

# Lecture 24: Milton's Areopagitica

## A FEW CRUCIAL PASSAGES TO THINK ABOUT

1. [U]nless wariness be used, as good almost kill a man as kill a good book; who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself. (1817)

Why do books matter so much?

What makes them immortal?

How do ideas exist apart from their creators?

How can an idea be a more complete expression of reason than the person that thinks of the idea?

2. Many there be that complain of divine Providence for suffering Adam to transgress. Foolish tongues! When God gave him reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing. (1818)

What does reason mean? What is "reasonable"?

Milton says that "reason is but choosing," but are choices always reasonable?

3. It was from out the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing . . . good by evil. ¶As therefore the state of man now is; what wisdom can there be to choose . . . without the knowledge of evil? . . . Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial. (1817)

Why does Milton think of good and evil as twins?

What does knowing good by evil mean?

Shouldn't we try to protect innocence from corruption?

4. [H]ow can a man teach with authority, which is the life of teaching, . . . whenas all he teaches, all he delivers, is but under the tuition, under the correction of his patriarchal licenser to blot or alter what precisely accords not with the hide-bound humor which he calls his judgment. (1820)

Why does Milton call authority the life of teaching?

5. Well knows he who uses to consider, that our faith and knowledge thrives by exercise, as well as our limbs and complexion. Truth is compared in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition. A man may be a heretic in the truth; and if he believe things only because his Pastor sayes so . . . without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds, becomes his heresie. (1820)

Are traditional practices always bad?

How can truth be heresy? (What is heresy?)

How can one hold a true (orthodox) belief in a false way?

6. Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making. (1822)

Is debate really necessary in order to achieve knowledge?

Does a free exchange of ideas ever obscure the truth?

Should the “free market” of ideas ever be regulated?

7. If all cannot be of one mind . . . this doubtless is more wholesome, more prudent, and more Christian: that many be tolerated, rather than all compelled. I mean not tolerated Popery, and open superstition, which as it extirpates all religions and civill supremacies, so it self should be extirpate, provided first that all charitable and compassionat means be used to win and regain the weak and the misled: that also which is impious or evil absolutely either against faith or maners no law can possibly permit, that intends not to unlaw it self: but those neighboring differences, or rather indifferences, are what I speak of, whether in some point of doctrine or of discipline, which though they may be many, yet need not interrupt the unity of Spirit. (1824)

Why won't Milton tolerate Roman Catholicism?

What are the practical and ethical limits of toleration?

8. If it come to prohibiting, there is not aught more likely to be prohibited than truth itself; whose first appearance to our eyes bleared and dimmed with prejudice and custom is more unsightly and unplaussible than many errors. (1825)

In this case, what is the problem with censorship?

Are there ways around this problem?