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The Index of Prohibited Books in the Academy: Teaching and Research in an Environment of Official Censorship

The Index of Prohibited Books was developed by the Roman Catholic Church over the course of the sixteenth century to control the printing, circulation, and ownership of books deemed theological incorrect or offensive to social norms and harmful for subjects' salvation. Despite occasional attempts at reform, it survived largely intact until being discontinued in 1966. Well into the twentieth century, the Index contained thousands of titles, many of them canonical works of philosophy, theology, history, and literature and it was considered binding on all Roman Catholics. One of the few exceptions to the Index's strictures was for faculty and students engaged in legitimate academic research. College presidents, and in some cases, directors of academic libraries, were granted the authority to allow access to prohibited materials. This paper will examine the rules governing the use of prohibited materials in American Catholic colleges and universities and the bureaucracies that were developed to enforce compliance with church law in the twentieth century, a period that saw growing acceptance of academic freedom among Catholic academics as well as increased assimilation into a broader American culture that placed a very high value on freedom of conscience. This paper will consider whether the Index had much effect on the reading and research habits of faculty and students at Catholic institutions of higher education in the years before it was abandoned and the degree to which curricula at Catholic institutions might have been shaped by the need to comply with the strictures of the Index.