

# THE PRINTING PRESS

## BACKGROUND

This story draws on events in history. The Europeans were not the first to use 'movable type', it seems. That happened in China and Korea some centuries earlier, but the Europeans developed moveable type in the 15th century. The main advance was that individual metal letters could be packed next to one another to make pages, then re-used to make new pages. Previously, a page could be printed from a woodblock, where the letters were carved onto a wooden 'page' which was then inked up and used to print multiple copies, but then the whole block had to be discarded and the next page carved from scratch. There were lots of other mini-discoveries that made up the print revolution, such as better paper and ink. All these were brought together at this time.

The beginning of mass produced books changed the course of history perhaps as much as any other single innovation. In Europe, it was one of the main causes of the movements known as the Reformation, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It was a huge political bombshell because it took away the privileged status of literacy: anyone could read anything, and know anything that anyone else knew. Before that, the works of Plato and the Bible and national histories were reserved for aristocrats and priests. Once people outside that elite got their hands on these books, they could interpret them for themselves and take away one of the main barriers to their own freedom.

For some reason, printing was slow to get off the ground in the Muslim world. Immigrant communities (Jewish, Armenian, Greek) in the Ottoman Turkish empire produced books in their own languages. Slowly more and more books in Turkish, Farsi and Arabic were produced but there appears to have been little demand. The reasons for this are not clear and it is a politically-charged subject. Western commentators have traditionally claimed that the slow adoption of printing and wider literacy were signs of the 'backwardness' of the Muslim countries. Some secularists of Muslim background have also used it to highlight the undue influence of religion in their societies. Opponents argue that the idea of the Ottomans banning or rejecting the printing press is a myth.

There is, however, historical evidence that calligraphers (who copied books by hand) lobbied the Ottoman government to protect their trade and there was a decree that religious books could not be printed. Perhaps the idea that the calligraphers were under threat could also have been a convenient excuse for religious authorities who foresaw the kind of dangers that beset the Catholic church - people would get wise to the way that their illiteracy had been exploited by the elite.

So there remains the possibility that the printing press could actually have been banned or its use restricted in some of the kingdoms to which it was introduced. And it is certain that its threat to the ruling classes was real.

If children are not guided on what to think about a certain kind of scenario, their reactions can be surprising - even shocking. Don't be surprised if some are persuaded by the idea that the printing press is dangerous because criminals will be able to communicate.

This debate is very live in our own times. The internet has done to information something just as momentous as the printing press. People are debating whether to censor or control it so that terrorists can't disseminate their ideas or communicate with each other. So the king's decision is one that our governments and security services are making for us, right now!

## STIMULUS

There was a time when all books had to be written by hand. If somebody wrote a new book there would be only one copy unless someone took the time to copy every letter out from the beginning to the end. So there were not many books in the world, and hardly any people could read.

Ordinary people who worked as farmers or made things with their hands would not be able to read, or even write their own name. Kings, queens, princes and lords, who ruled everyone, could always read. Some merchants - people who bought and sold things - could read. But most reading and writing was done by priests. They had a special room for writing - a scriptorium - and there the monks copied each page carefully and neatly. Their most important job was to make copies of the holy books, but they also kept books on science and maths and history and any kind of knowledge that they had.

One day an inventor came to see the King. He had invented something called a printing press and he wanted the king's permission to start selling it. It was a special machine that could print a whole page of a book at a time - a bit like printers do today. Once you had got it ready, you could print the same page as many times as you liked. So now each page would only take a few seconds - instead of a whole day.

The inventor explained the advantages of his new printing press:

- ✓ Books could be made much more quickly
- ✓ Books could be cheaper
- ✓ Ordinary people could have books in their own home
- ✓ More people could learn to read and write

The king was thinking about all this and getting very interested, when he heard the noise of someone politely clearing his throat. It was the Head Priest, and he wanted a word.

‘Excuse me, sire’ he began, ‘But I think you should also consider the disadvantages of this invention.’

The king told the Head Priest to go on, while the inventor waited nervously. The disadvantages, explained the priest, were these:

People will read our holy books by themselves and not understand them properly and priests will not be there to explain the true meaning

The people who write the books by hand will lose their jobs - one man operating the machine can work faster than ten men writing by hand

Ordinary people will be able to write anything they like and print it - even bad things

It will be easy for criminals to write books that might be full of lies or instructions on how to do bad things.

Now the king had to decide whether to allow the printing press to be sold or not. He sent the High Priest and the inventor out of the room and started to work out what was best for his kingdom.

## Task Questions

- ✔ Should the King allow the printing press to be sold?
- ✔ How should the king decide?
- ✔ What is the most important advantage?
- ✔ What is the most important disadvantage?