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Values: A Christian Perspective, A Response To Michael Gorman

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VALUES: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL GORMAN

Michael Gorman's recent challenge to Christian librarians at the ACL annual conference in San Diego begs for a response. What was the nature of that challenge? It was that we, as Christian librarians, should share values that can be derived completely from a humanistic perspective. It would be surprising if a humanistic perspective could successfully articulate Christian values, and in this case, there is no surprise.

This is not intended to be a personal attack on Mr. Gorman. I admire the courage demonstrated in his coming as a lion to a den of Daniels and telling us, in effect, how wrong we are. It is the conventional wisdom, or prevailing philosophy, of librarianship that he represents that I find objectionable. It is a philosophy that thinly veils its contempt for Christian evangelical views and has no patience with the acceptance of absolutes. Ironically, it is a philosophy that derides absolutes while speaking with absolute authority.

Before getting to the "meat" of my critique, there is one more observation I wish to make. It is to the credit of the Association of Christian Librarians that it invited Gorman to address its annual conference. He received a respectful hearing by those who are often pictured as intolerant by the opinion leaders of librarianship, even though his views are non-sympathetic to the Christian cause. One wonders when the American Library Association will allow anyone other than the choir to sing to them without demonstrations or heckling. Hypocrisy is alive and well in Christian circles—as those of us within the circle

sadly observe—but we need not worry that we have a corner on it.

My critique of librarianship's conventional wisdom is based on Gorman's guest editorial in *American Libraries* (April 2000, p. 39), not his conference presentation. The weakness of the set of values presented by Gorman is its lack of a solid foundation. It just dangles there, resting on no more than personal preferences, or at best, shared personal preferences. "[Values] are the products of human minds—shared beliefs motivated by interest and self-interest." This is a refreshingly honest admission. The values cited are socially constructed in their entirety; they are not "discovered from external sources." And this is their weakness.

My question to this philosophy is: How can you ever know that the values propounded are the right ones? If they are socially constructed and "neither universal nor eternal," then they are totally relative and have no power to persuade as to how things ought to be. There is no basis for saying that any value is the right value to hold, nor can

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one authoritatively propose a set of "best" values, because there is no external criterion by which to judge right or wrong, best or worst. One person's opinion, even if that is

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multiplied into a shared opinion, ultimately is nothing more than that—an opinion.

Those who believe in the biblical God, however, have access to an objective standard. God is truth. His character and His self-revelation describe what is right, what is absolute, what is eternal. As Christians, our personal perceptions may at times be faulty, but the standard of comparison (God's revelation) continues to exist as a corrective. Humanistic philosophies have no such beacon.

Despite the fact that Gorman's set of values possesses a basic philosophical weakness at the core, it is useful to examine each one to determine its validity for Christian librarianship. In some cases, the values will be seen to have little purpose; in others, they are mistaken or incomplete. Some are good, from both a humanistic and Christian perspective. The order of presentation is that of the *American Libraries* editorial.

Stewardship—a Christian conception of stewardship must include our human responsibilities to God. All that we have comes from Him—talents, truth, instructions and resources for life. How we use these to help others and ourselves is the key responsibility of stewardship. Although Gorman's value is a good one, its definition is too anthropocentric and narrow.

Service—this is an apple pie and motherhood value, universally proclaimed but unevenly practiced. Prostitutes, after all, consider themselves a service industry. There is no inherent benefit in service. One must always ask: Service for what purpose? For Christian librarians, the answer will be contained, to a large extent, in our definition of stewardship, which should describe whom we serve—and for what purpose.

Intellectual Freedom—the Christian conception of this value is more limited than the absolutistic humanistic one.

According to Gorman, "all people in a free society should be able to read and see whatever they wish." This statement contains no moral limits, yet it reads like an ethical "should" statement. It may describe what people *will* do; it is not necessarily a good description of what they *should* do. What people *should* do—from a Christian perspective—is read and see whatever will bring them into closer harmony with God's truth and love. Obviously, not everything available in the market does that well.

Those who believe in the biblical God, however, have access to an objective standard. God is truth. His character and His self-revelation describe what is right, what is absolute, what is eternal.

Rationalism—a vestige of Enlightenment thinking, many modern philosophers have discredited it as a sole epistemological method. Christian epistemology (where the fear of God, not amassed empirical observations, is the beginning of knowledge) provides an acceptable alternative. To be rational is good; to think that rationalism is all there should be is to truncate human experience.

Literacy and Learning—a value that all Christians can heartily endorse, as long as we keep in mind the eternal purpose to which this value contributes—growth in the knowledge and practice of all God's truth.

Equity of Access to Recorded Knowledge and Information—again, a value that Christians can endorse. The missionary movements during the history of the church demonstrate the principle that all people in the world need to hear and know what is important to them, and Christians have led the

way in service to groups that have been marginalized both in the world and in our society.

Privacy—a value with no biblical basis. It has been concocted to protect the identity of those who apparently wish to pursue questionable thinking and activities. I don't care who knows what I read. Why should others? This value always brings to mind the following (paraphrased) scripture: humans love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. The fact is that we cannot hide from God regardless of how successful we are at hiding from others. This value is a mirage, but we, as Christian librarians, may face an ethical dilemma when legal "privacy" rights conflict with doing what is right.

Democracy—this is the foundational value, according to Gorman. But can we give it such a status? Democracy is just a governing tool. It is not inherently good or bad. America has shown it to be good when it is exercised "under God." Current social movements are indicating that democracy can also be used to rebel against God. Therefore, the value of democracy depends upon how it is used. To make it a basic value is to raise the means above the end.

There you have it—some brief comments about Michael Gorman's presentation. I believe there is danger in accepting without question what our library profession hands us in relation to philosophies, values, and practices. Gorman has done a service by articulating what he thinks secular librarianship's values should be. Now it is up to us to determine what Christian librarianship's values should be.

Who wants to take up to the task?