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Volume 44 | Issue 3

Article 4

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2001

## Virtues or Values? Behind The Values Controversy

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### Recommended Citation

Delivuk, John Allen (2001) "Virtues or Values? Behind The Values Controversy," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 44: Iss. 3, Article 4.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2572-7478.1856>

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# VIRTUES OR VALUES? BEHIND THE VALUES CONTROVERSY

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**T**he American Library Association (ALA) has initiated a process of defining the values of libraries.

This process has influenced Christian librarians. For example, the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL) invited Michael Gorman, author of *Our Enduring Values*, to speak at its 2000 conference.

In his book, Gorman gives an excellent introduction showing the problem with the use of the idea of values. As he admits on page 8, the concept of "good" values assumes a kind of metavalue or set of metavalues by which we express can express preferences and beliefs about values. Our society is founded at least nominally, on the metavalues of reason and tolerance as opposed to conformity of faith and intolerance. This is not a battleground of belief and ideas but a way of looking at life and work that seeks positive ground and the essentials of a profession that is dedicated to serving humankind.

While I congratulate Gorman on having the integrity to attempt to define values, and consider their source, he implies tolerance is an absolute that justifies pluralistic values. The role of tolerance in his system is a problem for Christians.

Rather than following the idea of values into the intellectual minefields of pluralism and relativism, I call upon Christians to reject the concept of values entirely, and change the debate from one of relative values to absolute virtues.

To understand what I mean, let us look at the history of the use of the term "values." Gertude Himmelfarb, a

respected historian of the Victorian period, observes,

It was not until the present century that morality became so thoroughly relativized and subjectified that virtues ceased to be "virtues" and became "values." This transmutation is the great philosophical revolution of modernity, no less momentous than the earlier revolt of . . . modern science and learning against classical philosophy. Yet unlike earlier rebels, who were fully conscious of the import of their rebellion, the later ones (with the notable exception of Nietzsche) seemed almost unaware of what they were doing. There was no "Battle of the Books" to sound the alarm and rally the troops. Even the new vocabulary, which was so radical a departure from the old and which in itself constituted a revolution in thought, passed without notice. (p. 9-10)

The lack of notice of change was strange. This change is more radical than changing "Our Father" to "Our Parent" in the Lord's Prayer.

Prof. Himmelfarb continues, stating that the lack of protest was strange because the creator of this verbal revolution was aware of the significance of his work. Friedrich Nietzsche began to use the term "values" in the present sense in the 1880's. He used the word not in the traditional noun sense of "economic value," or the tradition verb sense of "to value or esteem a thing," but in the plural "connoting the moral beliefs and attitudes of a society." He used the word consciously, and repeatedly



to signify what he took to be the most profound event in human history.

His "transvaluation of values" was to be the final, ultimate revolution, a revolution against both the classical virtues and the Judaic-Christian ones. The "death of God" would be the death of morality and the defeat of truth—above all, the truth of any morality. There would be no good and evil, no virtue and vice. There would be only "values." And having degraded virtues into values, Nietzsche proceeded to devalue and trans-value them, to create a new set of values for his "new man." (p. 10)

The moral confusion of today's American culture reflects the success of Friedrich Nietzsche's war on virtues.

Sociologist Max Weber borrowed the term, and used it without Nietzsche's nihilistic intentions. Yet, the term values acted as a Trojan horse, bringing with it assumptions that all moral ideas are subjective and relative, that they are merely customs and conventions, that they have a purely instrument utilitarian purpose, and they are peculiar to specific individual and societies. (And, in the current intellectual climate, to specific classes, races, and sexes.) (p. 11)

Prof. Himmelfarb observes the following implication of the change.

So long as morality was couched in the language of "virtue," it had a firm, resolute character. The older philosophers argued about the source of virtues, the kinds and importance of different virtues, . . . or the bearing of private virtues upon public ones. They might even "relativize" and "historicize" virtues by recognizing that different virtues characterized different peoples at different times and places. But for a particular people at a particular time, the word "virtue" carried with it a sense of gravity and authority, as "values" does not. (p. 11)

Prof. Himmelfarb concludes, Values, as we now understand that word, do not have to be virtues; they can be beliefs, opinions, altitudes, feelings, habits, conventions, preferences, prejudices, even idiosyncrasies—whatever any individual, group, or society happens to value, at any time, for any

reason. One cannot say of virtues, as one can of values, that anyone's virtues are as good as anyone else's, or that everyone has a right to his own virtues. Only values can lay that claim to moral equality and neutrality. This impartial, "nonjudgmental," as we now say, sense of values—values as "value-free"—is now so firmly entrenched in the popular vocabulary and sensibility that one can hardly imagine a time without it. (p. 11-12)

While some persons think Himmelfarb has overstated the importance of the shift from virtues to values, the change has happened and has had a major impact. It has encouraged a fragmentation of American society into groups with differing values; such as gays and family value traditionalists, proliferators and pro-choicers, and Nazis and communists to name some competing groups. It has also encouraged the tendency in US culture toward unbridled individualism. It has contributed the feminization of poverty, the breakdowns of marriages, and damaged other community activities by undermining the virtues supporting these communal activities.

The shift from virtues to values has also created identity problems for institutions like libraries. Traditionally, a profession has had two defining characteristics. The first is professional expertise in a certain area. The second defining area is a common set of virtues. For example, people expected bankers to be honest as well as know how to process loans. I suspect the decline of virtues has been an important cause of the American Library Association's attempt to address this problem by asking what its defining values are. (If the ALA meeting I attended on the topic in 2000 was any indication, the debate on values will be around for years.)

What should we as Christians do? Unfortunately, too often we take our cues from the world. For example, I recently read a paper by an Arminian scholar who argued that the reason most American Christians became Arminians

is that the influence of American culture leaves them predisposed to this system of doctrine, not because they study the Bible. American culture also predisposes us to think in terms of relativism including values. A second way we take our cues is to be reacting to society trends, not leading them. For example, this round table is a reaction to the ALA attempt to define values. We need to switch to a leadership mode.

I have two suggestions for the Association of Christian Librarians. I believe we should form two committees on virtues. One should answer the question, what virtues should the institution of a library have to meet its purpose? The other committee should answer the question, what are the virtues required in the persons who serve as librarians? For example, God expects nations to have the virtue of justice. God also expects kings and judges to have the virtue of being just.

The two documents would help Christian librarians. While it is probably too late for us to have much effect on the ALA professional values document, the document on the virtues of the individual librarian could be very useful. This is my plan. After ALA determines its values, the Christian ALA members will request a second document listing the virtues (not values) of librarians needed to fulfill the ALA values. The virtue document would serve as a guide for library educators and mentors. When the committee is formed, we could get there first by sending each committee member a copy of the ACL virtues document, and praying for them. Our goal would be to have the ALA take a step toward virtues and absolutes. Will it work? I do not know, but it will not work unless we try it. It is like witnessing. We never know if our prayers and Gospel presentation will lead to a changed heart or not. We do know that the other person will not become a Christian unless we present the Gospel and pray.

Since my last proposal may be controversial, let me remind readers that all opinions expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in this article should be considered a position of the Association of Christian Librarians. \*