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Ethics and Christian Librarianship: Professional Standards and Personal Convictions

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In April of 1985 something snapped within me when I read the "How Do You Manage?" column in that month's issue of Library Journal. The problem case dealt with a library director who was faced with a plea to support intellectual freedom in connection with a suit involving an adult bookstore. In the three analyses there seemed to be a general agreement that yes, she should serve as an expert witness for the defendant (adult bookstore) in court. I immediately wrote a long letter to the editor of Library Journal and vented my pent-up concerns about the professional duties of librarians in relation to intellectual freedom and censorship. It seemed to me that the application in the "How Do You Manage?" was an extreme interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights. I knew that I myself could never consent to play the role of expert witness in such a case. It would be contrary to everything I believe in as a Christian. How was I supposed to reconcile my professional and personal convictions?

After sending the letter, I was concerned about the type of response I could expect and whether or not I would be ready for what I thought would be an overwhelmingly negative response. My Christian colleagues surprised me with so many letters of support and encouragement. I know of only two negative letters which were received by Library Journal. It was very heartening to me to receive such a warm response. I knew I had done the right thing in taking a stand, but I had been concerned about the results.
Sometime later that year, Ron Jordahl, editor of The Christian Librarian, asked me to submit an article on the same topic and I was very pleased to cooperate. The article gave me an opportunity to further examine the relationship between my professional and personal convictions.

In the years since then, I have read much and thought long on this subject. I have come to several conclusions:
1. It is not always possible to reconcile professional ethics with personal convictions.
2. When there is a conflict, the personal convictions based on the word of God are the ones I must follow.
3. Neither the profession nor our society is truly neutral in allowing all viewpoints to be heard. Other special interests groups care only about presenting their viewpoints and no one else’s.
4. As Christians, we are outposts of God’s kingdom in this ungodly and hostile world. Therefore, we are subversive agents in our society and in our professions.
5. We must take a stand as soldiers of Christ and not allow the world to rule how we apply God’s principles in our personal and professional lives.
6. We must be willing to pay the price of such action and to be seen as reactionary and narrow-minded.

Professional Ethics Vs. Personal Convictions

One of my most crucial questions in my letter was: "Must I live a dichotomous life, adhering to one set of standards in my professional life and to another in my private life?" At the time
I truly thought that it was possible to achieve a reconciliation between the two. After all the ALA Code of Ethics states: "Librarians must distinguish clearly in their actions and statements between their personal philosophies and attitudes and those of an institution or professional body." To my mind as long as I was conscientious to make this distinction, I could exercise both my professional and personal ethics in my work.

John Swan addressed this issue from an academic viewpoint in his article, "Minimum Qualifications and Intellectual Freedom." Swan states that a librarian should not be "a passive instrument of information processing." Rather, he sees the librarian as an educator who is involved in the education process with her patrons. In this role, the librarian may share her knowledge, experience, and opinions, without imposing them or endangering anyone's personal independence of thought. I would like to read two quotes from his article:

"It is presumably just this love of IF and fear of its loss that engender the widely held belief that the librarian should keep his/her opinions to him/herself. The love of intellectual freedom should be at the heart of the librarian's professional identity, but the fear of its violation should not lead to a simplistic view of that identity." AND

"It is possible, therefore, to accept both the civil libertarian view that library material should never be suppressed on the grounds of personal disagreement and the belief that the librarian should be free to share his knowledge and judgement of the materials. Should he force his views on the patron? Of course
not--but the librarian who shows a willingness and ability to share his knowledge is the librarian who gets asked to do so."

Unfortunately not all of our colleagues share Swan's generous interpretation of intellectual freedom standards. There are those, such as D. J. Foskett who say we must practice our profession without politics, without morals, and certainly without religion. Some would advocate a strict interpretation of intellectual freedom which would indeed "...lead to a simplistic view of [our professional] identity."

Herbert S. White asks us to remember that professionalism involves self-discipline. To quote:

"...ethical concerns become much more painful when our responsibilities as professionals keep us from doing what we really believe we ought to do for the benefit of humanity, or force us to help someone whom we are certain has evil intentions. That involves the teaching of self-discipline;..." "We have really always known that discipline is the price that a profession has to pay." According to White excercise of professional self-discipline is more important than your right to express yourself. "When you go to work to assume your professional duties, leave the buttons at home. Not because you don't have the "right" to wear them. You probably do. Do it as an act of professional self-discipline."

Although ALA is a powerful organization, it has no power similar to the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association to enforce the practice of its code of ethics by its members. Nothing regulates the librarians' compliance to the association's standards. Therefore, White urges us to practice
"professional self-discipline."

I believe we should practice both professional self-discipline and personal self-discipline. There may well be occasions when these will be in conflict with one another. So the question is, "Whom do we serve, ALA or the Lord?" When faced with that decision then my answer will be the Lord. After all He is the one who created me to do the good works which He has prepared in advance for me to do. (Eph. 2:10) Since everything I do in my life at home or on my job is to be done for Him and to His glory, my loyalty and obedience belong to Him, not ALA. (Can't you just hear their sharp intake of breath and the groans which follow?)

Neutrality

For a long time I was under the misapprehension that both our society and our professional association attempted to practice neutrality. I have since been disabused of that misconception. One influence has been Franky Schaeffer's A Time for Anger. In his book Schaeffer points out that we have bought the "myth of neutrality." We have been too ready to believe that our society and all of its institutions can be neutral. How can that be true in a world which is under the rule of the Prince of the Air? How can we expect that world to give our Christian views a fair hearing? We are aliens in this world and members of the Kingdom of God.

Another eye-opener for me was attending my first ALA conference. I was amazed at all the special interest groups represented in the program, such as the Social Responsibilities Round Table, Feminist Task Force, Gay and Lesbian Task Force;
Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association; Chinese American Librarians Assn., etc. At the first general session I swear I thought I had stumbled into the Democratic National Convention. The diversity of our colleagues and the libraries they work in is a wonderful asset to our association. But I think all these small groups within ALA have gone too far. I wonder what the comments would be from the floor if some us introduced action at a General Session to set up a Christian Librarians Round Table or Task Force? I do not think the reaction would be sympathetic or positive. But should we try it?

White says that "Professionals accept the discipline of behaving even-handedly (neutrality is the wrong word-- we aren't neutral, we just suppress our feelings as an act of discipline while at work and protest on our own time)...." However, I did not notice such suppression at the ALA convention. Every group and task force had its own agenda to pursue. I failed to detect evidence of a shared vision for ALA in either its programs or its meetings.

I have finally realized what my role is as a Christian librarian. I am not a librarian who happens to be Christian; I am a Christian who happens to be a librarian. As a Christian in this ungodly world, I am a "Subversive Agent" for the Lord. I must admit it is not a role that I have readily accepted in the past. But reading books like Peretti's This Present Darkness and Piercing the Darkness has opened my eyes (like those of Elijha's servant) to the spiritual battle around us. I have a responsibility to perform my part in that battle as a soldier of Christ. Sometimes there
will be actual combat as soldiers and sometimes we will be
subversive agents. We must not allow the Father of Lies to blind
us with neutrality, worldly ethics, or mediocrity. We must not be
passive but active Christian librarians in our institutions.

There is a price to pay. Remember Christ said that he who
puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the kingdom
of God. I admit for myself that I cringe at the thought that my
colleagues will look upon me as a reactionary and narrow-minded
person. But I hold onto this wonderful quote from Dr. Harold M.
Best:

"The narrowness of the Christian road is not the narrowness of
doing one thing, but the narrowness of doing many things for one
reason: the glory of God and in the name of Jesus."

---LFK
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Suggested Reading List

Baldwin, Stanley C.  *Take This Job and Love It: Solving the Problems You Face at Work.* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, c1988.


