

The Featured Joint IF Program, Chicago 2005 – Religion and Intellectual Freedom: Divine Revelation in the Marketplace of Ideas

Melora Ranney Norman

Can religion and free speech comfortably co-exist? What is the role of religion in censorship, and in libraries?

According to IFRT's panelist Susan Jacoby, religious groups play a key role in the censorship of speech. In her book *Freethinkers*, she writes:

"By the turn of the century, the most important reinforcement of censorship came not from formal prosecutions but from the informal cultural controls promoted not only by churches but also by members of the rapidly expanding Christian women's organizations established after the Civil War, most notably the Women's Christian Temperance Union."

I recall the day when a minister's wife came into the library I worked in and expressed her displeasure with a book she had checked out--a mystery novel featuring two gay men. When I suggested that gay people in the community probably appreciated having books like these to read, she said she just objected to not knowing what it was about before she started reading it; however, when we looked at the cover of the book, it clearly said who was in it and what it was about. She left, but some of the staff were upset--and the book eventually disappeared from the shelves.

What happens when people in our communities, buoyed up by their religious convictions, object to materials that others in our communities want to read or view? Jacoby notes that when it came to pro-censorship efforts, ". . . the WCTU worked closely with Protestant ministers right from the start." Arguably, the groups of women who continue this kind of grassroots moral activism (even those within our libraries) are direct descendants of the WCTU, and are inspired by their own personal religious values.

Another of our panelists might seem to agree with Susan. In his book *When Faiths Collide*, religious scholar Martin Marty writes:

"People who form communities devoted to belief in God, or who adhere to particular religious outlooks such as Buddhism that do not include God, often create problems for others. When they encounter people who revere other gods or hold to other outlooks, some of them become threats and challenges. Picture it: a person or group from an unfamiliar tribe or clan or nation arrives on an alien scene. Those who feel that they alone have the right to belong in that territory display fear

that the strangers will subvert their values."

It would appear from these examples that religion and free speech are predictably at odds with one another. If an individual's religious belief tells him or her that the only way to salvation is adherence to the only true set of morals, values, and behaviors, then how can they tolerate--let alone support--an entirely different set of religious beliefs, or the rights of people who are humanists or secularists?

Marty explores these issues and outlines some ways in which civil pluralism may be achieved. One strategy, "to work for the erosion of boundaries among religious groups," may result in attacks upon important features of religions, which is obviously going to upset the people who subscribe to those views. Another approach is a "leveling or balancing intention" that may lead to "the warm appreciation of the other by those who have belonged." Then he offers the idea that "groups of believers" may "use the presence of the stranger to help them reappraise and enrich their own commitments."

Can any of these approaches mitigate the seemingly divisive and incompatible elements of differing belief systems--including secularism? How can libraries respond to (and navigate) the conflict between those who insist that access to information is necessary to support their views when it comes up against the demands of those who insist that censorship is the only way to show respect for their core values?

In our IFRT panel discussion, Jacoby and Marty will address these kinds of questions and will be joined by two librarians with unique points of view. Doug Archer and Mike Wessells share at least two things in common: they are both ordained ministers as well as longtime active members of IFRT and of the intellectual freedom community. How they reconcile their appreciation of both free speech and religious conviction should offer librarians unique insight into a seemingly perplexing problem.

Speakers:

Martin Marty

Martin Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of the History of Modern Christianity in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, where he taught for 35 years. He has written for the Christian Century since 1956, has authored over 50 books and is a frequent speaker and commentator on religion in modern America. Among many other honors, Professor Marty has received the National Humanities Medal, the National Book Award, the Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is an ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Susan Jacoby

Susan Jacoby is the director of the Center for Inquiry Metro New York, a rationalist research and

advocacy organization, an independent scholar and a writer. She is the author of seven books, including *Wild Justice: The Evolution of Revenge* (a Pulitzer Prize nominee), and *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*. She has been a reporter for *The Washington Post* and has contributed articles to numerous publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *AARP Bulletin*, *Vogue*, *Newsday*, and *TomPaine.com*.

Responders:

Mike Wessells

Mike Wessells is a Regional Library Manger for the Timberland Regional Library system of Washington state and a fundamentalist pentecostal pastor. Mike is a past chair of IFRT and served on the ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee

Doug Archer

Doug Archer is Reference and Peace Studies Librarian at the University Libraries of Notre Dame and an ordained minister of the Church of the Brethren. Doug is a member of the IFRT Board and editor of the *IFRT Report*.