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The Pilgrim's Scrip

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The Pilgrim's Scrip

This is a guest editorial from Tom Leonhardt who was recently criticized for a talk he gave in St. Louis in May, 1990. We are printing Tom's response here not necessarily because we agree with it or anything radical like that, but because we want to express all opinions. We would appreciate your opinions on this matter, too.

In Volume 10:6 (June 1990) of *Technicalities*, editor Brian Alley mentions the "Acquisitions 90" conference in St. Louis (May 1990) and calls to our attention a talk that he rated rather low among all papers presented. "At the very bottom of my list of presenters was Thomas J. (sic) Leonhardt's plenary presentation, "Acquisitions and Collection Development: A Director's Perspective." Instead of preparing a presentation of his own views, he chose to take a published article written for a refereed library journal before 230 conference attendees and tear it to shreds. It has been a long time since I've witnessed such mean-spirited behavior on the part of a speaker. Apologies are certainly in order."

This paragraph deserves our attention, and our thought because it raises some issues that seem critical to librarianship, the conferences we go to (and why), and our professional literature.

Apparently Mr. Alley is first offended that the speaker chose to explicate an article from a refereed journal. By mentioning that the journal is refereed, he seems to imply that because a panel of peers has judged something worthy of publication, it is beyond criticism.

Would it have been an issue if the journal had not been refereed?

The issue is not whether a journal is refereed or not. The question is whether or not librarians are interested in the free exchange of ideas. To challenge ideas is not necessarily to "tear them to shreds." Can inanimate objects be torn to shreds? Can ideas be torn to shreds? Is total disagreement of someone's position tearing it to shreds? What does Mr. Alley really mean? If a position is torn to shreds, does that mean that the position was less than tenable in the first place? And how do you tear an article or idea to shreds without offering your own views?

Mr. Alley's comments seem out of place in a society that prides itself on freedom of speech and expression, and a profession that prides itself in upholding those freedoms.

There is also the matter of intellectual freedom that we all have a stake in, but that is particularly important to academic librarians under the guise of academic freedom.

Ideas should stand or fall on their own merits, and to discourage free exchange of ideas is to play into the hands of despots, petty and otherwise. Years ago, I can remember writing to the editor of a small town southern newspaper and criticizing the citizenry of the state

for wanting to prohibit Herbert Aptheker (remember him and Bettina, his daughter?) from speaking in a state owned building. All I said was that he ought to be allowed to speak in a state owned building, and his words, thoughts, and ideas ought to be judged on their own merits. As a result of that letter, I was criticized on the radio, and my cousins asked if I were a Communist. Can you imagine that? I was suspected of being a Communist because I advocated free speech? Does being published in a refereed journal make you right? Does speaking at a conference give you a market on the truth? If you throw out some introductory remarks to get a discussion going, does that give you the right to arbitrate the rest of the discussion, if discussion should miraculously take place?

In fact, we seem to go to conferences in order to hear the truth. When speakers speak and ask for questions, ideas are virtually never challenged. Instead, the speaker is treated like a guru. The few questions that are offered from the floor seem to be seeking answers that will tell them how to proceed or to confirm their own opinions.

Why?

Don't we have our own ideas? Haven't we read the literature, and haven't we worked at our jobs long enough to be able to challenge articles and speeches or at least discuss them knowledgeably and intelligently? If we attend conferences solely to hear the truth, I suggest a tent revival meeting. It is a lot cheaper than a conference, and you will certainly not hear or see anyone tear the Good Book to shreds. Perish the thought. ☞