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Paradise or Purgatory? Religion and the Ethical Librarian

Pamela Hayes-Bohanan

While the stereotype of the bespectacled, bun-headed, shushing librarian may lead some to believe that the job is relatively mundane and that the only decisions to be made are about what book we should next read, the fact is that our work can be quite political, controversial, and often requires nuanced decision making. In our increasingly diverse society, librarians can find themselves balancing issues of free speech with community standards and defending themselves and their libraries against lawsuits, and political attacks.

It is not unusual for librarians to face questions about censorship, display content, and meeting room space. Where religion is concerned these issues take on an added significance. These questions became part of an academic endeavor for me when I was called upon to coordinate the

Global Religious Studies Program at Bridgewater State University.

Bridgewater State University's Global Religious Studies Working Group was formed in December of 2014 by a group of faculty and staff along with some interested community members who

answered a call to discuss the possibility of starting a Religious Studies program. Partly out of curiosity, and partly to ensure that the university library would have the resources to support such a program, I attended the meeting. What I didn't expect was that an interest in religious studies would be sparked in me. And I certainly could have never predicted that I'd find myself three years later in the position of coordinating the program when its founding coordinator, Dr. Margaret Lowe, left for sabbatical. It is unusual (although not unheard of) for librarians to coordinate academic programs, and religion wasn't a field I had studied in any depth. Nevertheless, I took on the challenge and accepted my baptism by fire.

As a librarian I am used to noticing unexpected connections between seemingly disparate fields of study. And the more things I become involved with the more I realize that *everything* is connected. So when I was asked by the university's Center for Democratic Governance and Leadership to participate in a panel discussion called "What is religious freedom in a constitutional democracy," my thoughts immediately went to all the ways that secular library work intersects with religious life.

Librarians, and library boards, have sometimes found themselves balancing questions regarding the separation of church and state with those of free speech, and religious freedoms. This is especially true in public libraries, but certainly libraries of other types (school, academic, prison, and other special libraries) may also find that the same tensions apply.

While librarians typically will invoke the First and Fourth Amendments in the United States Constitution's Bill of Rights with regard to providing access to materials and protecting privacy, they also know that the American Library Association has its own Bill of Rights that expands on

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Library Bill of Rights

The American Library Association (ALA) affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services.

- I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
- II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.
- III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.
- IV. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.
- V. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.
- VI. Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use.

these. I used this more specialized declaration to organize my presentation.

All of this means that libraries have an obligation to do a lot more than simply provide a wide range of information about world religions. It is our professional responsibility to fight for our users' right to access information, even if that means providing access to content some (or perhaps many) may find offensive.

Censorship cases may be the most common ones that librarians face when defending the second item in the ALA's Bill of Rights. Harry Potter books and others that are perceived to be about witchcraft and the occult are frequent targets of censors. It is worth noting though that the Qur'an, the Bible, and the Torah have all also had their turn at being challenged. Likewise, the *Diary of Anne Frank*, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, and Judy Blume's young

adult classic, *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret*, have all been challenged for their "religious viewpoints." In 2007 the Standardized Chapel Library Project sought to remove tens of thousands of religious works from prison libraries that were believed to incite violence and instead create a list of "acceptable" titles – about 150 titles each from "20 religious categories." Following a lawsuit, most of the original titles were restored. There were questions regarding how the lists were determined, who made the decisions, and where funds would come from to purchase the approved books.

In 1965 Justice William Brennan in his concurring opinion in *Lamont vs. Postmaster General* noted that the right to receive publications was a fundamental right along with the protections from abridgement. People must be free to receive and consider all points of view or "It would be a barren marketplace of ideas that only had sellers and no buyers." Furthermore, the Supreme Court held in a 1982 censorship case (*Board of Education v. Pico*) that "the right to receive ideas is a necessary predicate to the recipient's meaningful exercise of his own rights of speech, press, and political freedom," and therefore, the Constitution was violated when books were removed from a school library.

Community standards are often invoked when library books are challenged. Can books with certain religious viewpoints be excluded if they do not conform to community standards?

Drag-Queen story hour, a popular family program in many libraries throughout the United States, was indefinitely postponed in Lafayette, Louisiana when lawsuits were filed by the groups Warriors for Christ, and Special Forces of Liberty, alleging that the library violated the First Amendment by promoting "human secularism." Similar lawsuits were filed in Houston, Texas. And in Temple, Texas a group called

Concerned Christian Citizens filed a petition against the public library calling “for library and city officials to refrain in both policy and practice from further advocacy regarding sexual and moral issues and practices” in response to two LGBT-affirming displays during LGBT History Month in June 2017.

The fact that materials or programs may be offensive to some or promote a particular point of view is irrelevant. Readers remain free to choose those views they wish to examine for whatever purpose. A diverse collection means that one’s own viewpoints are represented along with those that offend. The answer is always more information, not less. Collections should be developed by a diverse group of people so that as wide a range of viewpoints as possible are represented.

While questions of censorship are the most likely issues involving religious freedom that libraries face, they are hardly the only ones. Librarian and former columnist for *American Libraries* magazine, Will Manley, described a situation in his April 1998 column “Will’s World” in which a “fairly



(Author's Photo)

be missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints began helping out at the gift shop run by the Friends of the Library. The responsible and polite volunteers also wore name tags identifying themselves as missionaries. Asked by an officer of the Friends group to remove the tags so as to avoid any confusion about who ran the gift shop, the volunteers refused saying they were required to wear them at all times while they were in public. There were allegations of bias against the young religious people, and questions about how the issue would be handled if,

The American Library Association’s stance on the issue is that while dress codes for patrons should focus only on maintaining public health and safety, dress codes for employees should be **as unrestrictive as possible** to the extent that they do not interfere with the library’s mission. And what of a patron who “refuses to be served by a specified gender because his or her religions forbids cross gender contact?” Or because of the perceived religion of the library employee based on dress? Patrons are free to seek help (or not) from anyone they like (or don’t). This may be for religious purposes, or because the topic is sensitive. However, what does the Religious Freedom Restoration Act which “ensures that interests in religious freedom are protected” mean for library employees? Can a library employee claim a conscientious objection? Can a librarian be expected to help someone find information on a topic that is contrary to her religious beliefs (abortion if she is Catholic for example)? Simply put – no.

Following the passage of Indiana’s 2015 Religious Freedom and Restoration Act (RFRA) then ALA President Courtney Young stated that:

“The Religious Freedom Restoration Act contradicts the fundamental values of ALA and libraries. We deplore and reject any law that violates the civil liberties of any person... We reaffirm that it is the responsibility of library staff everywhere, regardless of legal

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large” public library found itself in a controversy over freedom of religious expression. A “group of seven clean-cut and very personable young men and women” who also happened to

perhaps, a nun in full habit wanted to volunteer? What about employees who wear crosses, Stars of David, a hijab, or other attire that might indicate their religion? Will this make some patrons uncomfortable? So what if it does?

ability to refuse service, to offer equal and unfettered access to all users in keeping with the library Bill of Rights and principles of intellectual freedom” (“ALA,” 12-13).

In other words, a person shouldn’t work in a library if they have a conscientious objection to helping people find information. The job is to provide information to all. Our core value is intellectual freedom.

in a religious setting as well. If a policy says that meetings must be open to all, then a religious group may not exclude anyone.

My own experience with religion in the library brought together questions of censorship and freedom of assembly. In the mid-1990s I worked in a public library in Texas with a policy that prohibited use of our meeting rooms for religious purposes. One of my duties

hand I was supposed to fight censorship at every turn, on the other I was supposed to help anyone who needed assistance with the copier, and ultimately, I just wanted to go home for the night. My desire to get home won out, and I helped with the copies without engaging in an argument about book banning.

On a practical level librarians are obligated to have an understanding of how religious diversity will affect how we do our jobs and interact with our users and co-workers. Many of these same issues I discussed here will be true of many who work both in the public and private sectors. An understanding of religious diversity is imperative in today’s global economy.

Further Reading

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Concerns about meeting room policies and displays are also common when religious viewpoints are involved.

Should library meeting room policies be written so as to prevent religious groups from using them? Do people only have freedom of religion if taxes don’t pay for it? How many times can a meeting room be used by a specific religious group before it becomes a “publicly funded place of worship?” Can a religious group exclude others from attending their meetings? There is precedent for using public spaces for worship. Public schools, parks, and even Bridgewater State University have been used by religious groups for worship.

The courts and the American Library Association say that meeting rooms should be open to all, including religious groups, and that policies must apply equally to all. If a policy says that money can be collected in a secular setting (for instance to pay for a speaker), then a plate can be passed

as Head of Reference was to schedule the meeting rooms and ensure that they were being used properly. The local Christian Coalition had been holding its monthly meetings in the library since long before I took a job there. When I asked the director about the apparent contradiction he explained to me that the policy was intended to prevent religious groups from holding worship services there. I accepted the explanation and the group continued to meet. One evening the group was late coming out of their meeting and I had to let them know that the library was closing and they needed to wrap up. When they came out they asked for assistance using the photocopier (which I had already turned off in preparation for closing the building). I begrudgingly turned the machine back on and assisted them with making the copies they wanted. I was surprised when I discovered that the document they were reproducing turned out to be a list of books they were going to request be removed from the schools! I was very much at odds – on one