Religion and Intellectual Freedom

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Introduction

　　Every year the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) collects statistics for books that have been challenged in libraries across the United States. The reasons for the challenges run the gamut from sexuality to political content. One reason that has been cited many times over the years by librarians that report the challenges is "religion." In some respects, it is difficult to know how this reason for challenging books is defined. For example, at the height of its popularity, the *Harry Potter* series was challenged for including witchcraft. There are several versus in the Bible that condemn witchcraft (Deuteronomy 18:10; Galatians 5:20) and these challenges could be interpreted as "religious" challenges. In another example, *The Da Vinci Code* was challenged by Catholic sources for its "blasphemous nature" (Karolides, Bald, and Sova 2011, 221).   In her reference book *Banned Books: Literature Suppressed on Religious Grounds*, Margaret Bald discusses the suppression histories of books as varied as *Oliver Twist* and the Bible (Bald 2006). Although the books that Bald catalogs are challenged for different reasons that range from promotion of evolution to blasphemy, they can all be classified as "religious." However, it should be noted that these varied explanations make it problematic to discuss religion as it relates to intellectual freedom.

If religion is defined narrowly, the United States is becoming a much less religious nation in the 21st century. According to the most recent Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life survey, 16.1% of Americans state that they have no religious affiliation (http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations). Although the survey accounts for many different types of religious beliefs (Christian, Agnostic, Hindu), this chapter will argue that this is a narrow construction of religion based on a conceptualization of the term that associates religiosity with organized religious practices. In order to have a less antagonistic relationship— as exemplified by the challenges given above—between religion and intellectual freedom, it is necessary to have more expansive definitions of both concepts.

This chapter argues that the relationship between religion and intellectual freedom centers on how one understands the practice of reading and its effects on the reader. It begins a review of previous literature and discussion on religion and intellectual freedom. It then offers a brief history of reading in a religious context and an overview of the connection between religious reading and positive or negative reading effects. The chapter then shifts to the modern era to discuss the development of an agnostic view toward reading effects which informs practices in contemporary librarianship. Finally, the chapter presents a conceptualization of religion based in a concept of "process of valuation" and a definition of intellectual freedom rooted in social justice. Overall, the chapter argues that because librarians can afford to be agnostic on the issue of the effects of reading, they are empowered to take a broader view of both religion and intellectual freedom. With these less limiting definitions in mind, it is easier for librarians and other information professionals to fulfill their professional duty to provide the best information on religion for the least cost to the people who use their institutions.

Previous Literature

Although there are many reference works concerning the censorship of individual works for religious reasons, there is little scholarly literature on intellectual freedom and religion. This might be true for several reasons but one of the primary ones seems to be related to the difficulty of defining "religion." Religion is a broad term and, as noted above, it can mean different things to different people. As Ann Taves noted in her 2010 presidential address to the American Academy of Religion, it is both difficult to specify as an object of study and a difficult area in which to formulate means to study (Taves 2011). The category covers theistic and non-theistic religions, animistic and organized religions, as well as broader social movements (e.g., Marxism as religion). It is also possible that the so-called secularization thesis, which holds that the modern world is continually becoming less religious, is also related to the lack of literature on the topic of intellectual freedom and religion. That is, it might be that as religion is perceived to be a less potent social force in our society, there is less interest in studying its influence within the academy. Although the rise of evangelical and fundamentalist movements in the later 20th century reduced general acceptance of this theory (Riesebrodt 1998), it is possible that its influence reduced the amount of research on intellectual freedom and religion. Finally, there also seems to be a stronger association between religion and *censorship* but not between religion and *intellectual freedom.* As demonstrated in the examples above, there seems to be an overall view that religions are focused on abridging intellectual freedom through the censorship of materials.

One article that exemplifies this viewpoint discusses the relationship between Catholicism and censorship. Ted G. Jelen argues that the Roman Catholic Church's position on

intellectual freedom has remained unchanged over time and is linked to the Church's overall view of itself as a teacher to its members (Jelen 1996). This is in direct contrast with what Jelen calls the classical liberal viewpoint of John Stuart Mill on which much of modern society bases its view of intellectual freedom. This viewpoint stresses liberty without constraint as long as it does not harm other people. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, rests its views of intellectual liberty on three pillars: first, that objective truth exists; second, that scripture is vital but is not the final source of authority for correct living; and, finally, on the long tradition of natural law. In light of this, the Catholic tradition is very suspicious of individual reason. If one follows one's own reason one is, for all intents and purposes, obeying the demands of the flesh rather than the spirit. The Church does not want to remove all books but provide guidance on what books/media are best for the soul. Jelen bluntly states the "Roman Catholic Church is not committed to intellectual freedom as that term is conventionally understood" (Jelen 1996, 48). The church is instead focused on teaching people to live responsibly within the strictures of natural law.

Note that this is the conceptualization that many bring with them to the topic of religion and intellectual freedom. That is, since religion is focused on living a correct life, it cannot—by definition—be committed to the possibility of intellectual liberty. This conceptualization, however, is based in a very narrow understanding of religion. Although the Roman Catholic Church as an institution may not be dedicated to intellectual freedom, this has little bearing on individual Catholics, the wider Western world, or other religious traditions. The conflation of the idea of "religion" with the "Church" or "fundamentalist Christians" or "Muslims" is one of the issues that increases the difficulty in reconciling religion and intellectual freedom.

In 2000, *Indiana Libraries* wrestled with the question of religion and intellectual freedom. Doug Archer's article on the topic is one of the few works to look at the topic from a positive point of view about religion (Archer 2000). Archer begins by noting that religion and intellectual freedom come from common philosophical and theological starting points and need not be in conflict with one another. Archer offers three possible reasons for this. First, religion is not monolithic category. There are, to paraphrase William James, varieties of religious experience and diverse viewpoints mean that there is a multiplicity of standpoints regarding questions of intellectual freedom. Second, Archer notes that the freedoms given in the First Amendment to the Constitution are rooted in the Reformation. Through a fairly detailed exploration of the history of Baptists and Anabaptists, Archer makes a case for the foundations of intellectual freedom as having roots in established religions. Clashes between various Reformist sects led, somewhat paradoxically, to the disestablishment of religion. "People argued for the right to hold a variety of beliefs and to print and circulate those beliefs. Diversity had become the rule rather than the exception" (Archer 2000, para. 10). This crucial point leads to the third reason for harmony between religion and intellectual freedom—both are rooted in the "soil of personal liberty." Although many Reformers wished for "religious freedom for me and not for thee," this attitude gradually shifted to one in which religious belief became part of an overall free market of ideas. "By the insight that religious wars had not, could not and should not settle the truth, and by the practical act of constitutionally removing the right of any one viewpoint, be it religious or political to official status, freedom for all was guaranteed" (Archer 2000, para. 13). Since there was no established religion, the marketplace of ideas—including religious ideas—became the law of the land.

Archer continues with a discussion of differing definitions of religion and ends by stating that librarians should view religion as "an inextricable element in human society" (Archer 2000, para. 18) noting that information professionals must be sure to remember that people, including religious people, have the right to advocate for any views they wish even if others disagree. Most importantly Archer states that librarians should see the religious community as an "opportunity for service" and not a professional roadblock.

There are two responses to Archer's article in the *Indiana Libraries* issue. The first is from Christian Pupont who argues that part of the issue with religious freedom centers on the semantics of the term "freedom." Religious ideas concerning freedom indicate that "believers do not simply claim that they have certain freedoms, but rather that they are free" (Pupont 2000, para. 2). He advocates instead for using the term "liberty" instead of "freedom." Liberty "better denotes the passive state of being able to act without fear of repression" (Pupont 2000, para. 3). This is discussed in more detail below.

The second response is from Barbara Luebke who describes some of the problems concerning intellectual freedom and religion in her small town in Indiana. She views religious censorship, particularly in the form of challenges to what is perceived to be unsuitable material and the use of internet filters in the library, as essentially a community issue. Those who move to her community because of its conservative character are surprised to find that the community is more heterogeneous than they expected. Most complaints come from this group, who are "very vocal about what they believe should be acceptable for everyone" (Luebke 2000, para. 2). Luebke ends by emphasizing policy and its importance for making all people feel that they have a chance to explain their own viewpoints.

In 2005 the Office for Intellectual Freedom Round Table of the American Librarian Association addressed the issue of religion and intellectual freedom in a sponsored program on the subject at the ALA Annual Conference. The speakers addressed two questions. First, "how can libraries serve both the religious and secular demands made by members of their communities? Second: Does demonstrating respect for religious life conflict with the separation of church and state. There were four respondents to the question. Each of their arguments is briefly described below.

Martin Marty began by addressing the growing controversial nature of religion in the U.S. He offers four seminal quotations on this topic. The first is from George Santayna who, in the early part of the 20th century, addressed the question of intellectual freedom (though not by using that term) through the lens of religious liberty. Santayana noted that religious liberty for all comes with a lack of certainty that is the basis for intellectual freedom. An agreement among those who were religious skeptics and those who were fervent believers laid the foundations for the first amendment freedoms found in the U.S. Constitution. In particular, Marty points to religious fervor of Anne Hutchinson on the one hand followed by Thomas Jefferson's skepticism on the other. This argument is similar to the one given by Archer described above.

Marty then focuses on Hannah Arendt and the importance of religious diversity to civil society. He states Arendt's thesis as follows: "if a society [has] one religion, they'll kill everybody else; if it has two they'll kill each other. Look at the map today, anywhere you'd like, if you have more [than two religions], they have to find a way and freedoms come with that" (Office for Intellectual Freedom 2005, 271). Marty is concerned that the polarization of the U.S. population is leading to a lessening of freedoms. He describes these poles as the "aggressively religious and the aggressively nonreligious" (Office for Intellectual Freedom 2005, 272). Marty

offers four possible explanations for these changes: First, the end of Communism, millennialism and other movements led to a certain kind of unrootedness for many individuals. Second, he notes that the marketplace of ideas is working hard to fill this vacuum. Third, we have become a more individualist and less communitarian society. Finally, technology allows those who have previously not had a seat at the table to gain a voice.

Similarly to Luebke above, Marty argues that many religious controversies are nativist expressions. The campaign to put the 10 Commandments in courthouse is "not about religion at all, it's about who belongs here and who doesn't" (Office for Intellectual Freedom 2005, 308). Finally, Marty argues that librarians must work to make others aware that all arguments, both religious and nonreligious, have ideological underpinnings.

The second speaker at the forum was Susan Jacoby, an independent scholar whose remarks will be discussed in more detail below. The third speaker was a Pentecostal pastor and librarian, Mike Wessells, who argued that libraries should collect a wide array of opinions in their collections. He stated that "in order to affirm everyone, we have to be able to be offensive to everyone in some fashion, and it's important to remember that we also have to be offensive to ourselves" (Office for Intellectual Freedom 2005, 312). The final speaker was Doug Archer whose argument is given above. At the presentation he also offered a few practical tips for librarians trying to be inclusive in their collection development policies.

To return to Jacoby, she noted that "libraries are in no way responsible for what any reader takes away from a book" and librarians should focuses on providing good reading material on not on "meeting religious demands of their community" (Office for Intellectual Freedom 2005, 309). She is particularly concerned with the issue of "demonstrating respect" to religious voices. Jacoby describes some religions as insular and notes that these will inevitably

be "undermined" by the mission of the library. Since the library attempts to make all information accessible, it cannot help but make information available that is at odds with these religions.

Jacoby argues that the act of reading has consequences and it is because of these consequences that people attempt to censor books. She looks back at the Roman censor and then discusses her own brushes with religious censors. Her own magazine, *Free Inquiry*, which has a distinctly new atheist bent, was censored by a local library in New Jersey which refused to accept a gift subscription to the magazine because it did not fit with the "values of the community." She ends by noting that libraries should collect books that will not be easy to read. It is not the library's place to make sure that all reading materials contained within it are simple and easy to digest. This means that, inevitably, that they will be offensive to religious readers. These two combined issues—that libraries are not responsible for how readers interpret a book and that reading has consequences—are discussed in more detail in the next section.

Religious Reading and Reading Effects

The concept of reading effects can be traced directly to particular ideas of religious reading that can be found in the history of reading practices. For example according to common sources, in the Middle Ages, although many people could not read, those who could often did so for religious purposes (Lyons 2010). Religious reading was seen as a path to redemption. During the early modern era, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone) led followers of Reformation leaders to read the Bible for themselves in search of salvation. Scholars note that among Reformers, although they argued that the Bible was a simple text to understand, there was pervasive fear that certain interpretations of scripture might lead to heresy (Gilmont 2003).

What is most important here is that reading was understood to be a practice with consequences for individuals. Although the formulations of this fear changed over time, few argue that reading has no effects on the character or behavior of the reader.

The idea that reading can have effects is one of the reasons why one might choose not to support intellectual freedom. A traditional view of reading holds that reading "good" books is a best because it will lead to good outcomes in the individual. For example, during debates in the late 18th and early 19th century over the so-called "fiction question" and throughout the public library movements dogma of "social improvement," librarians held the view that the general public should be indoctrinated to read "quality" books (Garrison 2003). Reading "bad" books would have a detrimental effect on both individual moral character and the democratic nature of society.

A few examples of this viewpoint come from articles from the *Library Quarterly*, published by the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago in the 1930s and '40s. One example is Douglas Waples's article "On Developing Taste in Reading" which argues that there are both "meritorious" and "meretricious" types of reading and taste has little to do with what people like to read (Waples 1942). Another is William Stanley Hoole's 1938 article, a course in recreational reading, which was intended to provide "close contacts with books which lead to broader cultural improvement" (Hoole 1938, 2). Even earlier, in 1931, A.H. Starke explicitly stated that there is a marked "influence of reading on character" (Starke 1931, 180).

Although there was quite a bit of research in the area of reading effects early in the first half of the 20th century, such research fell out of favor later in the century probably due to shifting attitudes towards paternalism in the public sphere as well as the adoption of the Library Bill of Rights. This latter document states that "materials should not be excluded because of the

origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation" and "should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval" (American Library Association 1996). Wayne Wiegand argues that librarianship found support for intellectual freedom a more fruitful area of research than studying reading habits and outcomes (Wiegand 1999).

Another influence upon reading research can be found in what might be called a modernist view of reading effects which developed in the 1970s. This viewpoint was most clearly articulated by Jesse Shera in his monograph *Introduction to Library Science* in which he writes that "because we do not know, with any precision, 'what reading does to people,' or how it affects social behavior the profession can be magnanimous in admitting to library shelves books that present all sides of a subject" (Shera 1976, 56). Modern librarianship does not argue that there are no effects when one reads a particular text but that there is no way of knowing what those effects might be. Agnosticism toward the effects of reading and knowledge might be understood as one of the primary epistemological positions of modern librarianship. This conceptualization of reading also allows modern librarians and information professionals to provide a variety of viewpoints regarding a particular subject, including religion, on their shelves.

Religion and Religiosity: An Expanded Definition

When one thinks of "religion," what comes to mind? One might think of a figure like Pat Robertson of the 700 Club or James Dobson of Focus on the Family who embody a particular type of Evangelical Christianity. Others might think of the Tenzing Gyatso considered by Tibetan Buddhists to be the 14th incarnation of the Dalai Lama. For many in the United States,

"religion" might have a political dimension associated with the Christian Right and their many social campaigns. Other images that might come to mind include churches, shrines, crosses, headscarves and other material of religious observance.

There is often a "public" aspect to these conceptualizations of religion. Religious people display their religion by discussing what they believe. In many cases, being religious also has a theistic cast involving a belief in an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent higher being or at the very least in a transcendent "higher power." Religious people "do things" and/or "believe things." Religion is also strongly associated with values and practices that may be in conflict with modern secular society.

These formulations all have several things in common. First, they are images of organized religion often associated with the five major religions. Second, these ideas of religion do not include people who are agnostic or atheist. Third, they incorporate a narrow definition of religion that focuses on public actions. They are all somewhat limited conceptualizations of religion that would, in turn, have strong implications for whether or not religious people support intellectual freedom. That is, if one thinks of being religious in these ways, then how could a religious person be open to other ideas? How can one respect the free speech of others?

As discussed above, although one might have a general idea of what religion is in a decidedly "I know it when I see it" kind of way, religion is, in fact, notoriously difficult to define. In the most recent *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Gregory D. Alles states that it is difficult to "denote religious experience in a way that is not obscure…or circular" (Alles 2005, 7701). Since its establishment as an area of academic study in the late 19th century, there have been many efforts to define just what "religion" is. This section of the article does not attempt to discuss all of the many definitions given over time or even give its own definition of religion; instead, this

section will provide the reader with some sense as to why religion is contested in the hopes of broadening the conceptualizations of religion given above.

Alles article provides a good starting point for understanding why the concept of "religion" is not stable. He begins with an overview of Ernst Feil's three meanings of the term starting with religion as a collection of moral behaviors that are directed to spiritual beings, then religion as "an intuition of the universe as a whole and of oneself as a part of it" and, finally, religion as faith (Alles 2005, 7702). Alles then discusses strategies that scholars have used to define religion. For example, there are scholars of religion who focus on how religion functions; that is, they "describe what religions do." Other scholars employ Wittgenstein's idea of "family resemblances" among religions while others focus on religion as prototype. This final category is probably most familiar to many non-scholars in that religions are often classified based on how much they resemble one's own understanding of religion. As Alles states, "for North American and European scholars, religion is a category whose prototypes are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, perhaps not in that order. Other religions are religions to the extent that they are more or less analogous to these prototypes" (Alles 2005, 7704). One could argue that the definitions of religion given above fall into this category of using a prototype for classification.

In her presidential address to the American Academy of Religion, Ann Taves also focused on the definition of religion as an object of study within the academy. She argues that rather than thinking of a religion as a "thing" one should consider religion to be a process, specifically a *process of valuation*. The term "valuation" refers to "things that matter":

> What we as scholars think of as religions, philosophies, paths…etc., could be construed as more or less formalized, more or less coherent systems of valuation that people call upon consciously and unconsciously when making claims regarding what happened, what

caused it, and whether or why it matters. They are not, however, the only systems of

valuation and may be drawn upon by some but not all participants in an action or event.

Nor are highly elaborated, formalized, and coherent systems required for people to make

such judgments. Indeed, I would suggest that the more formalized and coherent systems

stand in explicit tension with less coherent, but more pragmatic, more automatic,

seemingly intuitive processes of valuation (Taves 2011, 292).

Here religion is a process of making judgments regarding life events. This definition pulls

religion out of the realm of the how humans relate to the mystical, spiritual, occult, and

supernatural and into the domain of focusing on how individuals understand particular

happenings in their lives.

For the purposes of conceptualizing the relationship between religion and intellectual

freedom, this definition is helpful because it moves religion from simply a domain of "doing

things" and/or "believing things" into something more dynamic. If religion is a "process of

valuation" rather than a series of proscriptions and demands, one can more clearly see why it is

important to provide access to information that will aide this process.

Although the conceptualization of religion as a "process of valuation" provides a broader

starting point for understanding religion, it is still somewhat abstract. In light of this, it is helpful

to consider the varied ways in which people actually live out this process. Here we turn to social

science and the measurements that are used to identify the religiosity and spirituality of a

particular individual or population.

One of the most popular of these models is the Fetzer multidimensional measure which is

used by many scholars and practitioners (Neff 2006). Developed by a group of scholars to study

various dimensions of religion and spirituality, the Fetzer measure is composed of 12 dimensions

of spirituality and religion (Fetzer Institute and National Institute on Aging 1999). These 12 domains are as follows: Daily Spiritual Experiences, Meaning, Values, Beliefs, Forgiveness, Private Religious Practices, Religious/Spiritual Coping, Religious Support, Religious/Spiritual History, Commitment, Organizational Religiousness, and Religious Preferences. These dimensions cover a wide-range of concepts that might be included in the "process of valuation."

Items in the measurement run the gamut from "I ask for God's help in the midst of daily activities" to "I think about how my life is part of a larger spiritual force." Note that almost all of the questions are answered using a Likert-scale. That is, it is possible to state that " 'I feel God's presence' 1 - Many times a day; 2 - Every day; 3 - Most days; 4 - Some days; 5 - Once in a while;6 - Never or almost never" (Fetzer Institute and National Institute on Aging 1999, 15) It is the dimensionality of this measure that is of particular interest here. One might think of religion as an all or nothing proposition—one either believes or one does not. However, the array of questions and answers in the Fetzer Measure demonstrate that lived religion and spirituality is rarely static. When thinking of religion in relation to intellectual freedom it is important to consider both the process of valuation and all of the dimensions that encompass religious and spiritual life.

Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice

In the United States, intellectual freedom is strongly associated with first amendment of the Constitution. The amendment which states "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances" provides the legal basis for freedom of both speech and

religion in the United States. Although there are categories of speech that are not protected, American citizens are generally allowed to engage in a speech that is not incitement, libel, or slander. The concept of intellect freedom flows from this right but is somewhat broader.

The term conveys the idea that individuals are free to believe in, share, and have access to any intellectual materials.   The *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, for example, defines the term as follows: "intellectual freedom accords to all library users the right to seek and receive information on all subjects from all points of view without restriction and without having the subject of one's interest examined or scrutinized by others" (American Library Association 2010, 3).   Supporting intellectual freedom means that one is against censorship. This means that someone who supports intellectual freedom is, by definition, against religious challenges against material described above.

It is more helpful to define intellectual freedom as a right to access the whole of the information universe without fear of reprisal from social, institutional, or governmental powers. This definition is rooted in ideas of "liberty" rather than "freedom." As noted above, liberty denotes a state of independence from oppression—one has the agency to seek whatever information one wishes. This definition approaches intellectual freedom as a social justice issue and is based on the work of Peter Lor and Johannes Britz, who use philosopher John Rawls' theory of justice to support their view that knowledge societies must have freedom of access to information (Lor & Britz, 2007).Their thesis states that knowledge societies cannot exist without freedom of access to information. The authors use their own country, South Africa, as an example in order to demonstrate how lack of access to information can have deleterious effects on a society. "Our experience in South Africa during the apartheid years," the authors write, "taught us that restrictions on access can cause a regime to lose touch with reality. Curtailment of

freedom of information is invariably associated with the dissemination of disinformation" (Lor & Britz, 2007, 394). Lor and Britz describe four pillars of information societies (information and communication technology infrastructure, usable content, human intellectual capacity, and physical delivery infrastructure) which cannot be brought to fruition without access to information. It is the third pillar—human intellectual capacity—that relates directly to religion and intellectual freedom.

Conclusion

The relationship between religion and intellectual freedom is difficult to articulate. At first glance, they seem to be opposing domains. If the original conceptualizations of religion and intellectual freedom given above are used, adhering to a particular religion means, by definition, that one does not support access to any and all information. This article argued for a broad understanding of religion to mitigate the oppositional stance between religion and intellectual freedom.

In library and information science it is imperative that, instead of focusing on religion as a negative domain when it comes to intellectual freedom, we focus on the human intellectual capacity for the process of valuation and the multiple dimensions of religiosity and spirituality. Although librarians' interactions with "religious" people who challenge materials in collections might be of the negative variety, librarians and other information professionals must recall that we are there to serve all members of our communities including both those who are certain of their religious beliefs and those who are not.

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