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Religion in American Libraries: Questions and Answers

INTRODUCTION

It has often been said that there are three topics that one does not discuss over dinner: sex, politics and religion. These are three of the most personal, deeply felt and highly charged of human concerns. It should come as no surprise that they are often at the heart of library controversies. Recently, religion has become the explicit focus of several court cases involving libraries.

This Q & A provides guidance to libraries and librarians in protecting First Amendment rights to five freedoms: freedom of the press, speech, petition, assembly and religion. Courts have consistently held that for freedom of the press and speech to be meaningful, people must have the right to receive information: that is, to read, view, hear or access what they choose. In addition, the freedom of (and for) religion has been understood to include both the right of individuals to believe and practice their religion (the “free exercise” clause) and the right of individuals and the state to be free from religion (the “establishment” clause). . . .

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Religion, the First Amendment and America’s Public Libraries

By J. Douglas Archer

When religion is mentioned in the same breath with libraries, censorship often pops into the minds of many Americans. It is certainly easy to find accounts of religiously motivated attempts to censor. Even a casual review of a popular guide to challenged materials will reveal a religious element in a significant number of cases (Doyle, 2004). The *Banned Books* series devotes one whole volume to books challenged on religious grounds (Bald, 1998). In addition, many of the examples in its other three volumes document attempts to censor based on religious commitments (Sova, 1998). However, broader analyses of the relationship of religion and America’s public libraries are more difficult to locate (Archer, 2000). This essay, an extension and expansion of the author’s earlier work, explores that relationship.

Though concerned with religion and public libraries, most of the observations contained in this essay could be applied with appropriate adjustments to other types of libraries. For instance, libraries associated with private, religious institutions would need to be mindful of the mission of their parent bodies and the needs of their primary communities. . . .