

THE QUESTION...

DO MY VERY STRONG, CONSERVATIVE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS MAKE ME LESS OF A SCHOOL LIBRARIAN?

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What Does the Field Say?

VII. We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.—ALA Code of Ethics, <www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/codeofethics/codeethics.htm>.

The View from the Ivory Tower

People can change. You can't change people; you can only create an environment in which change can occur. This adage about change, author unknown, is not new, and is a part of much of the change literature. It speaks to creating scenarios or situations in which individuals make personal choices. School librarianship is not about adding an endorsement, it's about learning a new profession. As with most professors in this field, I don't simply teach about the job of the school librarian, I try instead to teach students to become school librarians. It's fairly easy to learn about, but in order to learn to become, change has to occur. Sometimes this is easy and some students take to it like going down a water slide at a birthday party. Others find the water cold and the slide covered with spiders. They are

willing, but they question openly and honestly how to reconcile previous beliefs with the tenets in the field. They struggle with access issues and enter into censorship role-plays with trepidation. It is a true ethical dilemma. They see the rightness of both sides, but they have to choose the path that allows them to retain the beliefs that make them who they are while providing the widest possible access to resources and services for students. They know that at times they can't do both.

Jumping Down from the Ivory Fence

The old adage about "if everyone else jumped off a cliff, would you do it too?" applies to this situations in reverse. Everyone has personal likes and dislikes that prejudices our selection. Some librarians love NASCAR and would buy biographies of every drive and pictorial books about every track. Others despise sports of any kind, but have an affinity for animals. We all need to know that our students are not miniatures of us. They have their own preferences and needs. One purpose of the library media advisory committee is to assist in selection. There are always resources that are written and talked about, but are not in most

school libraries. There are others, though, that most school libraries purchase and circulate without a single challenge. Many of these schools are in communities very similar to or even more conservative than yours. Ask about specific resources on state association library media electronic discussion lists. The bottom line is that the library collection should not be all about you. It should reflect the needs and interests of the students you are fired to serve.

Read More about It

There are many articles in the literature about providing the widest possible access, but little about the struggle between personal beliefs and publicly stated convictions. The materials in the ALA Code of Ethics <www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/codeofethics/codeethics.htm> and on the ALA Intellectual Freedom site <www.ala.org/OIF> may be of some use.

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IF YOU ARE NEW: If you are new or still in library school, you may be uneasy about some of the issues you are discussing in class. Your religious beliefs and the views of your religious leaders have always guided your life. Now you feel like you have to hide some of what you are reading or learning from the eyes of your family and friends who share your religious beliefs. This makes you uneasy, and you wonder if you can continue.

IF YOU ARE MID-CAREER: In mid-career, you have always been a bit more reluctant to provide new formats or the latest best-seller. You read reviews carefully to find if the materials had any objectionable content. Students and parents rarely pushed for any materials until the current wildly popular Harry Potter series. Now, you have to make choices.

1 CHOICE

It depends. If you are denying access to all children in the school to materials widely available in other schools, then perhaps you should rethink the purpose of your position.

WHAT'S THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN? The worst that can happen if you put your religious beliefs first: You will alienate all those from different religions, and even some of those who share your faith. Your principal has suggested that you are not following the selection policy and procedures. Your circulation has dropped because most students are using the public library or buying and sharing their own materials.

I'M NEW: As a new library school student, you were shocked to find that others in the class had beliefs opposite to yours. You were used to the concept of protecting children from harmful influences, and the concept of deliberately purchasing materials that exposed impressionable young people to language, sexual situations, drugs, or violence is anathema to you. Try as you might, you can no more expose children to models of poor behavior than you could deliberately place a child in physical danger. And besides, it's much the same thing, isn't it?

I'M MID-CAREER: In mid-career, you have managed to avoid a lot of the issues. You read a lot of the books before they arrive on the shelves to make sure they contain appropriate language or situations, and you scan magazines regularly to ensure that advertisements encourage healthy lifestyles and recreation. You firmly believe that parents need to prevent negative influences, and you have no intention of providing materials that highlight those undesirable behaviors.

2 CHOICE

It depends. Personal beliefs added to professional ethics should strengthen your mission as a school librarian to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information. The key is access.

WHAT'S THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN? If you purchase materials of which you disapprove, you could have a challenge to them, which would cause you to publicly defend your selection. Your pastor may want to counsel you, your family may be embarrassed, and your friends may be shocked. In the absolute worst case, you may no longer be welcome in your church.

I'M NEW: As a new library school student, you want to be the best librarian you can be. You had no idea that others felt so strongly about ensuring that students had a wide variety of materials. You assumed that all reasonable people felt the same way that you did. Now you are questioning how people who share your religious beliefs also can purchase materials that mention certain lifestyles, have language, or present situations that you certainly would never want your own children to pursue. If other librarians can do this with a clear conscience, you can too, right?

I'M MID-CAREER: In mid-career, you have managed to deny most requests for materials you consider unsuitable by claiming that the conservative community in the school would never stand for it. Now you are realizing that some of the parents you would identify as most conservative are buying those same resources for their children. You are wondering if you were wrong about your assessment. Maybe you are only denying access to those students without financial means. Maybe it's time to be more inclusive.