
Neutrality and Theological Libraries

Ezra Jiseok Choe, Theology and Philosophy Librarian, Baylor University

Dr. Robin C. McCall, Seminary Librarian and Asst. Prof. of Bibliography and Research, Union Presbyterian Seminary

Deanna (Dee) Roberts, Reference and Outreach Librarian, Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

David E. Schmearsal, Access and Instruction Librarian, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Gerrit van Dyk, Philosophy and Church History & Doctrine Librarian, BYU Library

ABSTRACT The five panelists in this session consider, debate, and discuss important questions concerning neutrality in theological libraries. The goal is to inculcate a greater, if more nuanced, appreciation for the complexities inherent in the professional aspiration toward neutrality and objectivity, and a deeper understanding of the reasons it may at times be necessary and appropriate to set aside this aspiration. Such insights can help guide both reference interviews with students and acquisitions decisions.

INTRODUCTION AND PRELIMINARY NOTES

Librarians, including theological librarians, are commonly considered to be, and generally aspire to be, neutral. Regardless of personal feelings and beliefs, we will gladly help you find a copy of *Mein Kampf*, *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, or *Malleus Maleficarum*. Such professional neutrality seems especially precious, and threatened, in our increasingly polarized culture. Yet are there ever times when it may be appropriate to set aspirations to neutrality and objectivity aside, and share our convictions? When, if ever, might it be acceptable to state our opinions or express our beliefs when conducting a reference interview or providing feedback on a student's paper? Is neutrality even possible? How does neutrality relate to equity? This session will provide an opportunity to consider, debate, and discuss these important questions. The goal is to inculcate a greater, if more nuanced, appreciation for the

complexities inherent in the professional aspiration toward neutrality and objectivity, and a deeper understanding of the reasons it may at times be necessary and appropriate to set aside this aspiration. Such insights can help guide both reference interviews with students and acquisitions decisions.

The panelists explored this question by addressing the following five questions:

- 1) What does “neutrality” mean in the context of theological libraries? What does it mean in your particular context (e.g., if you are at a more progressive institution, is it necessary to acquire more books from a conservative point of view to counterweigh this bias? Are we, or have we ever been, neutral?) [ALL]
- 2) Why is neutrality important? What do we gain, what might we lose if we neglect or abandon it?
- 3) How does neutrality relate to questions of equity and justice?
- 4) How might forgoing neutrality affect (positively or negatively) reference interactions?
- 5) How might forgoing neutrality affect (positively or negatively) acquisitions/collection development?

As will be evident in what follows, while there are many points of agreement, not all panelists hold the same views or share the same convictions. Our goal in exploring this important topic is to hold a genuine, forthright discussion rather than reach a consensus or offer a unified argument. Indeed, this ability to share a common space while holding divergent views is one of the many, often underappreciated virtues that our libraries and librarians exemplify in our collections and profession.

QUESTION ONE

What does “neutrality” mean in the context of theological libraries? What does it mean in your particular context (e.g., if you are at a more progressive institution, is it necessary to acquire more books from a conservative point of view to counterweigh this bias? Are we, have we ever been neutral?) [ALL]

David: “Neutrality” means striving toward impartiality in exercising contextually-informed, theologically-grounded judgement calls. Making such contextually-informed, theologically-grounded judgement calls is necessary as I negotiate between my more traditional faith formation and educational background, and my context: a more progressive Presbyterian (PCUSA) seminary in a fairly progressive city (Austin) in a largely conservative state (Texas). In my position as a librarian who engages in both instruction and collection development, I strive to take into account the presuppositions and “leanings” of the institution and decide when and how to counter-balance them, for example, by acquiring books from a Catholic or evangelical perspective, or by suggesting students incorporate sources that argue a position counter to their own.

Dee: The quest for neutrality and objectivity has often come at the cost of ethical and moral considerations. Gone are the days of hiding behind the notion that libraries are “neutral” spaces. While a valiant and important undertaking, the quest for maintaining neutrality and objectivity regarding access to multiple perspectives on various disciplines and subjects has often come at the cost of ethical and moral considerations regarding information access itself. Access to information has never been a topic of neutrality, but rather an issue deeply steeped in ethical considerations and the violations of those same ethics.

In my context at a “progressive” school in a liberal city within a deeply conservative state, it is essential to forgo neutrality when it only serves to further the aims of a harmful status quo. Being confronted with knowledge that is different and new, or which causes some discomfort, is not the same as being forced to engage with information that defamates or destroys the humanity of a person or group. Discomfort is part of the educational experience and to take that away from learners does them a disservice. As a queer theological librarian, it is a foundational ethos of mine to present an authentic and clear understanding of all of the information on a certain subject and not just the parts that people are comfortable with. So, I land on the side that neutrality, more often than not, is co-opted to reify harmful status quos.

Ezra: In a more general sense, neutrality stems from an implicit commitment to values of classical liberalism. Given that we live in

a pluralistic society, neutrality is desired as a value insofar as it aids in social cohesion and maintaining a just society. In effect, neutrality is an intuition that the state has no preference or aim that favors a particular group of people. Political decisions should be value neutral and independent of what the good consists in. Some take this intuition quite seriously and contend that justice requires a strong form of neutrality. For example, John Rawls says, “The principles of justice do not permit subsidising universities and institutes, or opera and the theatre, on the grounds that these institutions are intrinsically valuable, and that those who engage in them are to be supported even at some significant expense to others who do not receive compensating benefits” (Rawls 1999, 291–2).

Some take the opposite view. Perfectionists, broadly based on the Aristotelian tradition, think the state should be invested in the flourishing of its citizens. Thus, the state has the right to advance the common good, which means the state may endorse a particular course of action.

Neutrality in a theological context, I think, functions in a similar capacity. Librarians strive to be impartial, unbiased, and objective in making decisions pertaining to collections, instructions, reference, etc. Neutrality in this context is the general intuition to avoid endorsing a particular view, not censoring materials, and upholding intellectual freedom. But we as librarians are also invested in the flourishing of our academic community members and beyond. I am in broad agreement with Rick Anderson, who wrote: “In some ways neutrality in the library is clearly a very bad idea—and yet in some important ways, it’s absolutely essential” (Anderson 2022).

In my context at Baylor University, I try to exercise both commitments of perfectionism and neutrality prudently. That sounds impossible but one can exercise both simultaneously. I think there is no such thing as being value neutral. On the other hand, neutrality has its perks. I am deeply invested in the well-being of the students that I encounter. But I also know that much of the research and library work that I am involved in may not align with my own personal values. Here, I want to emphasize the need for prudence and to know how I avail myself of these situations. A great symbol for me at Baylor is the Interfaith Meditation and Reflection Faith Space, located in the Moody Library. This space is open to any students who

want to practice their religion or lack thereof. The space is neutral but can become a place that is not neutral.

Robin: My context is Union Presbyterian Seminary: an old, mainline-Protestant, standalone seminary, with a diverse student body. We have two campuses, both in blue areas of purple or red states (Virginia and North Carolina). We value and celebrate diversity. While our faculty and student body lean strongly liberal, our alumni and community patrons—the library is accessible to anyone who wants to use it—are often much more conservative. In our library you’ll find perspectives that range from very liberal to very conservative, but you’ll also see an LGBTQ+ Pride flag hanging in our atrium.

“Neutrality” in the context of librarianship exists to protect freedom of information access. It’s about ensuring that someone is not hindered from accessing information that a library already has because a librarian disagrees with or disapproves of the material or the patron’s research. Neutrality does not mean that a library staff member should never take a position on an issue or openly disagree with a patron. The customer is not always right, and librarians, being about the business of facilitating patrons’ information fluency, can and should point out bias and mis- or disinformation in sources, and flawed arguments that arise as a result of same.

Just as postmodernism and, now, metamodernism, have shown that the goal of “objectivity” in modern scholarship was never really attainable because it failed to interrogate the scholar’s own social location as inherently biased, so too I am not convinced that neutrality in libraries is ever really achievable, if we are truly about the business of facilitating information fluency. We must take ethical positions on things. In my view, neutrality is better re-envisioned as hospitality.

Gerrit: To me, neutrality means not privileging one faith tradition over another. It means seeking and promoting relevant, high-quality scholarship, regardless of whether the source is friendly to any particular faith tradition or not. We should be neutral in this regard.

What does this look like at my institution, Brigham Young University? Close to 35 years ago, one of our university provosts shared his thoughts on the purposes of higher education. “We,” he began—meaning, professors and librarians on campus, “move

[students] from dogmatism through healthy skepticism toward a balanced maturity that can tolerate ambiguity without losing the capacity for deep commitment. [... BYU's] vitality is a continuing witness for the proposition that within the broad gospel framework, robust faith and healthy skepticism are not mutually exclusive" (Hafen 2022, 209). So, neutrality at the BYU library is this delicate balance between robust faith and healthy skepticism. Because we are a private institution, we as librarians are able to be fully open with our students about our personal faith. It's amazing having the freedom to share my religious convictions in the same breath as I teach about Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Augustine, Hildegard, or Dante.

QUESTION TWO

Why is neutrality important? What do we gain, what might we lose if we neglect or abandon it?

David: Neutrality is important, first, because of the close connection between perceived neutrality and trustworthiness. It is precisely by adhering to neutrality that libraries have gained their reputation as trustworthy institutions. By maintaining impartiality and avoiding bias, libraries foster public confidence, ensure equitable service, and uphold their reputation as reliable sources of information.

There is just one problem with this: theological libraries are not neutral. Neither are theological librarians. Many of us serve in a confessional context in which, for example, writings by Athanasius and writings by Arius do not represent two alternative equally valid options. Athanasius's creed is included in official worship books; Arius is classed with other heterodox authors. For my own part, as someone who professes my faith using the words of the Nicene Creed on a weekly basis, I also am not neutral. At the same time, as a librarian, I would be equally aghast at the idea of removing Arius from the collection as I would with the idea of removing the Creed from the prayer book.

This leads to the second reason neutrality is important. For librarians, neutrality touches on (or represents the diving line between) two fundamental professional values: freedom and truth. As librarians, we believe strongly in defending the freedom of all persons to read whatever strikes their interests and oppose any attempts to

impose censorship. At the same time, we believe in the importance and value of information, specifically information that is accurate and authoritative. When these two values run in tandem, neutrality means that we are able to help our patrons find and use a variety of authoritative sources representing diverse perspectives, allowing our patrons to rely on the merits of the arguments to discern which sources to trust and what positions to adopt. But what happens when these two fundamental values come into conflict? When, if ever, might our obligation to uphold truth require a breach of neutrality that may impinge on freedom? (Kaihoi 2015). When might remaining silent or neutral for the sake of intellectual freedom mean betraying or sacrificing truth, or “choosing the side of the oppressor” (Gerolami 2020, 176)?

In the wider library world, debates between those advocating strict neutrality for the sake of upholding intellectual freedom and those who maintain that the library has an obligation to take stands on controversial social issues to uphold progressive values have been ongoing for some time. One may discern noticeable peaks in the 1930s, when the ALA first adopted the Library Bill of Rights against the looming Nazi threat (Campbell 2014), in the 1960s-1970s amidst social unrest and the Vietnam War, and mid-2010s (Wenzler 2019). These peaks do not seem to be reflected in the theological library literature from these eras, which suggests that perhaps neutrality looks a bit different in the context of a theological library.

Whereas many of our colleagues in the wider library world tend to see neutrality as one side in a two-sided, two-dimensional political struggle for power, theologically, we might instead see neutrality in terms of hospitality—of creating space for the other. This reminds me of Jürgen Moltmann’s discussion of *zimzum*, the kabalistic concept of God’s creating space (or a vacuum) within the fullness of God to allow something that is not God to exist (Moltmann 1985; Moltmann 2003).

What might this hospitality, this creating of space for the other, look like in the context of theological libraries? As Robin discusses in greater depth, as a theological librarian, hospitality means helping our patrons find good sources that offer strong arguments for positions with which I personally disagree. As Gerrit considers further, for a theological library hospitality means acquiring and

holding good sources reflecting a variety of perspectives, even those that are in opposition to positions that I hold personally or that the institution I serve holds confessionally or culturally. As members of Atla, creating space for the other means maintaining the neutrality necessary to include members from a variety of confessional contexts representing a diversity of perspectives, allowing each of us to share our own experiences and convictions in an environment that fosters mutual respect and connection.¹

Of course, by creating space within himself, God also allows the possibility of evil. Thus, hospitality and the freedom it brings also carries with it the call to discern truth and to live in accordance with truth. As Hans Boersma observes in *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, true hospitality is not entirely open: a house without walls is not very hospitable, especially on a cold Midwestern winter night (Boersma 2003). It does nonetheless create a space for genuine interpersonal connection.

One aspect of the debate over library neutrality that often seems overlooked is the interpersonal connection between librarians and patrons. Just as the sides of a pyramid draw closer together as one nears the pinnacle, so the space between my personal and professional interactions with students or other patrons narrows as we come to know and trust one another.

Like all persons, theological librarians are not, and cannot be, wholly neutral. We are all standing somewhere and we all bring our own ideas, beliefs, experiences, and convictions to every interaction with a patron. This does not preclude the possibility of, or absolve us of, striving to exercise fair, impartial judgement, insofar as possible. Rather, this gives us the freedom, and responsibility, to exercise discernment on a case-by-case basis. Whereas in my more professionally oriented interactions, I will retain a greater degree of neutrality, I may find it appropriate to forgo neutrality as I have built rapport and established trust. Above all, we must always seek to gain and retain the trust of our patrons (“can they still trust me to help them find good sources on and craft compelling research arguments for positions with which they know I disagree personally?”), grounded in interpersonal connection.

QUESTION THREE

How does neutrality relate to questions of equity and justice?

Dee: Ask people of the Global Majority and they will tell you that the concept of neutrality in library spaces has always been a farce. Many of the characteristics of libraries in Western contexts are born from systems that are inherently racist and exclusive, leading to inherent bias in the systems that many libraries use to organize and recall information. These systems were developed to serve members of the United States government who have historically been white, affluent, Christian men. Therefore, it is not surprising that the mechanisms that make these systems function also tend to be white-centered, cis-male oriented with a Christian and Western worldview (Adler and Harper 2018). Additionally, scholarly academic publishing—as well as publishing outside of academia—has historically been centered around white voices. All of this blended together has created an environment where the resources available on shelves, and the ways people find them, are entrenched in whiteness. This entrenchment requires targeted decolonization—of systems, access to information, and the profession of librarianship itself. Decoloniality exists to listen to Indigenous peoples, dismantle structures that limit Indigenous participation, and confront power relations within educational institutions.

While there are a plethora of social justice issues I could discuss, I have decided to focus on the topic that most library workers, and many professional associations, refuse to engage with—Palestine. Having been to Palestine five times, most recently in March of this year, in addition to having done advocacy work for over a decade, I feel uniquely qualified to speak on this topic.

As collectors and organizers of information, library workers have a two-fold mandate: to allow all voices to have a place, and to allow unrestricted access to these voices. The seventh edition of the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* states that:

[i]ntellectual freedom can exist only where two essential conditions are met: first, that all individuals have the right to hold any belief on any subject and to convey their ideas in any form they deem appropriate, and second, that society makes an equal commitment to the right of unrestricted access to information and ideas regardless of the communication

medium used, the content of work, and the viewpoints of both the author and the receiver of information. (Berman 2006)

Not to get too into the weeds of the medical profession, since I would guess most of us are not experts in this area, I would like to borrow a long-held ethos of medical professionals—do no harm. What happens when our silence (in the face of deep injustice) held under the guise of “neutrality” only upholds a status quo that perpetuates harm on the most disenfranchised in our midst? What do we do when the librarian ethos of neutrality has been weaponized to keep people from being confronted with uncomfortable facts? In journalism, there’s a term called “neutrality bias.” It is defined as “a type of bias in which a journalist or news outlet tries so hard to avoid appearing biased that their coverage actually misinterprets the facts” (Baleria 2021). In the context of Palestine, academic libraries have a long way to go in order to achieve true intellectual freedom within library spaces. The past year and a half has illuminated just how inadequate the idea of neutrality in libraries actually is.

If the library wants to achieve actual neutrality, we must transform our spaces from safe havens where people are not presented with information that might cause them to reevaluate their beliefs and opinions, to spaces where every library user is reflected in the materials held in, and resources available within, the library. Kirkland writes that, “[m]oving from the notion of the school library as a safe space for students who have no other place to seek refuge to a space that makes the full diversity of the student population feel welcome and engaged is not a neutral act. Being an anti-racist educator is not a neutral act. Neutrality cannot be achieved when varying perspectives and cultures continue to be underrepresented or have been historically misrepresented” (Kirkland 2021).

There’s a phrase commonly used in faith-based organizing spaces—“progressive except for Palestine”—that describes individuals and institutions that are forward thinking in their worldview in terms of queer rights, Black lives, Indigenous rights, immigration law, and other human rights causes but remain silent and inactive when the subject of Palestine comes up. Under the current Trump administration, it is abundantly clear that students, staff, and faculty who engage in activism around Palestine are being unjustly and unequally targeted and threatened into silence. Before October 2023, it was possible to have academic discourse about Palestine and, while

fraught, there is evidence that scholars engaged the topic on campus. However, these days any discourse critical of the modern state of Israel is met with aggressive push back. Thus, “[w]hat is crystal clear is that the ‘Palestine exception’ to free speech and academic freedom that has long existed in American higher education and public life is being deeply institutionalized” (Malley and Moses 2025). This institutionalization can be felt in the daily fabric of campus life across the country.

The findings of several international human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International and the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem, have determined that apartheid, genocide, and illegal occupation are all correct, non-biased, terms to use when describing the realities on the ground. Honest assessment of the recent history of Palestine exposes the reality that the State of Israel is a case of settler colonialism. Therefore, the vocabulary that best fits reality includes words like “oppression,” “domination,” “erasure,” and “apartheid” (Isaac 2025). It is well documented proof that every single university, and every single library, in Gaza has been destroyed. According to a January 2024 report written by Librarians and Archivists with Palestine, no less than six library workers have been killed since October 2023 (Librarians and Archivists with Palestine 2024). In amongst all this destruction and scholasticide, an overwhelming majority of those in academia have chosen the position of silence, or even worse, apathy. In library spaces, this silence is expressed by taking a neutral stance. Unlike the intention of neutrality—which exists to provide unbiased collections, access, and services—neutrality is instead being used to remain silent about one of the most urgent human rights violations of our contemporary time.

In the nearly two years of ongoing assault on Gaza, it has become clear that librarians, trying so hard to maintain a position of neutrality, have created an environment that goes against our collective *Library Bill of Rights*. In the American Library Association (ALA)-sponsored position, *Politics in American Libraries: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*, it clearly states that, “[l]ibraries should not ignore or avoid political discourse for fear of causing offense or provoking controversy” (ALA 2017). Writing on this, Bennie Allen argues that “it is our responsibility to provide this, and not one we can fulfill without taking sides” (Allen 2020). Paralyzed by the fear of losing funding, the fear of being called antisemitic, the fear of

losing jobs, and the fear of going against the notion of neutrality, most library workers and library institutions have chosen to remain silent.

Echoing Palestinian theologian Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, genocide is not a matter of opinion, and my opinion about it should not matter (Isaac 2025). Polarizing or not, true neutrality cannot be achieved because it too often “boils down to a slippery both-sidesism that posits the humanity of certain people as up for debate” (Lichtenstein and Sherman 2022). Both-sidesism during an ongoing genocide does nothing other than further the reach of disinformation. If the library profession wants to achieve a stance of neutrality on the subject of Palestine, then those of us in this work must dedicate ourselves to providing accurate, unbiased, information. An accurate understanding of the situation requires library workers to platform the historically silenced voices of Palestinians and those working in solidarity for a Palestine free from occupation—creating safety for all those living in historic Palestine, no matter how uncomfortable that truth might make some of our constituents.

As David mentioned earlier, theological librarians are, by our very nature, not neutral. I would take this a step further to say that we cannot be neutral, particularly when it relates to Palestine. Why? Because Palestine is the fifth gospel. As many Catholic theologians have stated in the past, including the late Pope Francis, Palestine is the living narrative of Jesus’ life and work. The land of the Bible provides a unique, experiential understanding of what we read in scripture. For those of us that are Jesus-followers, we, as theological librarians, have a mandate to provide uninhibited access to all information as well as stand in solidarity with those in our communities (both locally and globally) that are being oppressed. Jesus flipped tables, called out the powerful ruling elite, and built community with those at the fringes of society. Jesus was not neutral, and neither should we be.

QUESTION FOUR

How might forgoing neutrality affect (positively or negatively) reference interactions?

Robin: I came to librarianship after seven years of being a professor of Hebrew Bible at a research university, and my first library position

was that of Reference Librarian at Union Presbyterian Seminary, where I am now the director of the library. When I became a librarian, I discovered that students tended to relate to me as an academic authority, but—because I was not assigning them a grade—they did not see me as intimidating in the same way their professors were. So, there was a wonderful intermediate space where I could help them learn, but students could receive that as a collegial act rather than an authoritative one.

The reference librarian at Princeton Theological Seminary, where I did my Ph.D. work, was Kate Skrebutenas. She always treated her reference interviews as if you and she were about to go on the adventure of a lifetime. It was the student's trip—you were setting the course—but she was traveling with you to hold the lantern and tell you where the landmarks and the shortcuts were. This notion of the reference librarian as a kind of Gandalf figure is one that has colored the way I do reference work ever since.

If the metaphor governing my interaction with someone seeking reference help is “traveling companion,” then “neutrality” is not actually high on the list of qualities that I want to characterize how we interact. I want to establish a relationship and build trust with my traveling companion, so that when things get tough, they already know they can count on me to be on their side. Indeed, “on their side” and “neutral” are ideas that perhaps cannot even comfortably coexist.

To build a working relationship that will open space to build trust, there will likely need to be some transparency—some give-and-take—on both sides. Finding places where you share common ground, or even hold similar views, helps you build connection with someone. I work at a very small school (fewer than 300 students), and the institutional ethos here is one that celebrates diversity and does not tolerate exclusionary or dehumanizing views of others. This institutional ethos gives me some leeway to presume, when I meet a new student or faculty member, that we will probably both be operating under an extensive set of shared values, because if that were not the case, they probably would not have chosen to be at this institution. So, I feel comfortable being tactfully transparent about my perspective on some of the topics my students are

researching—women and queer people in ministry leadership positions, for instance.

Many students who come to me suffer from library anxiety. There are many reasons for this. They may be second-career students who have not been in school for a while, or perhaps they have learning challenges that, in the past, have not been well served. Libraries have not always been safe and welcoming spaces in the lives of some students of color. People who have little experience of large academic libraries can be intimidated by our building. It is my job as a reference librarian to put them at ease and help them feel welcome in this space. That means I need to build connections, and easy conversation that seeks common ground accomplishes that.

By the time students seek out the reference librarian, often they are already at a breaking point. They have done everything they can do without asking for help and now their assignment is due, or they are lost, and their stress levels are high. So, it is also my job to be a calm and reassuring presence, reminding them that they are not on the journey alone. While the nonjudgmental aspect of neutrality is vital here, the sense of detachment that may come with it could be detrimental.

If I do my job well—that is, if I help students find the resources they need and succeed in bringing down their stress or anxiety levels—then I have not only set that student up for success on this assignment; I have also established the library as a safe space, and myself as a safe person, in their mind. So, next time they have to tackle a tough assignment, they may be more likely to seek my help before they are totally stressed out. We have begun to establish a real working relationship. And the stronger our relationship is, the better able it will be to tolerate potential differences in our views.

Some people are great at thinking through difficult things all on their own, but many of us do our best thinking in conversation with others. We process through dialogue. Students can, and do, process their thinking with each other, and with their professors. But a reference librarian inhabits an extremely valuable middle ground, as I noted earlier: we are professional academics, we know things, but the power dynamic is very different with a librarian than with a professor. Thus, librarians make excellent dialogue partners for students who are working through new ideas.

This kind of dialogic processing is strongest when a relationship of trust already exists. There is a balance that must be sought here: a student needs to know they have the freedom to explore ideas without your judgment, but at the same time, they need to know that you will also challenge them on their ideas. If you disagree with their position and ask them to defend it, this can help a student refine an academic argument: identify where their audience may be confused, or where they may need to use more nuance, and hone their argument more finely. Because theological librarians are professional academics who often have subject expertise, we can provide students with academic rigor comparable to their professors', but in the context of a somewhat more horizontal, less vertical power dynamic.

Finally, when reference librarians are transparent about their disagreement with someone seeking their help for academic work, it may help the seeker to recognize a whole area of thought that they did not even realize they needed to consider. After all, students do not know what they do not know. As a librarian with a background in biblical studies, I know more about the state of the field of research than an OT or NT 101 student does. I may therefore disagree with an argument they are making because I have a broader understanding than they have yet learned, and I can disagree in ways that highlight for them topic areas they may need to consider further, or for the first time. Because they did not even know that topic area existed, the student was not able to ask about it before they formed an argument; but through our conversation, they are able to discover it.

The kind of relationship-building I have been talking about is an approach to the issue of neutrality in librarianship that David mentioned earlier: one that differentiates between neutrality and hospitality. Some of the descriptors that come to mind at the word "neutrality" include calm, detachment, acceptance without judgment, and balance. "Hospitality" has a different emotional range. Some of its descriptors include warmth, generosity, kindness and compassion, sincerity, and belonging.

An approach to the reference interaction that privileges neutrality is businesslike. There is freedom of information access, but it may be a freedom detached from relationality. An approach that privileges

hospitality includes freedom of information access but also builds in an element of relationality.

One critical reason that this relationality matters goes back to Dee's question—the way neutrality relates to equity and equality. Library patrons' reference needs are not one-size-fits-all. A librarian needs to respond differently to different patrons in order to help them achieve the goals of finding the research materials they need and applying them to build a strong academic argument. The only way to know what a given patron needs to achieve those goals is to get to know that person. And then you are involved: you are communicating, you are being real people to each other, you are bouncing ideas off each other...and neutrality becomes difficult, if not impossible, to maintain.

For my part, I find much more value in hospitality in the reference interaction than I do in neutrality—always presuming that hospitality leaves room for dialogue and unfettered information access. Hospitality seeks to build connection, to journey with, to welcome in. Hospitality seeks common ground, strives to talk towards someone else rather than talk ourselves into opposing corners. It may be that the only common ground available is “we are both trying to build a solid, well-defended academic argument with good critical sources behind it.” But those are shared goals, and fields of academic research grow precisely because scholars disagree productively and respectfully about arguments predicated on sound supporting material. In the academy, the most invigorating conversations happen when you have made a strong argument, and someone disagrees with a different strong argument. You both see things in a whole new way that you never would have seen on your own.

Finally, one last reminder to keep reading the room. Just as different people have different needs in order to reach the same goal, so too, different people will have different degrees of comfort with your transparency as a librarian. But again, you can only discern those limits of tolerance if you build connections.

QUESTION FIVE

How might forgoing neutrality affect (positively or negatively) acquisitions/collection development?

Gerrit: Collection development has always been a point of tension in libraries. Part of the ALA Code of Ethics states, “[w]e uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources” (American Library Association n.d.). In the heading of a recent post on the Scholarly Kitchen, the editors acknowledged censorship and book banning from both the political right and the political left—the former primarily through pulling books from libraries which contradict conservative ideologies and the latter through canceling or boycotting an author or book due to its rejection of liberal ideologies (Anderson 2024). In effect, the conservative method is to eliminate contradictory, but already existing material, where the liberal method is to silence or prevent the promulgation of antiliberal ideas. Both examples are infringements upon our freedom of speech. As one librarian noted, “the suppression of any idea can be dangerous to the flow of all ideas” (Swan 1989, 10).

Why do we care so much about banning or canceling certain titles or authors? I think each of us as librarians may have a different response to these questions, but I submit it is essential for all of us to know where we stand. Wenzler reminds us that this question of neutrality is not simple:

[w]hen the overall moral worldview of a librarian is largely in harmony with the worldview of her patrons, propositions A[advocacy] and N[neutrality] usually are compatible with each other. The dilemma comes when librarians encounter patrons whose moral ends are fundamentally at odds with their own. Then, it often seems that the best way for librarians to use their authority to prevent injustice is to use their influence to impose the “patterns of their own thought” on the patron. Thus, the only way to accomplish proposition A is to violate proposition N, or vice versa. (Wenzler 2019, 60)

In libraries, we have created for ourselves a no-win scenario. We either impose our self-righteous views on our less-enlightened patrons through banning, soft censorship (Cooke and Harris 2023), or canceling authors, or we cast our lot with the oppressor by staying silent. But are those the only options, or is it a false dichotomy? Perhaps we have forgotten Aristotle, who cautioned against any extreme, however beneficial, and recommended finding the mean between two extremes. Could we instead find ways to be both advocates and neutral given certain situations? Is neutrality actually the mean to strive for, even if it is ultimately impossible to be perfectly neutral, and advocacy on the extreme left or the extreme right are the Scylla and Charybdis of our times?

For my part, I reject all forms of censorship because I believe in the human right to information. That we should have access to materials which both affirm and challenge our world view. I also believe strongly that the greatest and best way to combat tyranny is a well-educated and well-informed populus. How can we help inform citizens? One way is through our published materials, whether print or electronic, analog or digital.

Censorship takes many forms. At my institution, I have had a few books challenged in my collection, usually because the author has done something reprehensible after publishing a book. This is a tricky situation. Does having a book on the shelf of a known pedophile or murderer give the impression the library endorses those reprehensible behaviors? Would removing that book be a form of censorship/book banning/canceling?

When we collect materials, we also need to acknowledge that as librarians we have our own individual biases as well as our institutional constraints to consider. We must be aware of our own personal feelings on a topic and how that might influence our decision whether to purchase a title or not. Similarly, we may find ourselves at odds with the directives of our library organization and administration. Do we have the academic freedom to purchase materials that might be considered controversial to our library management?

Atla librarians at public institutions should generally purchase materials that support the missions of their institutions, including and especially the research needs of their students and faculty. Naturally, librarians at private institutions may have additional constraints on their collecting responsibilities, but wherever possible we should still practice our professional creed to reject censorship in all its forms. That is neutrality in collection development.

Collecting religious materials has several nuances that more general or secular materials may not have. Today, I wish to focus on one of these nuances: the difference between polemical and academic publications in religious studies. Each religion I am aware of has its share of both popular and scholarly materials about its history, membership, sacred texts, and theology. Because of the nature of religion, and faith in general, some of the more popular materials may be considered polemical, that is, elevating a particular and perhaps extremely biased view of a religious tradition, primarily to

dissuade or support belief in the subject religion, rather than honest inquiry and dialogue about it. These polemics can be both friendly and antagonistic to the tradition. What do we as religious studies librarians do with this material?

What if, at say a private institution, a librarian is asked to purchase polemics which attack another religious faith? Are we obligated to purchase that material even when we know its quality and objectivity are in question? Does the same hold true for polemics which support a librarian's sponsoring religion? If, as a thought experiment, by some miracle we have excess funds at the end of the year, but only polemical material left to purchase (we have bought all academic material on the subject), are we obligated as librarians to buy some of that material? Would not buying it constitute a form of censorship?

I would like to turn to my own experience at a private religious institution, Brigham Young University (BYU). At BYU, it is my job to acquire and manage a collection of books related to the history, theology, and culture of my sponsoring religion, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Polemics are not very problematic when we are acquiring materials for other religious traditions. No one is banging on our door telling us we should not have a certain title about Islam or Catholicism. But that same title might very well become a red flag at an institution sponsored by one of those religions. At BYU, we try to mitigate this by purchasing religious scholarship from academic presses of high quality and reputation. We rarely, if ever, purchase polemical material about another religious tradition.

Those of you who know me know that I hope other religious studies libraries would do the same when collecting Latter-day Saint studies materials. I would hope my Atla colleagues would pass on polemics in favor of academic titles about my faith.

Having said this, I admit I do bend this soft no-polemics rule at BYU in select cases. That is, I do forgo my neutrality in favor of popular materials that have a significant connection to the lives of young adults of my faith on campus. This means I purchase missionary memoirs or conversion narratives from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences. I purchase how-to guides for prospective missionaries and those who have returned from their service and now

need tools to help them transition back to so-called “civilian life.” Our students also tend to court and marry while pursuing their degrees, so I buy practical theology books about marriage and raising young children from a Latter-day Saint perspective. I find myself bending this no-polemics rule most often when the author is from an underrepresented group.

When it comes to purchasing scholarship about the Church, my guiding principle is not: is this critical of our faith? But rather, “is this from a reputable publisher? Is the author respected in Latter-day Saint studies circles?” If yes to these questions, I usually just buy the copy.

In conclusion, when in libraries might we not be neutral? I refer us all to Rick Anderson’s post a few years ago (2022). Anderson reminds us that there are issues libraries take a non-neutral stance on, such as literacy, racial diversity, equity of access, and the importance of privacy to name a few. We promote these initiatives and unabashedly combat their opposites.

When we consider neutrality in collections at Atla member institutions, we take into account our individual library’s mission, goals, and population. We should examine our collection development policies to ensure we are acquiring materials which would be considered neutral and non-neutral or partial, to observers. Neutrally, our aim as librarians is to deliver timely, relevant information to everyone. Partially, that is, not neutrally, we actively promote and acquire materials related to information literacy, education, and equity among all human populations, as well as those priorities our individual library administrations have designated. I encourage all of us, when our next collection evaluation and assessment comes up, to examine our print and electronic materials with these considerations in mind.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adler, Melissa, and Lindsey M. Harper. 2018. “Race and Ethnicity in Classification Systems: Teaching Knowledge Organization from a Social Justice Perspective.” *Library Trends* 67 (1): 52–73. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0025>.

- Allen, Bennie. 2020. "Libraries Should Take Sides: Breaking Down the Neutrality Myth." February 25, 2020. <https://hacklibschool.wordpress.com/2020/02/25/libraries-should-take-sides/>.
- American Library Association. 2017. "Politics in American Libraries: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights." July 5, 2017. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/politics>.
- American Library Association. n.d. "ALA Code of Ethics." <https://www.ala.org/tools/ethics>.
- Aristotle. 2020. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Adam Beresford. Penguin.
- Anderson, Rick. 2022. "Libraries and the Contested Terrain of 'Neutrality.'" *The Scholarly Kitchen*, March 3. <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2022/03/03/libraries-and-the-contested-terrain-of-neutrality/>.
- Anderson, Rick. 2024. "Revisiting: Libraries and the Contested Terrain of 'Neutrality.'" *The Scholarly Kitchen*, September 3. <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2024/09/03/revisiting-libraries-and-the-contested-terrain-of-neutrality/>.
- Baleria, Gina. 2021. "What Is Neutrality Bias and Why Do We Need to Address It." *Routledge*, September 15, 2021. <https://www.routledge.com/blog/article/what-is-neutrality-bias-and-why-do-we-need-to-address-it>.
- Berman, Sanford. 2006. "Intellectual Freedom Manual." 7th Ed. *College & Research Libraries* 67 (1): 382-384. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.67.4.382>.
- Boersma, Hans. 2004. *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition*. Baker Academic.
- Burgess, John T. F. 2016. "Reconciling Social Responsibility and Neutrality in LIS Professional Ethics: A Virtue Ethics Approach." In *Information Cultures in the Digital Age: A Festschrift in Honor of Rafael Capurro*, edited by Matthew Kelly and Jared Bielby. Springer.

- Campbell, Douglas. 2014. "Reexamining the Origins of the Adoption of the ALA's Library Bill of Rights." *Library Trends* 63 (1): 42-56.
- Cooke, Nicole A., and Cearra N. Harris. 2023. "The Softer Side of Censorship." *Journal of Intellectual Freedom & Privacy* 8 (1): 4-9.
- Coleman, Anita. 2020. "Using the Anti-racism Digital Library and Thesaurus to Understand Information Access, Authority, Value, and Privilege." *Theological Librarianship* 13 (1): 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.31046/tl.v13i1.560>.
- Engelson, Leslie, Brinna Michael, and Caitlin Soma. 2021. "Implementing Antiracism in Technical Services." *Summary of Proceedings: Seventy-Fifth Annual Conference of Atla*: 117-140. <https://doi.org/10.31046/proceedings.2021.2958>.
- Farrell, Michael. 2022. "Racism, the Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church, and American Presbyterianism in the 19th Century." *Summary of Proceedings: Seventy-Sixth Annual Conference of Atla*: 55-71. <https://doi.org/10.31046/proceedings.2022.3122>.
- Gerolami, Natasha. 2020. "No Faith in the Library: Challenging Secularism and Neutrality in Librarianship." *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 43 (2): 172-192.
- Hafen, Bruce C. 2022. "The Dream is Ours to Fulfill." *Envisioning BYU, Foundations and Dreams*. BYU Press.
- Hurlbut, Jesse Lyman. 1914. *Palestine Through the Stereoscope*. Underwood & Underwood.
- Isaac, Munther. 2025. *Christ in the Rubble: Faith, The Bible, and the Genocide in Gaza*. Eerdmans.
- Johnson, Eric D. M., and Michelle M. Kazmer. 2011. "Library Hospitality: Some Preliminary Considerations." *Library Quarterly* 81 (4): 383-403.
- Kaihoi, Scott. 2015. "Christian Librarians and the Ethics of the Library Bill of Rights." *Theological Librarianship* 8 (1): 42-60. <https://doi.org/10.31046/tl.v8i1.353>.

- Kirkland, Anita Brooks. 2021. "Library Neutrality as Radical Practice." *Canadian School Libraries Journal*, November 8. <https://journal.canadianschoollibraries.ca/library-neutrality-as-radical-practice/>.
- Lewis, Alison M. 2008. "Introduction." In *Questioning Library Neutrality: Essays from Progressive Librarian*, edited by Alison M. Lewis. Library Juice Press.
- Librarians and Archivists with Palestine. 2024. "Israeli Damage to Archives, Libraries, and Museums in Gaza, October 2023–January 2024," February 1. <https://librarianswithpalestine.org/gaza-report-2024/>.
- Lichtenstein, Jena Barchas, and Melina Sherman. 2022. "Are Libraries Neutral? A Media Analysis," October 24. <https://programminglibrarian.org/articles/are-libraries-neutral-media-analysis>.
- Macdonald, Stephen, and Briony Birdi. 2020. "The Concept of Neutrality: A New Approach." *Journal of Documentation* 76 (1): 333-353. <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/149715/7/Macdonald%20Birdi%20JDoc%20proof.pdf>.
- Malley, Christopher, and Nathaniel Moses. 2025. "We Don't Have to Hand It to Harvard," *The Nation*, April 28. <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/harvard-university-trump-lawsuit-palestine-academic-integrity/>.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. 1985. *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*. The Gifford Lectures 1984-1985. Translated by Margaret Kohl. SCM.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. 2003. *Science and Wisdom*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Fortress.
- Portland Research Group, Maine State Library, Bruce M. Lockwood, and James Ritter. 2016. "Maine State Library: Trusted Professionals Survey 2016." Library Documents. Paper 101. http://digitalmaine.com/msl_docs/101.
- Powell, Julie, and Amber Wessies. 2021. "Creating a Culture of Hospitality That Engages and Retains Gen Z: Library Services." *The Christian Librarian* 64 (1): 3. <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2248&context=tcl>.

- Scott, D., and L. Saunders. 2020. "Neutrality in Public Libraries: How Are We Defining One of Our Core Values?" *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 53 (1): 153-166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000620935501>.
- Swan J. (1989). "Untruth or Consequences." In *The Freedom to Lie: A Debate about Democracy*, edited by J. Swan and N. Peattie. McFarland.
- Wenzler, John. 2019. "Neutrality and Its Discontents: An Essay on the Ethics of Librarianship." *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 19 (1): 55-78.

NOTES

- 1 Michael Farrell (2022), drawing a parallel with the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, advocated for maintaining Atla's organizational neutrality.

