

Special Forum: An Ethical Imperative of Open Access

Considerations On How Faith Affects Christian Librarians in Providing Open Access Resources

by Alyssa G. Sultanik

CONSIDERING THE ETHICAL IMPERATIVE

Open access to resources is not a novel concept for the modern information professional since its introduction in the 1990s. The ethics of ensuring open access to resources is one that librarians and information professionals should consider at some point in their careers. The faith of believers should affect everything they do in some way (1 Corinthians 10:31). Does the faith of believing information professionals give an ethical imperative to provide open access resources?

ACCESS IN SCRIPTURE

Access to information has changed drastically over the centuries. Access to God's written word was often limited access to specific groups of people, especially during particular eras in the nation of Israel's history. In Scripture, the word "access" is mentioned three times in the King James Version (Romans 5:2, Ephesians 2:18 and 3:12, respectively), each instance focusing on Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament era, the priests were the only ones with access to God in the Tabernacle and the Temple (Moses being the exception at Mount Sinai). The High Priest was the only one designated in Scripture to enter the holy place safely. Kings, priests, and fathers of families had first access to Scripture so they could make copies for their use. However, direct access to God was limited to the High Priest during the Day of Atonement. Pharisees and other sects had access to Scripture in the New Testament era. The Pauline epistles were copied and read at other local churches in the Mediterranean area and eventually collected and concluded as the canon of Scriptures. Direct access to God was still limited to the High Priest until Jesus provided direct access to God when He died on the cross, and the Temple veil was torn.

Many verses describe Jesus as access: by placing faith in Him, born-again believers have access to God (John 4:6, 10:9, Romans 5:2, Ephesians 2:18, 3:12). Since deep discussions are possible with soteriology and are outside the scope of this paper, one can conclude that Jesus is a Christian's access and the way to heaven (John 4:6). Because Jesus is the High Priest, Christians can boldly access God for grace in times of need (Hebrews 4:15-16). Jesus provides this access by acting as the mediator between believers and God (1 Timothy 2:5).

THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

These theological premises seem a stretch to apply to open access for all topics. In light of eternity, open access to information for an academic paper is not the same as access to God. The hierarchi-

Alyssa G. Sultanik is an independent scholar.

cal value between these two accesses is contrastingly different as one has eternal value while an academic paper may only bring value for a short season.

Access to Scripture is not the same as access to all resources. A Christian's faith mandates being shared (Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15). The information in all resources does not contain a mandate to be shared as information can become outdated or obsolete while the faith remains eternally valuable. Salvation is eternal, but academic resources are not (especially if one's faith includes a view of a pre-tribulation premillennial return of Christ, the burning away of the old earth, and concluding with the new heaven and new earth).

AUTHOR'S INTENT

The author's intent should be taken into consideration regarding the publication. Did the author intend for the work to be accessed freely by anyone, or did the author expect compensation for their work? Was the work intended for a specific journal or publisher that upholds paywalls to restrict access to a particular group of users instead of anyone? While most authors usually sign a form of consent for their work to be published, this form may also include how the work is distributed, whether the publisher releases articles as open access or under a paid subscription model.

PUBLISHING PRACTICES

Some publishers will be financially motivated to keep articles behind paywalls. Extensively commenting on publishing practices is outside the depth and scope of this article. Still, the ethics of publishing and the existence of predatory publishers would also be a fascinating and potentially heated topic of discussion for information professionals since access (or the lack thereof) to paid databases affects users and where they can go for services. Current publishing practices affect whether certain materials are available under open or limited access. Copyright laws may also protect published materials from becoming open access until the published material's copyrights expire and enter the public domain.

AVAILABILITY OF OPEN ACCESS RELIGIOUS RESOURCES

Religious studies scholarly databases are not as well represented in the open-access arena (Avery, 2018, 16). However, more resources are becoming available, such as creating the Open Access Digital Theological Library (Phillips, 2018, 1). Several other Christian publications offer online articles and journals, but not all these resources may be easy to locate if the journals are not discoverable on popular research tools. Some researchers may discover that using both Google and Google Scholar may find better results for open-access religious sources than just one of the above tools (Avery, 2018,16).

THE EMERGENCE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

Some considerations regarding the ethics of open access may adapt as AI services such as ChatGPT and other artificial intelligence services become more prolific and integrated into users' lives. Since these AI services use a lot of open-access material or transform copyrighted material into something considered open-access, it gives a lot of ethical considerations. Artists may have their work

stolen by AI, or authors may get their work copied and used in ways not originally intended. Since this is a changing field, opinions and options will change as AI adapts and ethical considerations enter discussions around these new services.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

If a patron needs resources and cannot find anything in a library's resources, using open-access resources makes sense as it expands the library's original collection and gives the patron student a source that may be required for an academic paper. The ethical imperative does not lie in providing open resources but in serving our fellow man (John 13:15, Matt 12:35a). Providing resources via open access is one crucial way in which an information professional can effectively help patrons. Serving patrons to the best ability possible should be the goal of every believing information professional.

CONCLUSION

Enabling open access to works designated as open by the original authors is a privilege that information professionals can participate in with a clear conscience. Librarians are professionals and can develop their online open-access resource collection to serve their patrons effectively. However, the faith of the believing librarian may or may not dramatically affect their role in providing open-access resources if the believing librarian already believes in effectively serving patrons to the best of their ability.

WORKS CITED

- Avery, Joshua M. 2018. "The Open Access Availability of Articles from Highly Ranked Religious Studies Journals: A Study of Ten Journals." *Theological Librarianship* 11, no. 1:12–17. <https://doi.org/10.31046/tl.v11i1.465>.
- Phillips, Thomas E., Ann Hidalgo, and Drew Baker. 2018. "Introducing the Open Access Digital Theological Library (OADTL): Creating the World's First Entirely Open Access Library in Religious Studies." *Theological Librarianship* 11, no. 2: 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.31046/tl.v11i2.520>.