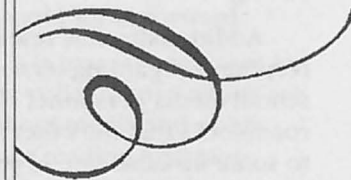


**SERVING THE RELIGIOUS INFORMATION  
NEEDS OF OUR COMMUNITIES  
WITHOUT BLOWING THE BUDGET**

*by Douglas Archer*



## INTRODUCTION

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some Indiana public libraries are hesitant to purchase religious materials, especially small and medium sized libraries. The most frequently cited reasons are a potentially high demand upon a limited budget, the enormous pool of materials from which to select and the sometimes controversial nature of religious materials. Yet religious information needs are as real as any other need for information and, within the context of the current war, are of special importance for American citizens. After first addressing these hesitations in more detail, this article will offer practical suggestions for building a modest collection of religious reference materials for small Indiana public libraries.

## THINKING ABOUT THE PLACE OF RELIGIOUS MATERIALS IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Arguments against selecting religious materials for public libraries because they might be controversial are for the most part no different from the arguments advanced against collecting materials on every other sensitive issue. They deserve the same response, sensitively but firmly put, that librarians give to any such objection. Librarians collect materials of interest to the public at large and to segments of the public representing all (or at least most) viewpoints on a topic. As the bumper sticker says, "My library has something to offend everybody."

However, some individuals will point out that the First Amendment to the Constitution sets up a wall of separation between church and state. Since public libraries are governmental bodies, religion has no place in public libraries. This argument ignores the difference between promoting religion or and providing information about religion. Even public schools may teach about religion as long as they do not promote a specific religion or religions (Teaching About Religion, 1995).

The library profession, through the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights, recognizes that religion should be treated as any other topic is treated:

1. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
2. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval. (American Library Association, 1996, p. 57)

Religion is mentioned as a clear and explicit example of censorship in the interpretative document titled "Diversity in Collection Development" (American Library Association, 1996).

Arguments based on limited budgets and the vast pool of available materials have also been advanced as secondary reasons for avoiding controversial issues. The solution in the case of religious materials is again no different than that for any other controversial issue. Librarians fulfill their professional responsibilities to select the best material at the lowest cost which will meet identified local needs within the context of other worthy, competing needs. It is their professional obligation to make such tough decisions.

Since many religious people tend to feel strongly about issues and are generally well organized, citizens with a right to have their legitimate information needs met, anticipating their needs builds bridges to important (and often vocal) segments of local communities. The efforts needed and the contacts made in the process of discovering and meeting their needs will, at a minimum, create valuable channels of communications (if not potential allies) long before the next library controversy erupts.

If one knows of people who wonder about the presence of items about religion in a library, give them the same advice one would give to anyone else who objected to books on the shelf. Remind the concerned citizen that in order to assure that his or her point of

view is represented in the collection, other viewpoints must be represented. Ask the person to suggest books that interest him or her.

## AUDIENCE ANALYSIS AS A PRECURSOR TO COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

Assuming then that it is appropriate to address religious information needs and that small public libraries are working with very limited budgets, what are the dozen or so nearly indispensable books that will provide a solid basis for meeting these needs? Before answering that question, it is necessary to point out that these needs will vary from community to community and that the first task is to identify potential elements of interest to your local community. The religious composition of the community might be one measure of potential interest.

While statistics indicate that the predominant religion in America is still Christianity, it no longer occupies the position of dominance it once held. It should also be noted that no one Christian denomination has ever held such a nationally dominant position though regional influences have been great (e.g. Baptists in the South, Lutherans in the upper Midwest, Congregationalists in New England). In addition, in some cases these patterns of influence have shifted over time. While New England was originally Puritan (Congregationalist) it is now heavily Roman Catholic.

In addition, there have always been a variety of traditions present in America. Jewish congregations were established in the 17th and 18th centuries along the Atlantic seaboard. Native Americans had and have maintained their traditional religions. Asian faiths did not arrive in the 1960's; they have been here from at least the mid-1800s. Finally, one must not ignore the fact that there has always been a relatively large unchurched population: those people who, while nominal members of some group, participated in no organized religion — not to mention others, including free thinkers who did not belong to any group.

Not surprisingly given Indiana's image of cultural conservatism, on first glance it tends to reflect these older patterns. Yet, it too is undergoing major transformation. The following titles covering the United States as a whole give a helpful start in the identification process. They will be helpful to the librarian and the average citizen alike.

## DEMOGRAPHIC RESOURCES

ARDA (American Religious Data Archive).  
<<http://www.thearda.com/>>

ARDA (funded by the Lily Foundation) provides free access to numerous quantitative data sets related to American religion. Some of the files are easier to use

and interpret than others but, on the whole, ARDA contains a wealth of information of potential value for both the librarian and the average citizen.

Bradley, Martin B. et al (2002). *Religious Congregations & Membership in the United States*. Atlanta: Glenmary Research Center.

The only county-by-county statistical source available. A decennial study, the 2002 edition is the first to include non-Christian groups. It is limited to participating organizations. Many but not all Christian denominations took part. The percentage of non-Christian groups was considerably smaller. Its preface is clear about who was included and who was not included and how they were counted. The work is well done within its stated parameters and is continually moving toward greater inclusiveness.

Gaustad, Edwin Scott and Philip L. Barlow (2001). *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This is a new edition of a classic title completely revamped from its earlier incarnations. Of particular note are the extensive color coded maps indicating not only the historical religious composition of each state but the contemporary situation of each county (primary and secondary dominance or plurality). While it does not indicate every group, its coverage is extensive enough to make it the best single volume for becoming acquainted with regional patterns of religious membership through the United States.

The next best tools are local Yellow Pages and the weekly religion section of the local newspaper. While there are groups which are so quiet, low key or adverse to technology that they will not be listed, most groups want interested parties, if only their own members, to be able to find them. No matter how small a community, one will likely be surprised by its diversity once research has begun.

The purpose then of this article is to affirm intellectual freedom as a basic responsibility of librarianship and to facilitate the task of building a collection of reference materials on religions. Since religion touches all elements of life including politics, social issues and the arts, it is impossible within it to address all of the potential religious information needs of any community. Instead, this article will focus on the most obvious topics of beliefs or religious tenets and historical or biographical information.

## SELECTING RESOURCES THAT WILL ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT BELIEFS AND TENETS

No single title will answer questions regarding every possible religion. Many of these titles will provide contact information and brief bibliographies in addition to short descriptions of the history and beliefs of each



group represented. From such bibliographies one may begin the process of selection of other reference tools and non-fiction titles for the circulating collection.

Magida, Arthur J. (2003). *How to be a Perfect Stranger: A Guide to Etiquette in Other People's Religious Ceremonies*. 3rd ed. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing.

An excellent, practical guide to the ceremonial aspect of a wide variety of world religions including Native Americans. While the other titles listed in this section stress history and beliefs, this work emphasizes what people do during worship and other communal events and each group's expectations for visitors. For instance, at most mosques visitors are welcome to observe, seated separately and praying silently, but may not join the *Umma* (congregation) in the prayer line. Each chapter contains a description of that group's basic worship service, holy days and anniversaries, life cycle ceremonies (birth, marriage and funerals) and home celebrations.

Mead, Frank Spencer (2001). *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*. 11th ed, revised by Samuel S. Hill. Nashville: Abingdon Press. The classic handbook, now in its eleventh edition, contains descriptions of major religions and their subdivisions. Proportionally, it gives more space to Christian denominations than the other publications cited here, though it does include many world religions. For example, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Baha'i are included but Buddhism and the Sikhs are not. Unfortunately, it is also weak with regard to newer "alternative religions" such as Wicca. Updated approximately every five years, it contains helpful, reasonably current bibliographies, contact information including websites and indexes. If price is the final determining factor, this is the title to buy.

Melton, J. Gordon (2003). *Encyclopedia of American Religions*. 7th ed. Detroit: Gale.

The most ambitious guide to American religious groups yet published. The entries are divided into three sections offering a very brief unit of general introduction, a somewhat longer collection of historical essays for each family of religions or denominations and an extensive directory of each family and its major subdivisions. Within each subdivision there are individual numbered entries for every group which could be identified, whether active or defunct. If the information was available, each entry contains a current address, a brief history and description of beliefs, membership figures, a list of educational facilities, periodicals published by the group, brief remarks about any recent changes in the groups membership (divisions, splits, etc.), and a short list of sources. There are 2630 entries and three indexes. Though much more expensive than Mead (see below), it may be the title to buy if one can

only have a single such title. Given its value in relation to its price it is still a bargain.

Melton, J. Gordon (1994). *Encyclopedia of American Religions: Religious Creed*. 2nd ed. Detroit: Gale. This work follows an organizational principle similar to that of the *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (7th ed. Detroit: Gale, 2003) documenting creeds, confessions of faith and other statements of belief by specific denominations within larger "families." With the general exception of multiple entries for these families, only one document is included for each denomination represented. In many cases where there is a specific, officially approved statement this presentation may be adequate.

However, for non-creedal bodies the selection of one statement from the many available might be misleading. For instance, for this author's particular tradition, Melton has chosen a statement which is, while authentic, less than representative. In spite of this limitation, this volume does what no other single title does in letting a large number of traditions speak for themselves.

Rosten, Leo (1975). *Religions of America: Ferment and Faith in an Age of Crisis, a New Guide and Almanac*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Rosten's work is dated but still helpful. The first 300 page section of the book is composed of twenty-one chapters with "what is" titles: "What is a Baptist?," "What is a Catholic?," etc. Each chapter is a question-and-answer dialogue with standard question slightly modified to fit each group. The respondents are representatives of major elements within each tradition as they existed in the early 1970's. Other than chapters for the unchurched, agnostics and Jews, the book covers only groups with Christian origins.

Rudolph, L. C. (1995). *Hoosier Faiths: A History of Indiana Churches and Religious Groups*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

The treatment is historical and heavily referenced. The focus is upon each tradition's experience in Indiana. Therefore, it is the tool to use if one wants information about Muslims in Indiana. See also his *Religion in Indiana: A Guide to Historical Resources*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986. In addition to a 2866-entry bibliography, it contains a directory of document repositories and congregational or parish histories.

Shulman, Albert M. (1981). *The Religious Heritage of America: One Hundred Religious Groups Speak for Themselves*. San Diego: A.S. Barnes & Company.

This title contains responses to a standard survey by official (or quasi-official) spokespersons for each tradition. It is particularly helpful for new religions such

as Eckankar, Scientology and the Unification Church and for major subgroups within non-Christian religions. For instance, there are three entries each for Islam and Hinduism, though again the Sikhs are left out. While this work does not begin to cover everyone, it does allow groups representing a large portion of the American population to speak for themselves in a format convenient and accessible to the average citizen.

*Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches.* Nashville: Abingdon Press (for the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Office of Research, Evaluation and Planning). Annual.

Limited to Christian groups, this title attempts to include all groups whether members of the NCCC or not. The most up-to-date source for current, detailed contact information for Christian denominations of any size. Each entry contains a brief historical sketch. If a community is heavily Christian, this relatively inexpensive title might be worth acquiring.

## SELECTING RESOURCES THAT ANSWER HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL RELIGIOUS QUESTIONS

One volume dictionaries of religion and religions abound. Below is a list of major one volume works currently in print. Multi-volume dictionaries and encyclopedias have been excluded for the purposes of this article since their costs are prohibitive, often costing over \$1,000.

*Encyclopedia of American Religious History* (2001). Rev. ed. New York, NY: Facts on File, Inc. (2 vols.)

*Religion and American Cultures: an Encyclopedia of Traditions, Diversity, and Popular Expressions* (2003). Gary Laderman and Luis León, Eds. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. (3 vols.)

There are several dictionary or encyclopedia type reference tools available which specifically target religion in America. While many of them address the relationship of religion and some other theme such politics, ethnicity, etc., these are two which address religion in general. While they are each multi-volume and therefore a bit more expensive, they are still reasonably priced and provide more detail on religion in America than any of the one volume tools listed earlier.

*HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (1995). Jonathan Z. Smith, ed. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.

*Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of World Religions* (1999). Wendy Doniger, ed. Springfield, MA.: Merriam-Webster.

*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (1997). John Bowker, ed. Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press.

*Penguin Dictionary of Religions* (1997). New ed. John R. Hinnells. NY: Penguin Books.

*Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* (1989). San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. (originally Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions, 1981)

All five of these titles are worthy of consideration. The Oxford, Perennial and Penguin dictionaries offer relatively brief entries (Perennial has a few longer, feature articles). All but the Oxford and Penguin provide illustrations. Penguin, though remarkably thorough in its coverage for such a small book, has quite terse entries. At the other extreme, the HarperCollins and Merriam-Webster titles offer numerous feature lengthy, encyclopedia-like entries along with the usual short treatments. Merriam-Webster has the added advantage of color images accompanying treatment of the major world religions. If only one such dictionary could be purchased, the latter is recommended. But if this is the title which is preferred, speed is necessary; it is often found in remainder sales. It might be best to pick two, one with a brief entries and one with a long entries.

*HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (1995). Richard P. McBrien, ed. Harold W. [San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco.

An excellent example of the one-volume dictionary devoted to a specific group.

*New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1978). Rev. ed. J. D. Douglas, Ed. Grand Rapids, Zondervan Pub. Co.

This title is less comprehensive than Oxford but also less expensive. Douglas gives emphasis to evangelical Protestantism.

*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1997). 3rd Ed. F. L. Cross. New York: Oxford University Press.

Anglican in origin and emphasis, it is nevertheless astonishingly comprehensive and authoritative in its coverage of all facets of Christianity. If one could buy only one reference tool for Christianity, this would be the title.

*Westminster Dictionary of Church History* (1971). Jerald C. Brauer. ed. Philadelphia, Westminster Press.

This title is also less comprehensive than Oxford but also less expensive and emphasizes mainline Protestantism.

## CONCLUSION

A final consideration for the selector is Johnston's *Recent Reference Books in Religion*. It is an excellent guide to recent (1970 to 1995) works but with references to earlier classics. This is the first source to consult when expanding a specific portion of a reli-

gious reference collection. Each entry follows a standard pattern providing the scope, strengths, weaknesses, competitors and a summary of content.

This guidance in building an adequate collection of religious reference tools at a minimal cost for the small Indiana public library. By purchasing just a few titles in each category listed above, the librarian should be able to begin the process of building a practical, balanced, wide-ranging but relatively inexpensive reference collection which will meet the religious information needs of his or her community. The librarian will also be able to feel more comfortable as a professional being on the side of the angels (whether literal or figurative) in the never ending defense of a core value of librarianship, intellectual freedom.

## REFERENCES

American Library Association, Office for Intellectual Freedom. *Intellectual Freedom Manual*. 6th ed. Chicago: ALA, 1996.

Teaching About Religion. *Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law*. April, 1995. <<http://www.ed.gov/Speeches/04-1995/prayer.html>>

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