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NOTE TO THE READER:

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**Religion in American Libraries: An Interpretation of the
Library Bill of Rights**

The courts have consistently held that for the freedom of the press and speech guaranteed by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution to be fully meaningful, people must also have the right to receive information: that is, to read, view, hear or access what they choose. In addition, the First Amendment guarantees the right of individuals to believe and practice their religion or practice no religion at

of, for and from religion, are similarly guaranteed.

In most cases involving religion and libraries, these latter freedoms of, for and from religion are not at issue. Rather, the constitutional principles at stake are usually freedom of expression and the corollary freedom to access the expression of others. For instance, most challenges to materials with religious content potentially infringe on the rights of other persons to access

of his or her own religion.

For the purpose of this interpretati
supreme deity or deities or one's understanding of the ultimate meaning or purposes of life. It

unfettered access to different points of views and ideas. Above all, collection development should be content-neutral, assuring that the library reflects a diversity of ideas including controversial or unorthodox points of view.

The selection, shelving and labeling (especially the use of religious symbols in labeling) of religious fiction are particularly sensitive. Nevertheless, excluding religious fiction would be a ^{ign,} background, or views of those contributing to their creation." Librarians should distinguish between providing access to religious fiction and the appearance of supporting or endorsing a particular religious point of view. Religious content is no more or less protected than any other type of speech. While libraries and librarians should respect the diverse religious traditions of their communities, libraries exist to serve the information needs of all users in their communities.

Library policy should be applied equally to shelving of religious books, to storage or display of religious objects, or to access to religious Web sites as they would be to any other shelving, storage, display, or Web access. Privileging one religious tradition over others could violate the establishment clause of the First Amendment. Placing specific materials according to religious point of view or status within a given faith community rather than according to the cataloging system used in the library can make it difficult for users to locate such materials. It could be a violation of the Library Bill of Rights to give special treatment to a specific sacred text or object or to limit access to such a text or object. On the other hand, it is appropriate to add additional titles or versions of a text or objects to the collection to meet community needs or interest but not to remove or sequester them. The scriptures or religious materials of all religions should be treated respectfully and equitably.

If a library sets aside tables or shelves for specialized materials or purposes such as atlases, directories, college guides, dictionaries or local history, it would be appropriate to set aside shelving for scripture, as long as all scriptures are treated equally, including texts that occupy a similar status among other groups (e.g., *The Humanist Manifesto II*).

Regarding meeting rooms, courts have consistently held that libraries may not exclude religious groups from their meeting rooms solely because the group is religious in character or because the meeting may include religious activities. Many precedents exist for the use of public facilities (e.g., school auditoriums or park pavilions) by all types of community groups, including religious groups. Courts that have considered the question have consistently held that libraries are limited public forums for the receipt of information. In turn libraries may designate areas within their facilities as limited public forums for use by the community for the exchange of information and may create rules for their use. No court has ever ruled that a library must exclude religious groups. The safest course of action is to provide the same access and apply the same rules of use to all community groups. As with collections, these rules should be content-neutral and address only behavioral restrictions (time, place and manner). Consistency is crucial: all groups should be treated the same and subject to the same rules, such as rental fees, frequency restrictions, noise policies or food bans.

With regard to displays, libraries are not required to open display or exhibit space to community groups. If libraries choose to open their exhibit and display space to community groups, space

