

Navigating and Preserving Interfaith Dialogue: Perspectives from Two Academic Librarians

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Abstract:

This paper presents examples from academic librarians' experiences on documenting religious conflicts and promoting interfaith dialogue without sustaining resentment. To prepare for the Parliament of World Religions in November 2018, an academic librarian in the United States collaborated with a religious studies professor to document ways to enhance dialogue and understanding of "dignity" in religions including Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism through Wikipedia. The wikipedia collaborations led to opportunities to teach the meanings and concepts of dignity in religious contexts but there were also moments when the added citations and texts were challenged by other Wikipedia users; we reflect on navigating sensitive topics such as dignity in religious studies and in Wikipedia during such complex times.

In an interdisciplinary course entitled 'Contemporary Debates in Islam' at New York University Abu Dhabi, one librarian was tasked with supporting the course through both collection development and instruction. This experience provided an important test case for the library's mission of easing the tension between academic freedom, interfaith dialog, and mutual respect between proponents and opponents of Islamic traditions. From collection development to wikipedia activities, these engagements demonstrate opportunities to document religious conflicts and to foster interfaith dialogue.

Keywords: academic librarianship, collection development, information literacy, religious studies

Introduction

As facilitators of information accessibility and discovery, librarians have an important role in fostering cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect between adherents of different faith traditions. Religious topics, and sometimes conflicts, are among the most sensitive issues to discuss in a public or academic setting. Criticism of one's religion, even when made in good

faith, often feels like an attack on the core identity of its adherents. Yet the increasing exposure of people to divergent and conflicting religious opinions, especially via social media, makes it all the more important that respectful dialogue can be held and citizens can agree to disagree on the big existential questions. Leonard Swidler's *Dialogue Decalogue* provides much needed guidance for such interfaith dialogue to produce positive results for a pluralistic society (Swidler, 1983).

What are opportunities for academic/research librarians to engage with their community to address religious conflicts? This paper will explore how in-person interactions and digital activities can create opportunities to promote religious dialogue and understand how "conflict" can be understood and documented. Several case studies are presented as examples for other library professionals to model in their own unique circumstances. Moreover, analyzing hostile discourses based on religious sentiments can be used as a teaching mechanism, in furtherance of advancing information literacy skills among university students as well as the general public.

Reading Circles

Conventionally, public libraries have held many community reading groups. Reading groups are often fascinating ways to gain and share perspectives on a given topic (see Barton and Hamilton). This conventional activity is often celebrated and recognized in public libraries as a way to enhance literacy, civic engagement, and dialogue. Public library spaces and its activities can provide a "social infrastructure" for its communities as described by Dr. Eric Klinenberg. When libraries provide such activities, we foster new connections and ideas through reading and discussion. What if these reading topics were controversial? How does one provide an opportunity to explore world faiths in an open but safe manner?

In Spring 2013, a series of theology and literature discussion group was held at the research library of The New York Public Library (NYPL). This idea was sparked from an exhibition that the NYPL held called "Three Faiths; Judaism, Christianity and Islam" which focused on exhibiting collections covering the distinctions and similarities of these religious traditions. Aside from exhibition, the discussion series prompted opportunities to think about these faiths and other ones. For the first time in the library, the reading topics focused on different religious groups including Jewish/Muslim Identities, Christian Faith and the Religious Right, and it opened up community members to participate in such discussions. Once a month, the reading group met in the library to talk about the specific book and topic. The librarian served as a facilitator to engage with attendees on these topics and asked thoughtful questions to the participants. Like any other reading groups, there will be debates, strong opinions and thoughts on specific topics. These groups generated a series of biases against specific religions and their practices. Identity politics became a central issue in the book discussions particularly when it came to Christianity and Islam.

In a public library space, it may be an opportunity to mediate such disagreements and raise awareness of religious practices and ideas to non-practicing members. The interactions were very vivid, each book focused on a particular topic within the faith. Participants listened carefully, shared their thoughts about the book at hand. It became clear that they were not reading the book but rather joining to learn more about the spiritual groups. One participant condemned one faith openly by citing the trauma that they experienced. Another listened at the comments very carefully without taking offense to such comment. This is often something that is not discussed or examined closely enough. When there are physical interactions and engagements provided by the library, opportunities to reflect and bring community members

together to discuss openly their thoughts. Of course, this largely depends on the reading discussion.

There are many books to consider when covering world faiths today. It is important to find one that can cover the religion authentically and authoritatively. In some of the seminars, participants were also pastors and religious leaders who wanted to hear more about the public perceptions and thoughts on these faiths. This can open opportunities for new levels of engagement without sustaining resentment. It's often very difficult to discuss such topics openly when there are spiritual leaders in the group but by ensuring that there are norms and policies for the group discussion in the beginning of each seminar, participants can then also engage with other members at the end of the session. When libraries provide an opportunity for community members to learn more about the religious differences and traditions, there can be opportunities to reduce resentment and increase understanding and appreciation. All of these experiences can be observed and documented from these book discussions.

One aspect that the librarian learned is that people in New York City, a very modern and liberal city, craves for discussions on spirituality. Each session drew about 30 attendees and often times it was difficult to get everyone to talk on this topic. The books that were discussed in sessions included: *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis *Allah, Liberty and Love* by Irshad Manji, *Why Faith Matters* by David J. Wolpe, and *The Reason For God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* by Timothy Keller. Facilitators should keep in mind that there may be people who are curious or may not have read the book and are simply observers in these discussions. It's important to include all voices and perspectives in the process. The physical interactions in the library is critical to foster engagement and new connections.

Dignity, World Religions and Wikipedia

In addition to the physical activities, the digital ones from the library can play an important role in fostering inter-religious dialogue. In November 2018, the Parliament of World Religions, a major religious studies organization, organized its meeting in Toronto, Canada. To prepare for the Parliament, the academic librarian collaborated with a religious studies professor to document ways to enhance dialogue and understanding of the role of "dignity" of women in various religious traditions including Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. One of the most controversial topics in Wikipedia include topics of religion. Any editing in Wikipedia entries on religions can be contested and generate tension among editors, contributors and readers alike. Based on a study in 2013, politics, geographical locations and religions were often viewed as controversial topics in Wikipedia (see Wikimedia, 2013).

What role does Wikipedia play in documenting and sharing the role of women's dignity in this digital space and without sustaining resentment in the process? It is often a popular source that online users will seek out for information whether their sources are scholarly or not (Staub and Hodel 2016). In fact, information literacy can also be embedded into the process of editing Wikipedia entries to document and preserve information and narratives that are based in sources. The decision to use Wikipedia for this project in preparation for the Parliament of World Religions was to showcase how the community can engage and foster new knowledge on the concept and role of dignity in women's lives across the faiths. This was a learning opportunity to engage and illustrate scriptures that reflect the importance of dignity and its meanings in such faiths. In one approach, this kind of work to create new subsections within Wikipedia entries that cover women in Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism generate knowledge that becomes accessible and provides a voice for women of these faiths and the role

of dignity in their lives. This documenting effort is what makes Wikipedia an effective source to consider when teaching students how online information can be created, disseminated, and rectified. Prior to this collaboration, there were no entries or subheadings on the importance of dignity in women's religious lives.

Individual consultations and wikipedia-edit-athon workshops led to further engagement that enhanced teaching opportunities covering meanings and concepts in specific religions. This opportunity to integrate Wikipedia as a way to understand internal religious conflict through the web can be a unique way to discuss with students on how "digital control" and authority can become barriers of expression and understanding. More importantly, the participants from professor's classes had opportunities to add and edit Wikipedia entries. It is known that the issue of gender inequity exists in the Wikipedia community regarding the lack of entries on women's issues and topics such as biographies, rights, perspectives and general information. In addition, there are not many participants who identify as female to contribute to Wikipedia. In the classroom, there were women and underrepresented groups who eagerly contributed to the topic of dignity in these religious traditions.

During the Wikipedia-edit-a-thon sessions, we noticed that when adding "dignity" in "Women in Hinduism" page with proper sources, it is usually accepted and can become part of the entry. However, there were times when our entries were contested by other Wikipedia editors. This has become more challenging and reveals a deeper internal conflict within the online community on how "dignity" should be described and considered for women in the various religions' entries. These learning moments where religious information that has been documented can still be challenged and contested by other Wikipedia users due to its sensitive topic such as dignity in an entry on a particular religion.

Of course, we are unable to meet with these users/editors and inform them our goal in preparing for entries relating to dignity in women's religious lives for the Parliament of World Religions conference. We took the opportunity to discuss it in class and reflect why dignity is being challenged in Wikipedia. What does that tell us about the digital culture and knowledge when it comes to issues that are particularly sensitive. How do we have a dialogue that does not fuel resentment but enlightenment for all. It was particularly challenging because we did not expect such challenges coming into our newly added entries. Fortunately some of the entries were accepted and saved including Hinduism and Christianity but others were immediately deleted such as Islam and Judaism. Hosting a wikipedia-edit-athon can be an exciting opportunity to bring members together to discuss the topics that they would like to uplift and support further. Wikipedia as a media can be informative and instructive as a research tool for all topics alike. We need to recognize that online conversations will continue to grow into heated discussions through Wikipedia but there are still opportunities to engage with in-person experiences (See Kramer and Taraborelli, 2018).

Supporting academic programs without supporting prejudice

One of the greatest challenges facing Western countries is their troubled relationship with Muslim minorities, especially immigrants. Ever since the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States, Islam and Muslims have become a "political" issue across North America and Europe. The current President of the United States on the campaign trail promised to ban Muslims (that is, all Muslims) from entering the U.S. and once said in an interview, "Islam hates us." Franklin Graham, a popular evangelical pastor, also declared, "Islam is a very evil religion." In Europe, Dutch politician Geert Wilders went even further stating, "I want the fascist Quran banned..."

That means no more mosques, no more Islamic schools, no more imams” (Esposito and Kalin, 2011, xxi-xxii). Such heated anti-Muslim rhetoric has arguably led to real-world acts of violence against Muslims, including the January 2017 shooting at a Quebec City mosque killing 6 people and, most recently, the March 2019 shooting at mosques in Christchurch New Zealand killing 50 people.

Clearly, anti-Muslim animus or “Islamophobia” is a distinctly pernicious prejudice of an ideological nature that goes beyond ordinary dislike or disagreement with Islam and Muslims. Islamophobia has been defined by researchers as “the dread, hatred, and hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetrated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims,” resulting in exclusion from public life, discrimination, and hate crimes (Esposito and Kalin, 2011, xxii-xxiii). It is the public duty of academics to study such phenomena and challenge them as appropriate. This imperative creates a dilemma for the collection development and instruction librarian. To what extent is it proper to provide patrons with access to extreme non-academic anti-Muslim views in the general collection? How can instructors make us of the dynamics of public debate around Islam to further information literacy instruction?

This unique predicament was encountered by the Middle East studies librarian at New York University in Abu Dhabi. One of the CORE courses in the undergraduate curriculum, part of the required interdisciplinary subjects for all students, is a class about contemporary debates in Islam. The scope of the class was wide, covering topics such as politics, democracy, the Rushdie affair, gender, feminism, liberalism, secularism, and fundamentalism. Much of the standard academic corpus of texts were suitable to meet the needs of students in the course, exposing them to multiple sides of an issue and presenting arguments and counter-arguments in an academic setting. However, no course about contemporary debates on Islam would be complete without critically examining the popular anti-Islam discourse that strays into outright hostility towards Muslims. This issue can be especially sensitive to Muslims students, who are directed by instructors to confront an acerbic discourse that vilifies and disparages a core component of their personal identity.

The course instructors requested that students be able to access such texts, non-academic and hostile to Islam as a whole, for the purpose of an assignment analyzing and deconstructing their arguments. This included unqualified but prolific polemicists against Islam such as Robert Spencer, Bat Ye'or, Glenn Beck, and Andrew G. Bostom. None of these authors has official credentials in Islamic studies, but their writings are highly relevant and influential to the discourse around Islam and Muslims in Western countries. The problem from the collection development point of view is that placing these texts in the general collection runs the risk of exposing inexperienced students to erroneous misinformation of a prejudiced nature; on the other hand, there may be academic value for students to access these texts to engage critically in a serious public debate. After all, “scholarship is a conversation” according to the American Library Association’s Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. If students are going to be able to join the public discussion, they need access to relevant, albeit distasteful, actors within that discussion. As such, the subject librarian worked out a compromise with the faculty to provide a select number of “anti-Islam” texts in the general collection in support of a specific course assignment, while also ensuring that academic and dispassionate voices, i.e. the counter-arguments, were prevalent. Students could access problematic texts for the purpose of the course but would also have equal or greater access to reliable sources on Islam and immigration.

The subject librarian was also tasked with teaching sessions in the course as part of the library's embedded information-literacy instruction program. The anti-Islam authors could serve as appropriate test cases for applying information-literacy principles in support of the library's learning objectives. For instance, one of the ALA framework's principles is the ability of students to define and recognize authoritative content that, in this context, would be scholars with degrees and credentials in Islamic and Middle East studies or other relevant fields. The learning objectives of the program are mirrored in the ALA framework, specifically, to instill in students an appreciation of academic authority and recognition of scholarly activity as an ongoing discourse of claim, argument, exchange, and rebuttal. While anti-Islam polemicists offer a distinct example of inflammatory claims made by those lacking authority or credibility, a more a concrete and relevant example of ordinary scholarly development was used for general information literacy instruction.

Providing access to problematic texts was an effective way of introducing students to book reviews as part of the peer-review process. Authors Deepika Bains and Aziza Ahmed reviewed the work of New York Times best-selling writer Robert Spencer, whose arguments were highlighted in the course as representative of a significant portion of anti-Islam sentiment among the public. Bains and Ahmed criticize one of Spencer's books for its "structural and substantive flaws," particularly his "view of all Muslims as violent." Spencer instills this perception in his readers "by relying on his selective interpretation of the Qu'ran and Islamic history." Ultimately, they conclude that his work "does little more than contribute to an already abundant discourse of hate speech against Muslim Americans" (Bains and Ahmed, 2007). This example illustrates to students the method of scholarly critique within the academic publishing apparatus. While Spencer's arguments have little value on the merits, they do provide a striking instance of pernicious misinformation that has been popularized in the public sphere.

The controversy over the political theory of the 'clash of civilizations,' which predicts inevitable and enduring conflicts between Western and Muslim countries, is another example for Middle East studies students to highlight the method through which academic debate is facilitated and scholarship is produced. Unlike the writings of Spencer, whose work is accessible largely from popular publishing outlets, the clash-debate has occurred and is still ongoing within the academic publishing apparatus. The original term 'clash of civilizations' was coined by Bernard Lewis, Professor Emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, in his 1990 article *The Roots of Muslim Rage*. Lewis argued that conflicts between the United States and resurgent Muslim countries, such as Iran, were "no less than a clash of civilizations" (Lewis, 1990). Unlike many amateur authors who cast Islam itself as threatening, Lewis had scholarly authority; he was a top professor at a prestigious Ivy-league university. The controversy he generated could not merely be dismissed by academics as nonsense, but rather must be responded to within the peer-review process.

An initial response came from C. M. Naim, currently Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago, in his journal article *The Outrage of Bernard Lewis*. Naim says that 1990 Lewis' Jefferson Lecture, which was based on claims put forward in The Atlantic essay, was "not particularly distinguished" and consisted of "stale generalizations and a selective, even disingenuous use of evidence" (Naim, 1992). The accusation of over-simplification would become a major criticism of Lewis by many authors to come. Lewis, however, was not alone in his arguments. His thesis and terminology was further developed by Samuel Huntington, director of Harvard's Center for International Affairs, in a 1993 article for Foreign Affairs and later into the 1996 monograph *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*

(Huntington, 1996). Huntington, although not a scholar of Islam himself, added serious credentials to Lewis' arguments due to his high standing in academia.

The clash thesis provoked several responses in national and international forums. A colleague of Huntington's Roy Mottahedeh, Gurney Professor of History at Harvard University, issued his response in a 1995 journal article for *Harvard Middle Eastern & Islamic Review*. Mottahedeh disputed the "empirical basis" of Huntington's claims as well as charged him with "pander[ing] to the less constructive stereotypes of the history of the non-Western world" (Mottahedeh, 1995). Another volume edited by Salim Rashid, currently Emeritus Professor of Economics at the University of Illinois, republishes Huntington's original thesis that the "great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural" (Rashid and Huntington, 1997, p.1). Following a restatement of the clash thesis, the volume includes several critical essays from the perspective of Asian authors. For instance, Chandra Muzaffar, a Malaysian intellectual and human rights activist, claims to have found "serious flaws" in the clash thesis and suggests that it is "a myth propagated by people like Huntington to justify increased US military spending in the post-Cold War era" (Ibid., p.105). Even shortly after the publication of his 1993 article, Huntington anticipated these criticisms and issued his own rebuttal to critics in the same publication (Huntington 1993).

Huntington's thesis enjoyed renewed relevancy and political oxygen after the 9/11 terrorist attacks were carried out by the Islamist terrorist organization Al-Qaeda. He faced renewed scrutiny by heavyweight literary critic Edward Said, professor of literature at Columbia University and author of the groundbreaking 1978 book *Orientalism*. Said criticized both Lewis and Huntington together in an article entitled *The Clash of Ignorance*, which was published less than a month the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Like Naim, Said took issue with Huntington and Lewis' generalizations "as if hugely complicated matters like identity and culture existed in a cartoon-like world where Popeye and Bluto bash each other mercilessly" (Said, 2001). Fully developed and sustained critiques of Huntington-Lewis would also be published in academic presses, as typified in the monograph by Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand, both professors at the New School in New York City. Decrying the clash thesis as a "political myth," the two authors assert "the idea of a clash between civilizations is simply false" (Bottici and Challand, 2012, p.2). Nevertheless, to this day the clash thesis remains highly influential, as is demonstrated by its explicit support or rejection in contemporary political discourse (Tharoor, 2015).

Over the course of this narrative, the instruction librarian highlighted the development of the clash thesis, and its criticisms, from its inception to its status as a current political talking point. The claim, argument, exchange, and rebuttal process shows students two important points: 1) all the authors have credibility or "authority" in their fields, and 2) the claim-response dynamic is an example of "scholarship as conversation." The intended learning outcome is to motivate students to find authoritative sources and critically examine them with an open mind, with an aim for them to become contributors to the information marketplace and not merely passive consumers. By exposing them to this unfinished and ongoing academic discussion, students can better recognize how this dynamic plays out in other disciplines as well. As such, the story of the clash thesis provides students with a compelling and relevant narrative instead of a dry rehashing of the Framework's principles.

Conclusion

Academic, research, and public librarians can create many opportunities for students and the general public to discuss issues of religious conflict within the boundaries of civil discourse. From collection development policies and classroom instruction, to public engagement in wikipedia workshops and reading forums, these activities demonstrate ways to document religious conflicts and at the same time facilitate dialogue to promote diversity of religions and the historiography of religions for a specific group or for a general audience.

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