

Summer 7-5-2018

# Resurgent Faith Traditions and Information and Library Theory and Practice

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**RESURGENT FAITH TRADITIONS AND INFORMATION AND LIBRARY  
THEORY AND PRACTICE**

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### Abstract

In a seemingly worldwide development faith traditions are seeking to redefine their relationships with national and local cultures. This process specifically includes information, archival, knowledge, and library cultures in academic and professional environments. Such encounters can be complex in nature and involve several gradations of adherence to differing secular and religious paradigms or mental models. As evidenced by the anglophone literature, North American academic theorists in information studies and librarianship, categorized by the American Library Association as library and information studies (LIS), have seldom addressed this reality. This intellectual circumvention is seen as traceable to such long-standing factors as (a) the continuing influence of traditional models of *secularization theory*; (b) the historic reluctance of professors in multicultural, multi-belief universities to risk possible domination by sectarian influences; and, more problematically, (c) the existence of overreaching stereotypes held about religious adherents by other scholars. Such factors sustain ongoing communication misunderstandings. From a secular standpoint the essay addresses this deficiency through providing culturally pragmatic formulations which, under appropriate conditions, can support information and library researchers working with faith-influenced scholars in theory development collaborations. The author hypothesizes that aspects of an analyzed North American experience may be helpful in other developed cultures where multi-cultural realities require bridging secular-religious divides to facilitate cooperation in addressing significant library, information, archival, and knowledge issues involving faith communities.

## **RESURGENT FAITH TRADITIONS AND LIS THEORY AND PRACTICE**

### **Faith Traditions and the Anglophone North American Academic World**

A few years ago, this author had an unusual conversation with an immigrant social science professor who had earned various European degrees and a doctorate from a leading public university in anglophone North America. This scholar asserted that he believed in the inerrancy or complete factual accuracy of all the original manuscripts of books contained in the Protestant bible. This admission of the extent of his belief in revealed truth was unexpected. This scholar was known for a painstaking commitment to the scientific method based on rigorously maintained and analyzed evidence. In addition, he did not visibly wear a cross or otherwise publicly symbolize his strong religious beliefs.

When pressed on how he could hold a commitment to scriptural revelation while adhering to a scrupulous allegiance to the scientific method, this scholar's reply was simply stated. As with many educated Protestants, he believed that his secular and religious views did not conflict since the world no longer possesses the original inerrant manuscripts of the bible. The laborious process of copying and recopying the various biblical books over hundreds, even thousands, of years had undoubtedly allowed errors to accumulate in the scriptures. Since perfection is lacking in human actions he believed one could hardly expect otherwise. Pragmatically "speaking," if the books of the bible lacked veracity with all the factual items they contain, they cannot be the final arbiters of the validity of today's science, social science, and the humanities research and scholarship.

### **A Note on Terminology**

For analytical convenience, this essay will follow the American Library Association's (ALA's) lead in referring to the diverse if sometimes overlapping sectors of information science and librarianship as aspects of library and information studies (LIS). This is the generic term employed by the ALA in program accreditation (ALA 2015).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem addressed in this essay may be succinctly stated. Resurgent religious traditions, often proclaiming dogmatic and irrefutable certainty on their own terms, are increasingly impacting the geographic and intellectual worlds of the twenty-first century. Directly and indirectly, assertions by such traditions of the right to influence, even direct, national cultures also have the possibility of impacting the LIS archival, information, knowledge, and library intellectual domains. The anglophone literatures of LIS have consistently revealed that LIS theorists and practitioners appear to lack the secular theory necessary to collaborate, should they even choose to do so, with the religiously influenced in formulating questions and solving problems of mutual interest.

The strength of contemporary religious belief is such that adherents regularly impact academic and community cultures (Dafydd Jones 2014; Crowley 2015). In consequence, it may no longer be assumed that the secular academic world in developed nations can adhere scrupulously to the argument against cooperation with members of faith traditions offered by the pragmatic philosopher Randolph Bourne. This diktat first appeared in "The Uses of Infallibility (1992)," a 1920 essay on the famed English 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian and academic theorist John Cardinal Newman. In his essay Bourne asserted, "Let theology deal with its world of dogma. Let science deal with its world of

analyzable and measurable fact. Let them never touch hands or even recognize each other's existence (Bourne 1992, 501).

### **Theorists, Practitioners, and “God Talk”**

#### **Secularism, Religion, and the Academic World**

In an increasingly religious age the university world may not be the best possible arena for developing theory on how to address religious belief in organizing and delivering information, knowledge, archival and library services. Many contemporary LIS and other academics, particularly those at elite, non-denominational institutions, follow Bourne in their distrust of any mixing of religious understandings with research and teaching. According to political scientist Charles W. Anderson, “it is widely assumed that science and religion are not only distinct but antagonistic,” with university professors often taking on the obligation to “disabuse students of the superstitions and myths propagated by organized religion” (1993, 117). Arthur Waskow has summarized a typical academic reaction to the possibility of factoring religious factors into research and teaching by quoting a professor who observed, “the way I was taught, if it's God, it isn't scholarship” (1984, 132).

There is a certain incongruity in the reality that in place of an established national church the United States has long operated with a what has been termed “civil religion” a concept credited to the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (Haberski 2018). American civil religion, as a conveyor of national values, had and must continue to address a disparate competition of popular and elite faiths, the influential emphasis on reason and science of the European Enlightenment, and a spectrum of colonial, state, and federal models of religious interactions with government.

As summarized by Raymond Haberski, Jr. in his article “Civil Religion in America,” published in the online *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, American civil religion has echoed Protestant values and assumptions, while enshrining the mythic nature of the Puritans, founding fathers, and common people who gave their lives in wars and conquest. Moreover, while Americans do not pray to their nation, they have no trouble praying for their nation; they see presidents and preachers as both serving in capacities that minister to the people in times of crisis, and they invest sacred meaning in events and documents to help them imagine that America is as much an idea as it is a place. Over time, American civil religion has also provided a narrative for a set of ideals, statements of purpose, and symbols to which all Americans, in theory, can appeal. (2018)

One hesitates to assert that civic religion is unique to the United States in anglophone North America. However, it is of interest to note that a quarter-century ago Andrew Kim (1993) discerned an absence of civil religion in Canada due to such factors as:

- Strong political and economic regionalism;
- Lack of unifying national symbols;
- Pervasive American cultural influence;
- Linguistic and cultural differences of the two non-Native founding communities of Canada -- English and French-Canadians; and
- Lack of shared beliefs, symbols, and values regarding a "Canadian Way" (1993, 257).



A reading of Kim's (1993) comparison of the status of civil religion in the United States and Canada and Crowley's analysis of the French experience (2015, 212-213) can suggest an additional field for research on secular-religious issues and their impact on library and information education and professional work. This under-studied area would involve investigations of the similarities and differences between the effects on LIS theory and practice of (a) American civil religion and its cultural, if legally discretionary, celebration of the nation's mixed Protestant and secular cultural values (Haberski 2018) and (b) *laïcité*, the more officially and culturally compulsive celebration of the significantly more secular qualities of the French republic (Crowley 2015, 212).

The adherence of LIS and other faculty to American civil religion is indeterminant. This further complicates the existing difficulty with analyses regarding the impact of religion within the nation's academic worlds and the broader American culture. Simply put, the problem may not be straightforwardly solvable due to the numerous and overlapping variables impacting human actions.

As advised by Baker (2012):

It is best to refrain from positing inherent relationships between belief systems or social institutions, including those involving science, religion, or secularism. The actors who animate ideologies are inseparable from the historical, political, and cultural contexts structuring the situations they inhabit. It is in the intersection of these fields that belief systems, secular or otherwise, emerge and persist. (181)

People do not act solely on internalized religious rules for behavior learned in childhood and the contexts for learning such rules differ. Individuals raised in the same secular tradition can diverge in the ways they apply the tradition's rules to their existence

(Holland et al. 1987). It can be the same case where faith traditions provide “a culture of choice and spiritual exploration prevails—both inside and outside the religious establishments” (Roof 1999, 53). Depending on the faith tradition, the areas where dissent can be tolerated may be surprisingly wide (Bokenkotter 1990).

Multiple factors went into the creation of modern secularism. One such was the growth in the availability of faith options. Greenberg and Steinmetz (2018) stress the role of the Protestant Reformation in the development of both secularism and religious freedom, “Protestants were therefore the godfathers of secularism as we know it today: with a modern, neutral state to ensure that religion was removed from the public sphere, a plurality of religious beliefs could be expressed in private” (108).

As presented by Patrick Fisher at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association in Oregon, U.S.A., the United States has developed into a nation where conditions facilitated such a religious plurality.

People in richer countries tend to be less religious than people in poorer countries.

The United States, however, is an exception: it is a rich country with a high rate of religious observance. The United States is the most devout and orthodox of the world’s industrialized nations and compared to other wealthy countries the United States has often been seen as a religious outlier. In Western Europe, only minorities say that God is “very important” in their lives. In the United States, on the other hand, large majorities make such a claim, a rate similar to Latin America, Africa, and other parts of the developing world. (1).

For American academics, particularly academics lacking tenure in any field or discipline, stress on the of religion in a national culture may raise concerns about pressure

to teach and research according to the dogmas of one or more of the nation's religious traditions. Under certain unique circumstances this can be an understandable worry. Nevertheless, given the wide range of faith traditions in the United States, dogmatic control by a single religion of academic research and instruction in non-sectarian, particularly public, institutions is a remote possibility. Furthermore, even strong faith adherents can have a multiplicity of loyalties. Farid Panjwani (2017) has emphasized that "no Muslim is just a Muslim" (596) in stressing the complexities and ongoing results of identity formation. Such complications were captured by the noted folklorist William A. Wilson who emphasized the basic reality that humans have a variety of social identities:

For example, I am a Mormon; but I am also a father, a teacher, a Democrat, an Idahoan, a tennis fan, a photography nut, and so on. To assume that one can know me fully simply by identifying me as a Mormon is to assume too much. It seems safer to say that in certain situations my Mormon identity will become dominant and my other identities will be forced into the background, though never fully suppressed - that is, even in my most intense Mormon moments I will not cease entirely to be a Democrat, and conversely, when I play the role of Democrat, I will not cease to be a Mormon. (3)

To limit the mental world of a potential collaborator in research and theory development solely to her or his religious identity is to operate based on a stereotype that has quite often proved to be erroneous.

### **The U. S. Contexts of LIS Theory and Practice**

Since the twentieth century changeover in much of the Western world from library as community censor to proponent of intellectual freedom, the English language

LIS literature has tended to view interactions with the religiously motivated as involving the need to (a) resist censorship (Landrum and White 2001; Steffen 2002; National 2018), (b) avoid giving offense to the faithful (Schielhagen 2002; American Library Association 2010), or (c) ensure that religious perspectives are appropriately represented in library collections (Doyle 2002; Silver 2002; American Library Association 2010). In this context, LIS educator Richard J. Cox (2001) of the School of Information Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh and reference librarian and Christian pastor Mike Wessells (2003) are among the few exceptions in that they have drawn on their religious traditions to more positively address LIS issues (Crowley 2015).

### **Why Knowledge of Religious Perspectives Is Important for LIS**

Contemporary religion has become both a critical problem for study and an unavoidable factor in an incredibly broad range of cultural and societal interactions. Since the 1980s, it appears to be the case that “religious traditions throughout the world—Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism” have been on the rise, refusing “to accept the marginal and privatized roles that theories of modernity, liberal political theories, and secularist ideologies had reserved and prescribed for them” (Kumar and Makarova 2002, 95).

As stressed by Jose Casanova, this rejection by faith traditions of efforts to minimize their roles means that to some believers no subject is beyond religion’s purview,

Religions throughout the world are entering the public sphere and the arena of political contestation not only to defend their traditional turf, as they have done in the past, but also to participate in the very struggles to define and set the modern

boundaries between the private and public spheres; between legality and morality; between family, civil society, economy, and state; between nations, states, and civilizations in the emerging global system. (Kumar and Makarova 2002, 95).

If Casanova is correct in this assertion that cultures are being transformed by new or reenergized faith traditions offering direction for existing in an increasingly globalized world, then faculty in library and information studies and other fields face a critical question: *How can theorists provide constructive guidance to practitioners who must interact in the religiously influenced environments served by the various information, library, archival, and knowledge professions?* The short answer to this question, to be discussed in more depth below, is that such guidance, at times, is apparently going to require the involvement in theory development of scholars who either study and/or participate in the religious components of contemporary cultures.

Unfortunately, the present lack of theory useful to understanding, and perhaps resolving, “faith versus professionalism” challenges in contemporary library, information and knowledge environments may even now be contributing to ongoing academic and community polarization.

## **Nonverbal Communication, Perception, and Law**

### **French and American Law**

Although the French ban on wearing religious symbols has frequently been discussed in the contemporary social science literature (Crowley 2015, 211-212), it is effort to control religious expression that has a history in the United States of America. Too few researchers are aware that many American states once legally prohibited a teacher from wearing a religious garment in public schools. According to an Associated

Press report, published online on March 27, 2017 by the *Chicago Tribune*, a total of thirty-seven states once prohibited such garments in schools “under pressure from the Ku Klux Klan during a time of intense anti-Catholic sentiment.” The report went on to note, since Nebraska had repealed its law “public school teachers in Nebraska will soon be able to wear habits, hijabs and other religious clothing in their classrooms.” Nevertheless, the change was not entirely supported in the statehouse since “some lawmakers opposed the measure, saying all displays of religion are inappropriate in public school classrooms” (Chicago Tribune 2017).

### **Nonverbal Communication**

The banning of religious habits being worn by public school teachers in most of the American states represents instances of outlawing a specific form of nonverbal communication, what Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel have termed “The Messages of Attire” (2010, 253-254). Where nuns might have seen their habits as reflecting modesty and self-restraint in the service of God, others felt uneasy or threatened by this form of clothing. Such a reaction is crucial to understand since “consciously and unconsciously, intentionally and unintentionally, people make important judgments and decisions concerning the internal states of others—states they often express without words” (Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel, 2010, 244). An additional complication to communication of all types is the reality that nonverbal communication messages are often conveyed “without ever being aware that they have meaning for other people” (Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel, 2010, 246).

The unintended negatives for wearing religious attire can lie in the fact that articles of clothing can be worn for reasons intended by the wearer but can be received as

messages meaning something entirely different by the message recipients. For scholars who adhere to Randolph Bourne's strong view of non-interaction between religion and secular matters (1992), a faculty member wearing religious garb and/or symbols can be viewed as asserting in public that her or his faith tradition already provides dogmatic answers to research problems. Secular research seldom seeks religiously dogmatic answers to newly formulated questions. In consequence, individuals wearing religious garb or symbols can be viewed negatively as potential partners in the process of research collaboration. Such perceptions may well be wrong and opportunities for research collaboration may exist if negative initial reactions are overcome.

American federal policy frowns on using religiously-associated attire as a barrier to employment. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has outlined the strong protections given to clothing and other religious expressions in the work place by federal law and regulation. These are contained in a document entitled "Religious Garb and Grooming in the Workplace: Rights and Responsibilities" which "answers questions about how federal employment discrimination law applies to protect religious dress and grooming practices and what steps employers can take to meet their legal responsibilities in this area" (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2018)

According to this federal guidance,

Examples of religious dress and grooming practices include wearing religious clothing or articles (e.g., a Muslim hijab (headscarf), a Sikh turban, or a Christian cross); observing a religious prohibition against wearing certain garments (e.g., a Muslim, Pentecostal Christian, or Orthodox Jewish woman's practice of not wearing pants or short skirts) or adhering to shaving or hair length observances

(e.g., Sikh uncut hair and beard, Rastafarian dreadlocks, or Jewish peyes (sidelocks)...In most instances, employers are required by federal law to make exceptions to their usual rules or preferences to permit applicants and employees to observe religious dress and grooming practices. (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2018)

Several practical, day-to-day reasons exist to explain why openly religious perspectives are usually absent from the process of developing theory for library and information studies, various professional fields, and many of the other social and physical sciences. The first is the historical approach to developing research group solidarity by avoiding what may be termed the “Which religion is right on this issue?” question. This query reflects the existence of many faiths with sometimes-conflicting truth claims (Warner 1998). In much of the twentieth century the potential question of which believer’s religious dogma would take precedence in a research project was avoided through agreements among faculty to set aside diverging denominational teachings and rely on scientific evidence and empirical data. Such an approach proved to be enormously attractive as the world of university researchers and theorists expanded from its liberal Protestant base to include Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, as well as a spectrum of other believers and nonbelievers. The *scientific method*, with its emphasis on the seemingly objective process of experiment and replication, supplied “standards for truth on which people of many persuasions could agree.” In so doing, it allowed scholars from a spectrum of faith traditions to “suspend or subordinate their sectarian religious beliefs...[to] work together and treat reality as the product of natural forces susceptible to empirical investigation” (Marsden 1996, 311).



Religious academic institutions aside, within 20<sup>th</sup> century mainstream higher education there seemed to exist a fundamental agreement that applying religious approaches to research questions was intellectually irresponsible. Living in what was perceived to be an increasingly secular world, a number of researchers and theorists even defined religion as a category that was becoming merely of historical interest—at least in a research university environment. Science, in short, was deemed to provide more respectable answers to all truly worthwhile questions. Even the “God of the Gaps” approach of assigning to the Deity areas which could not be explained by empirical data has now been deemed to be unacceptable. In the words of the theoretical physicist Marcelo Gleiser, “One thing should be clear to all who share a scientist's urge to learn about the world: To put God in our current knowledge gaps certainly would not further our understanding of the universe. For that we need science and its stubbornly secular modern approach” (Gleiser 2015).

### **The Example of American Catholicism**

Until the mid-twentieth century many American intellectuals, perhaps confusing religion as codified doctrine with religion as lived by its adherents, assumed that Catholicism in the United States was merely the local extension of a monolithic world view, a religion whose doctrines made its members unsuitable for participation in democratic processes and academic (including research) cultures. For these critics, Rome and its adherents represented a medieval, reactionary force opposed to the “liberal and progressive norms of the academy,” an irrationality that operated on the basis of the “arbitrary whims of the pope or church teaching” (Hart 1999, 40-41).

Ironically, this problematic, non-empirical judgment from outside the Roman Catholic tradition was balanced by internal denominational accusations from Rome asserting that American Catholics were much too “American.” The European wing of the Catholic Church, as far back as 1898, identified at least two critical qualities of American Catholicism that were not shared at the time by fellow believers in the Old World—a “love of science and love of democracy” (McAvoy 1963, 315].

The full story of how immigrant *Catholics in America* were transformed into a diverse spectrum of native born *American Catholics*—defined as individuals who do not see any conflict with “being a good American and being a good Catholic” (McAvoy 1963, 307)—is well documented but obviously impossible to fully present in a work of this size (Cross 1958; D’Elia and Krason 1993; Murray 1960; Porterfield 2001). In this context it is worth recalling Sibley’s 1946 assertion, unfortunately using only male pronouns, that

To most Americans, no church speaks with unquestioned authority on all aspects of life. In our culture, each individual is his own final court of appeal on questions of value; he may exercise his judgment either directly or indirectly by choosing whose opinion he will accept. No answer is final, and new questions continually have to be faced. (72)

For more than a century a shared American culture has socialized generations of Catholics into becoming effective participants in civic and intellectual enterprises, including theory development, often to the dismay of a Vatican bureaucracy that seemed to prize obedience to authority over intelligent, if nuanced, belief (Cross 1958; Porterfield 2001). Nevertheless, with exceptions, *Catholics in America* did indeed become *American*

*Catholics*. This reality should serve to ease concerns about the impact of another world religion—Islam—on American national culture, including its subculture of research and theory development.

Based on the domestic American Catholic experience, it can be expected that the same process of enculturation will refashion many *Muslims in American* into *American Muslims*, who define their faith and their nationality in complementary terms (Kumar and Makarova 2002; Lang 1997). As with immigrant Catholics before them, from the first-American born generation on, many American Muslims in the university environment can be expected to balance their faith with the demonstrated ability to participate in the collaborative work of theory development, including LIS theory development.

### **Pragmatic Justifications for Working with Faculty of Faith in LIS Theory**

#### **Development**

The research philosophy of *cultural pragmatism* offers several justifications for opening the theory development process within library and information studies, as well as other fields and disciplines, to collaboration with researchers with faith-based connections (Crowley 2005). First and foremost, the fundamental tenets of cultural pragmatism include William James's assertion that "all philosophies are hypotheses" (James 1912b, 279). For a cultural pragmatist, all of humanity's traditions may have the potential to provide testable assertions about the world, albeit at different levels of usefulness and validity. For example, religious faiths and their stories form a fruitful source of the analogies and metaphors that capture the experience of daily life, contribute to the advancement of science, and draw attention to desirable or even threatening states of being (Garden of Eden, widow's mite, Armageddon, etc.). Although dealing with

secular figures of speech, Roy Dreistadt's classic treatment of the use of analogies in science is a strong reminder of the value of drawing theoretical inspiration from a variety of sources. (1968).

In this context, a second fundamental tenet of cultural pragmatism—shared at many levels with classical pragmatism—asserting that *consequences or results determine if an idea is true* now comes into play. Under this criterion, the “origin, logic, and elegance of an idea are secondary to its practical outcomes” (Young 1997, 35). The emphasis on theories that work was a fundamental part of Thomas S. Kuhn's influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* which describes how scientists select a theory to guide their research:

Though the values they deploy at times of theory-choice derive from other aspects of their work as well, the demonstrated ability to set up and solve puzzles presented by nature is, in the case of value conflict, the dominant criterion for most members of a scientific group. (Kuhn 1970, 205)

A third culturally pragmatic reason for envisioning the possibility of theory collaboration with religious believers involves the reality that the shared culture of the United States supports religious devotion to the point where it is never totally absent from the Academy (“Insulting” 2017).

LIS theorists are inevitably going to have to test theories in religiously-permeated cultures. Scholars possessing both strong faith affiliations and appointments in university environments may very well be valuable collaborators if they are able to draw on their religious traditions to generate questions for research. In some cases, they may have a greater understanding of the populations involved in a given study.

A fourth reason for potentially collaborating with the religiously influenced flows from the reality that without religiously inclined associates able to serve as “translators.” For example, a secular pragmatist may have difficulty in theorizing for aspects of the contemporary United States where “a growing body of literature documents how religious beliefs and commitments inform political values and behaviors” (Sherkat and Ellison 1999, 4 of 26). To again cite Kuhn, “translators” knowledge about divergent theories can play a significant role in enhancing communication between differing knowledge communities (1970, 201).

As William James noted a century ago, “We are all biased by our personal feelings” ([James 1912a, 40). A secular cultural pragmatist is likely to need intellectual assistance from scholars with religious understandings to theorize with greater chances of success for environments where faith traditions are in play. The same need for balance, it must be stressed, applies to scholars from faith communities who, for example, seek to develop hypotheses describing the library, information, or knowledge experiences and perceptions of believers from other traditions or nonbelievers with secular orientations.

A fifth culturally pragmatic rationale for being open to the possibility of collaboration with scholars and others who are also faith adherents, results from the understanding that members of such traditions can exhibit a high degree of flexibility, possibly in response to an American national culture that “encourages a mixing of religious themes” [Roof 1999, 41]. In this context, it is worth noting the every-day pragmatism in religious affairs of American adults who, nearly two-decades ago, agreed at a forty-two percent approval level with the statement “the best religion would be one that borrowed from all religions” (“The Way We Live” 2000, 84).

## **Faith Adherents and Collaboration in Theory Development**

Years ago, there appeared the culturally pragmatic “A Nine-Step Model for Pragmatic Research” through which it is possible to identify possible theory collaborators and determine if such collaboration is effective.

The components of this model include

1. Confirm, or establish and maintain, a common language for identifying and solving the problem.
2. Identify the problematic situation.
3. Frame (define) the research “problem” from elements of the larger problematic situation.
4. Identify how analogous problems may have been resolved in other contexts.
5. Devise one or more provisional solutions to the “framed” problem through a “useful theory” construction process.
6. Field-test, fine-tune, or reject the provisional solution(s).
7. Implement a successfully field-tested solution(s) on a broader basis.
8. Monitor the continued effectiveness of the solution(s).
9. Decide when changes in contexts may require a revised identification of the problematic situation, another effort at problem definition, and new or different solution(s). (Crowley 2005, 190; Crowley 2015, 213-214).

Potential partners in theory development, whether they be critical theorists, feminists, or faith adherents, need to demonstrate flexibility in the preliminary and subsequent discussions called to determine the feasibility of collaboration in the usually ego-driven, frequently intense, and always demanding theory development process. The

first step in this collaborative theory development process directs the potentially collaborating partners to “Confirm, or establish and maintain, a common language for identifying and solving the problem.” If such discussions demonstrate that a common language for discussion is lacking and does not seem likely to develop, or that potential associates for the research effort are convinced that they already possess all the necessary answers from a research philosophy or religious tradition, then the potential collaborators will need to abandon cooperation and proceed in their very different ways.

### **Theorizing and an Indiana Public Library**

In an intriguing development, many adherents to contemporary religious practices are emulating pragmatists of all types in valuing the results of their personal and other experience over the prescriptions of “reason or inherited faith” (Roof 1999, 46). In consequence, cultural pragmatists and faith believers with a shared appreciation of analyzed experience may similarly embrace a mutual interest in developing theory valuable for explaining such issues as religiously-inspired challenges to the ownership and circulation of certain material by public libraries.

Here it is useful to examine Barbara Luebke’s aging yet still relevant report from Indiana describing how local protests against her public library’s holdings were undertaken, not by the area’s long-established Mennonite and Amish believers, but by more recent residents adhering to a “new spiritualism” who were “slightly astonished that our community is not as homogenous as they originally thought and are very vocal about what they believe should be acceptable to everyone” (Luebke 2002, 1 of 2).

As part of her account, Luebke provides a summary of the observations of the Middlebury Community Library staff regarding the nature of complaints over library materials as well as their possible causes.

Beyond trying to determine from what direction the challenges come, our staff has made the following observations. More complaints are received about audio and visual items than books, such as magazine covers, videos and audio books. These leave less to the imagination and offensive passages cannot be skipped over as easily as a paragraph or pages in a book without going too far beyond the passage. People rely on ratings and labels for assurance that materials are appropriate, not realizing that the standards and subjectivity of the raters may not mirror their own values. Language and sex are still more often offensive than hate or violence. People may have other reasons than the obvious or stated ones for challenging something. A person may have a personal history that is more responsible for his or her feelings than religious affiliation. (2000, 1 of 2)

Luebke's summary of the likely causes for religiously inspired attempts to censor library materials in her community suggests a spectrum of possible research questions. These include, for example, exploring whether or not there really are such phenomena as (1) less of a tendency to censor among long-established faith communities, as opposed to later religious arrivals; (2) over-reliance on labels by library users who underestimate subjective differences between rater values and their own; (3) relative acceptance by some faith communities of violence in library materials and a lack of acceptance of strong language and explicit sex within the same print, oral, or visual formats; (4) different borrower reactions towards censorship based on whether the story is conveyed



through print, oral, or visual format; and (5) role of personal experience versus religious belief in stimulating censorship activities.

From the culturally pragmatic perspective, efforts to develop truly useful theory to confirm or disprove the conclusions of Luebke and the other library staff—in their Indiana context or in other public library contexts—would clearly benefit from a team approach. With sufficient funding and release time, a strong case could be made for involving in such research and theory development “field” practitioners and scholars from such professions, fields, and disciplines as library and information studies, public administration, religious studies, interpersonal communication, linguistics, folklore, psychology, sociology, etc.

At its heart, America is a *pragmatic nation* where patterns for research, if they are successful, legal, and ethical, may have broad appeal. It may be characteristically “American,” for example, for even a Catholic instructor such as Steve Mueller to quote the pragmatist William James in a work justifying the value of reading and understanding the Christian Bible, in part, on the basis of its “practical application or usefulness” in the life of a student (Mueller 1999, 7).

In both twenty-first century United States of America and the larger world, it is safe to assert that consciously or unconsciously ignoring the influence of religious traditions, on occasion, can verge on intellectual folly. If understood in the necessary contexts and used with an awareness of both its strengths and limitations, a culture’s base of shared norms, many of which are religiously derived, can facilitate the efforts of scholars to bring researchers from both faith and secular traditions into a successful theory development process. Since “useful theory” prizes a strong connection between

itself and the practitioner realities that it purports to describe, it is likely that this approach will be seen by an increasing number of scholars as being appropriate for a surprising number of the questions studied within the information, library, archival, and knowledge domains.

### **Theory Collaboration Across International and Cultural Boundaries**

In addition to drawing on insights from cultural pragmatism, this essay has relied heavily on fundamental beliefs supported by a shared American culture and its “civil religion” to provide the necessary reasons for crossing philosophical and theological boundaries to bring scholars with religiously influenced perspectives into the LIS theory development process. In this light, what can, or should, be asserted regarding the possibilities of such collaboration within other national cultures and across international and cultural boundaries?

Differences in culture, context, language, politics and interest, as well as the issue of distance, inevitably and immeasurably complicate cross-national theory development and application. As stressed by John Dewey as far back as 1931, “We are not explicitly aware of the role of context just because our every utterance is so saturated with it that it forms the significance of what we say and hear” (1985, 4). If theorists do not identify and address the implications of variations in contexts, their hypotheses are likely to be woefully out of place when developed in one milieu and applied in another. Cultural pragmatists are understandably reluctant to set any “law” in stone but Dewey’s further observation that “analysis falsifies when its results are interpreted as complete in themselves apart from any context” (1985, 6) almost warrants an exception to the

philosophy's injunction when theorists offer an intellectual product developed in one culture to potential users in another.

### **Secular-Religious Cooperation in an International Context**

Working against the possibility of exporting the concept of contextually-appropriate secular-religious partnerships for theory development is a dearth of English-language scholarship advocating the idea, *except in works produced by the religiously affiliated* (Khalil 1991; Newman 1852; Polkinghorne 1998). The absence of secular considerations in library and information studies is a particularly notable gap. Both this specific LIS intellectual deficiency and the larger lack of analyses across the fields and disciplines are to be regretted, particularly since contemporary theorizing from a religious perspective does not always limit itself to the restatement of denominational dogma. A remarkable instance of freedom from what this author terms *intellectual predestination*—defined as *the erroneous assumption that the views of other theorists, due to a presumed knowledge of either their secular philosophy or religious faith, are knowable in advance of working with them in one or more contexts*—is J. Wentzel van Huyssteen's *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (1999). In this work, Huyssteen asserts the value of *epistemic humility*, defined as a knowledge stance “that accepts that the theorizing through which we come to understand our world is always going to be tentative and imperfect” (1999, 131). Such arguments, it could be noted, echo a century of thought by both classical and, more recently, cultural pragmatists.

The United States of America is a famously Protestant nation, so much so that G.K. Chesterton's well-known remark that “in America, even the Catholics are

Protestant” (Bellah 2002, 14), can be updated to “in America, even the Buddhists, Catholics, Muslims, other believers, and atheists can be Protestant in their emphasis on individual freedom and voluntary affiliation.” Based on the specific experience of the United States of America, secular theorists in other nations who envision cooperating with faith connected scholars may have a greater chance for success in environments where a cultural emphasis on democratic participation and individual freedom coexists with societal support for a spectrum of competing religious faiths.

Environments where competition among ideas is supported, where neither government nor religion are deemed to have a final say in the determination of theoretical truth, are likely to maintain cultures supportive of numerous secular and faith alternatives. Even allowing for the inevitable clashes and biases at the level of the individual scholar, such open contexts, within reason, can reassure potential collaborators in theory development that it is *unlikely* that (a) their freedom to explore various intellectual paths will be limited by established religious dogma and (b) their faith will be demeaned by other religious traditions or by a governmentally supported, or university endorsed, secularism. Such freedom in theory development is likely to be best achieved in institutions, in North American and other contexts, that do not require dogmatic affirmations of specific beliefs from their research and teaching professors.

## **Conclusion**

In his fundamentally important *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Thomas S. Kuhn made a striking assessment of the social sciences just prior to his description of paradigms, or “universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions for a community of practitioners” (1970, viii). In his

review of the fields and disciplines Kuhn noted that “the practice of astronomy, physics, chemistry, or biology normally fails to evoke the controversies over fundamentals that today often seem endemic among, say, psychologists or sociologists” (1970, viii). Since its practitioners view library and information science/information science as a social science, it would be quite appropriate to add LIS to the list of fields arguing over fundamentals.

Doubtless a number of readers of this essay agree with the pragmatic philosopher Randolph Bourne’s already discussed argument that the world would be a better place were we to “Let theology deal with its world of dogma. Let science deal with its world of analyzable and measurable fact. Let them never touch hands or even recognize each other’s existence (Bourne 1992, 501). Unfortunately for adherents to Bourne’s approach, the “world of dogma” regularly impacts the academic and community worlds in which theorists and practitioners work. In his 2015 consideration of the issue of secular-religious theory engagement (Crowley 2015) ended with a recommendation that yet remains relevant:

From the perspective of theory development, the more pressing need seems to be the formulation of notional connections to allow secular LIS researchers, particularly those working in academic environments, to theorize for practitioners working off campus with users of various and no faith traditions. It is a do-able, if at times unfamiliar, but very necessary task. (Crowley 2015, 215

The task remains, but the reluctance of academic LIS researchers to help bridge the secular-religious divide in anglophone North American and other contexts, a partition that so afflicts the working lives of LIS professionals, is still very much in evidence.

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