

## **2. Dangerous Ideas**

The Code of Ethics of the American Library Association recognizes that controlling and disseminating information carries enormous responsibility and that intellectual freedom and freedom of access to information are fundamental to an informed citizenry. Although prisoners, whether US citizens or not, retain some rights, there are reasonable limitations to those rights that may include restrictions on fundamental freedoms.

Following 9/11, fear of terrorism led the federal Bureau of Prisons to restrict prisoner access to religious books. To counteract the threat of radical religious groups recruiting members, gaining influence, or promoting terrorist ideas in US prisons, the federal Bureau of Prisons compiled a list of approximately 150 "noncontroversial" books and 150 multimedia materials (videos, audio books, CDs) for each of twenty major religions. The Standardized Chapel Library Project required chapel libraries in prisons to purge books that were not on the approved list. Enforcement of the policy resulted in both the removal of collections of religious writings acquired over decades and a prohibition against acquiring newly released unapproved materials. Some collections were comprised of thousands of books and other library materials, including thousand-year old classics of religious thought. Rather than identifying and removing-as has been done in the past-specific religious or secular library resources that incited hatred or violence or threatened security, the new policy limited prisoner access to a severely restricted number of pre-approved library materials. The list was to be updated occasionally, and prisoners could request that specific materials be reviewed for inclusion on future revisions of the list.

According to a September 10, 2007, New York Times article, Bureau of Prisons spokesperson Traci Billingsly stated: "We really wanted consistently available information for all religious groups to assure reliable teachings as determined by reliable subject experts." However, The Bureau of Prisons declined to publish the list of approved titles, although it is available through the Freedom of Information Act. The Bureau also declined to release the names of the religious experts on staff at the Bureau of Prisons who determined, in consultation with unnamed external religious scholars, which materials were deemed acceptable. Despite concern that the list excluded significant works, included obscure and insignificant ones, and was strongly biased toward a particular perspective, the only information released about selection guidelines specified that materials could not be discriminatory or disparaging, or advocate violence or radicalization. These guidelines did not apply to nonreligious library materials. The Bureau of Prisons did not provide funds for libraries without the resources to replace their purged collections with acceptable materials.

The Standardized Chapel Library Project brought together outraged prisoners, conservative advocates of religious freedom, and liberal supporters of civil liberties who opposed the restrictions and who challenged the government's right to determine what religious ideas are permissible.