

We do not allow nativity scenes. We feature Santa and snowmen, holly, greens etc.

A bit puzzled about why you would leave up the Pride Month display, but worry about the Nativity? Seems like both reflect cultural values of American society.

If you really want to make it appear that you are not supporting one religion over another, I would focus on adding displays from other belief systems, not taking away one.

Just my opinion.

Hello Don, I am at a small private ELCA university in the UP. We put up Christmas decorations in the library every year but I include other religious observances too. For example, we made a large Christmas tree out of butcher block paper and added 'ornaments' that represent Hanukah, Kwanzaa, Crescent and moon for Islam, peace symbols, along with Christian symbols. I try to make it as inclusive as possible. I also do a book display with various holiday books for all ages.

I have also had the pushback about LGBTQ+ displays but I tell patrons that our collection and displays reflect the diversity of our community and that we try to provide all of our patrons with reading materials.

As far as the Nativity goes... maybe simple signage that tells passerbys who is responsible for it will help to distance the library from the Nativity scene. Maybe contact the group that puts it up and ask for them to take responsibility/credit. Please share the responses you receive with the rest of the listserve, I am sure there are other librarians who would like this kind of feedback too.
Enjoy the end of spring!

Hi Don- I see many librarians discuss removing religious symbolism altogether, even if it is a Christmas Tree because while not inherently religious, it still reflects the Christian Holiday. You seem to be in a spot where you could choose to highlight many world religions so the patron in question would feel more represented or you remove the implied religious decorations altogether and represent no one. It's a tricky subject to be sure, but my judgement lead me to simply focus on winter decorations around the holidays and not a focus on Christmas.

As far as your pride display goes, I think that's a different set of circumstances altogether. Religions might have a problem with it, but that's on them, not you. Pride

isn't a religion thing, so there's no implied discrimination there.

Just my ramby two cents.

Hello-

If you are publically funded, the display of a celebration of one religious holiday over another is a First Amendment concern. You are endorsing Christianity over any other religious system at that point if you are directly sponsoring the display. I am not saying you are wrong to be indirectly doing so, but I am saying that you are legitimately subject to challenges for it.

Do you also put out colors for Holi, or celebrate Sukkot with booths, or help with Ramadan meals after sundown publically? --Yes, having a crèche out front during Advent privileges Christianity, and invites challenges... from the whole spectrum of people who disagree... including your Atheist or Fundamentalist patron. So you have to identify your privilege and understand it to be so... libraries are supposed to be by their nature, inclusive spaces for all, tacitly endorsing the majority culture and not endorsing minority cultures is privilege. Because I am a Theology librarian, we could quickly go into the weeds on this subject from some other perspectives as well.

If the same patron challenges a rainbow flag, or Pride... that's his right to do so, but this is a policy challenge on the same lines, but a different idea is at stake. You are not endorsing a school of religious thinking, despite your patron's complaints about his own "religious beliefs", but affirming positive civil rights for people who are you patrons. This is also controversial, but IMHO, the right thing to do. others may not agree. This has parallels with Intellectual freedom inside the library, where we ethically do not interfere in people's reading/media choices, but we do make collection development decisions based on what the majority of our patrons will read first, then seek to find other viewpoints.

This subject gets deep quickly, and is very controversial. One resource I know for this is the ALA Intellectual Freedom IG. There is a good body of constitutional law on this subject as well.

(I speak for myself, not for my organization here, with some insights from my position)

Hope you find a good solution:

I have to disagree with Anne. I think there is a major difference between Human Rights and religion. If your religion doesn't believe in equal rights for everyone, that's tough cookies for you.

Religious holidays, on the other hand, are tricky. I used to work in retail, and the couple of stores I worked in approached the holidays in very different ways. One had about 20 different religious institutions represented. It was more of an educational display than a holiday display (cool but a ton of work!). The other store I worked in avoided all references to all religions. They did a different color scheme every year and then we did lights, tinsel, and snowflakes. We actually had people complain about both (no one is ever happy in retail), but we just said 1. this is an acknowledgement of all traditions associated with this time of year or 2. This is an acknowledgement that this is a special time to different people in different ways. Personally, the all religions display is a lot of work, but it's something that's pretty fun if you can swing it. The no holidays display is just an easy fall back. I've also seen displays of pine trees that were decorated with different religions (the Meijer Gardens has a great holiday tree display). That's a nice way to have a tree without having it be a purely Christian icon.

I think it would be a mistake to equate a Pride month display, which speaks to issues of civil rights, with displays of religious observances. A library, as a public institution, has the responsibility to reflect all its users. In as much as we are public, we should also be cognizant of the historical separation of church and state and be wary of aligning ourselves with a specific religious tradition

Don,

The ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee created an interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights on that topic fairly recently. Here's a link if you haven't seen it.

<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/religion>

[Religion in American Libraries | Advocacy, Legislation & Issues](http://www.ala.org)
www.ala.org

The First Amendment guarantees the right of individuals to believe and practice their religion or practice no religion at all and prohibits government from establishing or endorsing a religion or religions. Thus the freedom of, for and from religion, are similarly guaranteed.

There is also a Q & A on the topic. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/religionfaq>
From my brief reading of it and memory of the creation, if it's an outside group putting up the display, you need to offer the same opportunity to other groups. If they choose not to take advantage of that opportunity, that's fine, as long as it's available.

Religion in American Libraries: Questions and Answers | Advocacy, Legislation & Issues
www.ala.org

Religion, American Libraries, This Q & A provides guidance to libraries and librarians in protecting First Amendment rights to five freedoms: freedom of the press, speech, petition, assembly and religion. Courts have consistently held that for freedom of the press and speech to be meaningful, people must have the right to receive information: that is, to read, view, hear or access what they choose. In addition, the freedom of (and for) religion has been understood to include both the right of individuals to believe and practice their religion and the right of individuals and the state to be free from religion.

Hope that helps!

The nativity scene and the tree may very well be illegal, as we still have separation of church and state in this country. For a time, at least.

Pride month is not a religious celebration and is completely appropriate.

Below is a link to a very informative article on the subject. Yes, it probably leans towards my particular opinion, but it is an excellent discussion.

<https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2016/11/01/tis-the-season-holiday-programming/>

Don,

I suggest getting some advice from your lawyer. Based on the responses you have received so far most people are giving opinions that may or may not be based on fact. In cases like these there is quite a bit of misunderstanding, in particular regarding the separation of church and state. Best to get guidance from a professional to help know how to set policy. These types of battles seem to be getting more common so it would not be a waste of time or money. Of course, that is only my opinion.

Hi Don,

We used to have Christmas themed programs & displays in my old library - but it was a very homogeneous community so no one complained. Thinking back, I would do things

differently. If the majority of a community is one religion, that is a great reason for a library to explore and share info about the other religious customs. I wouldn't put up a nativity without also having equal space and prominence for a Judaic display, along with one for Kwanzaa, Islam, Hindu, Buddhism, Gaia, etc.

Best to stop all religious displays or have one that celebrates the diversity of beliefs around the world. Keep the separation of Church and State clear.

An LGBTQIA exhibit/display is more of a civil liberty/freedom issue. We libraries have always tried to educate people about and support civil liberties. If his religion is opposed to homosexuality, that is his business and he need not check out those materials; but he is not allowed to infringe on the rights of others to exist or to be represented in the community. There are those who used to feel similarly about African Americans, and other groups. I had a complaint this year that we were "overdoing" our Black history displays (and our community is 77% AA)!

I agree with Phillip and Kate. We wouldn't hesitate to celebrate Black History month, or Women's history month and I believe that Gay pride fits in this category as opposed to religious observances. You might argue a Christmas tree isn't religious but they only come out at Christmas time and you'll rarely see them in a University Library (at least in my humble experience).

If Nativities were to suddenly disappear, would references to Ramadan and Passover also disappear? What about the increasingly popular Color Runs, which are an appropriation of the Hindu festival of Holi?

It seems to me that by removing any references to religious festivals such as these, we are missing an opportunity to become more informed about others who may not be "like us".

We do not need to prioritize one religion over another, that's a personal choice, and not what librarians are about. Also, all religions are protected by law in this country.

But we can help provide information, and hopefully help as many as possible to feel included, not excluded. Just as we try to do with Black History Month, Gay Pride, etc.

Again, just my opinion.

You know, personally I would just steer clear of pointing out in display, program or otherwise religions or religious holidays. Purchasing library materials—books and

media—is certainly a way of providing the information about such to one's patron's. Don, I'm sure you directed your patron to whomever is involved in the Nativity display. There are many municipalities around Michigan who still display one during the Christmas holiday. Freedom of speech and expression is the rule, but imo libraries have many, many more neutral options when it comes to promotions.

Just my 2 cents ;-)

Don, you've clearly asked a great question. A lot of interesting discussion happening on this.

I will join with those whose comments have stemmed from a patron-based approach. That has never failed to lead me well, whereas the more intellectual/philosophical approach has. Frequently. Certainly we are, as librarians, concerned with ethical discussions and exploration of philosophical issues; however, it is important to remember that we are here, most basically, to simply be people serving other people.

Distinctions between religion and culture are murky, at best. I would posit that for anyone who is deeply religious, the two are all but inseparable. This is true for any religion.

I would ask these questions: What reflects your community? Is the Nativity important to some members of your community? Is the Pride Month display a source of encouragement or acceptance for even one of your patrons? If you don't know the answer, find out. If the answer is no, get rid of them. If the answer is yes, keep them.

Then add a few more questions to your arsenal: ask the man who complains whether he believes his neighbors should be compelled to believe as he does. I've asked patrons this, and once they understand the library is here for everyone, it generally takes care of the complaint very well. Ask him what is most important to him, and how the library can positively affirm those values.

We are here to celebrate and build up our communities, we are not here to engage in cultural censorship. We don't get to decide what is worth celebrating and what is not: that is for our patrons to guide us.

My two cents, with maybe just a little change alongside. J

Have you asked this patron to be involved by suggesting displays, programs, books to add to the collection? Many of our more needy patrons just want to be heard. I believe it is all in how you present it to him. He is wanting to impose his beliefs as well, by

rejecting someone else's. I would ensure that your displays meet as many of the area as possible for sex, religion, race, age, etc. which I am sure is written somewhere in your policies. Respectful, diverse education of our communities in my mind, is part of our job and one that I do not take lightly. I am fortunate enough to be at a college campus where my monthly displays have not been challenged. I have a display for Christmas, Kwanzaa, and Hanukkah. I currently have a Pride month display. I had a Chinese New Year, and point out all the countries that celebrate it besides China, etc, etc. Good luck to you.

Many years ago as a Director in another state my library board unexpectedly banned Christmas at their November meeting. Really. Decorations were limited to greenery (no Christmas trees), poinsettias and red ribbons and no holiday specific programs. It did not sit well with our community or our staff. I even ended up on local talk radio.

This community had a good sized Muslim/Somalian refugee community, which was a big part of what spurred the board member who initiated it.

If your board is thinking of doing something like this it might work better if they at least post the agenda item ahead of time. It turned out to be very bad PR.

That's unfortunate that you received a complaint! I would certainly leave the pride display up because it's a civil and social issue. Personally, the nativity scene is fine. Just like others have said, as long as you're (potentially) open to other groups putting their paraphernalia up. I see what others are saying about separation of church and state, that seems to make it a bigger issue. In reality, a bunch of people (no statistics here) celebrate Christmas each year, but wouldn't consider themselves "religious" or a part of a religion. Just like people who celebrate Halloween aren't actually celebrating witchcraft (again, majority of people). It's ultimately up to your discretion what you do, but since the library is a public space, if the person finds offense, he can go elsewhere, or if he has something he wants represented, then perhaps you can work together. It probably also depends on your city. For instance, with Flat Rock, the Beautification Committee goes all out with Christmas decorations during the holidays. I grew up in a Jewish/Christian home in NYC, so I notice the lack of other religious representations, but it certainly represents the community of Flat Rock itself (which has multiple churches within blocks of each other).

I hope this helps somewhat. And that whatever you decide, it's a peaceful resolution!

My thoughts exactly, Connie! If I (and my board) were to ban Christmas at the library in this small, very religious town, it would be an enormous black-mark against the library!

We do not push the religious aspect of Christmas, but we put up a tree, decorate the railing, have snowflakes falling from the ceiling, and there is a Christmas Open House. We have had different themes over the years, sometimes with Santa, once with a nationally known children's author who lives nearby. She read her Christmas books to the children through the evening. Naturally, there are crafts for the kids; reindeer antlers, gingerbread men, etc. It was wonderful and we got lots of positive feedback and new people signing up for cards.

Not an expert here, but I am going to suggest that there is an important difference between a cultural display (Pride Month) and a religious display (nativity). Religious displays run the risk of violating separation of church and state as required by the First Amendment to the US Constitution, while cultural displays do not.

ALA's website

(<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/religion>) seems concerned only with the availability of religious materials in the library's collection, but not with religious displays on library property. But maybe a closer reading would reveal more.

This site gives arguments on both sides: <https://aclu.procon.org/view.answers.php?questionID=000691>. The debate centers on whether or not a religious display on public property amounts to favoring one religion over another, which would violate the Constitution.

Not sure if this helped or not, but now you have more to think about!

Hi Don,

I saw your discussion on Michlib and thought I'd add my two cents.

I think it's best to be neutral in these matters, but we sometimes think of neutrality in the wrong way. A lot of people believe that a complete ban on religious displays is the most neutral response. I disagree. I think that banning religious displays gives (tacit) support to atheism. Why? Because it projects an atheist environment. If the state "religion" was atheism, we'd see no religious displays. If you ban religious displays, you get the same result. Like all religions, atheism makes metaphysical truth claims. Supporting it above all others, even tacitly, is not neutral.

I think the most inclusive response is to allow members in the community to create displays that reflect their own belief systems (including atheism). If people ask, "Why don't you have a display for such-and-such religion," invite them to make one. If they say they don't have the time or inclination, give them your card and tell them the door is always open. Furthermore, you could post a small sign near every display that says something along the lines of, "Want your own display? Call (XXX) XXX-XXXX to make it happen". Finally, if you're worried about display-overload, create a policy that limits how long a display can be up and create a system for reserving spots.

In the end, you'll still get complaints, but honestly, you'll get complaints no matter what way you go. I think the most important thing is to strive to be fair, and I think this is the way to do it.

I hope you've found some benefit to my thoughts! If you want to include this (or not) in your response to everyone, I'm totally fine with it.

Have a great weekend!