REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN COLLECTING FREETHOUGHT BOOKS IN AMERICAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES: A CASE OF SELF-CENSORSHIP?¹

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This study was conducted to determine if American public libraries located in an area of the country hostile to atheist (freethought) ideas collect atheist books at a lower rate than a region of the country more open to such ideas. The US General Social Survey was consulted to locate the contrasting regions. New York Times Best Seller lists were used to select recent (since September 11, 2001) atheist publications and contrasting books favorable to religion. Public library catalogs were then checked for holdings of these books. Purchases of atheist material differed significantly between the two regions, while purchases of religious materials showed no statistically significant difference. Possible explanations for the difference are explored, including censorship pressures, the exclusion of atheist thinking from the discourse of the community, and budgetary considerations.

Introduction

Censorship has nearly always been an issue for libraries [1–2] and remains a hot topic in present times. The American Library Association (ALA) has many initiatives to deal with censorship. Any brief perusal of its attempt to record censorship challenges, the Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom, will give the reader an idea of the extent of the problem. Not only are the reports of censorship attempts numerous but the battles waged over censorship issues are often bitter, emotional struggles that can be very damaging for the people involved.

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Self-censorship is a way for libraries and librarians to avoid censorship battles with the general public or with organizations wishing to control what reading material is available to whom. Debra Lau Whelan describes the problem as “rampant and lethal” [3, p. 27] in American public libraries. Self-censorship occurs when libraries fail to acquire material simply because they fear a censorship challenge. Whelan points out the difficulty of recognizing the problem. Librarians practicing self-censorship rarely publicly reveal their intentions. Self-censorship may also occur in cases where the librarian has a personal bias or disagreement with the material under consideration for purchase.

This article will examine the possibility of self-censorship of atheist materials within American public libraries. The working hypothesis is that we will find little evidence of self-censorship; that is, there will be no difference in the collection rates for recent books written by atheist authors in a region of the country where censorship challenges are more likely than in a more tolerant region. The notion that potential challenges for this material cause fewer purchases would then be disproved.

Why Atheism?

Atheism (some prefer the term freethought) is the certainty, or near certainty, that there is no God and that the universe was formed and continues to operate from entirely natural processes. As with other religious beliefs, the percentage of any population holding atheistic attitudes can be hard to measure. Sociologists use many indicators to measure religiosity [4], and not all of them work well for measuring unbelief. Measuring church attendance, for example, would count atheists who attend religious services as “religious.” Richard Dawkins anecdotally notes two atheist friends who go to church for “purely social reasons” [5, pp. 14, 100], and Darren E. Sherkat [6, p. 449] demonstrates that atheists do, indeed, attend church.

Regardless of the problems in measurement, it is certain that atheists form a very small minority in the general US population. An analysis of General Social Survey (GSS) responses from 1988–2000 [7] showed that only 2.5 percent of the population identified themselves as atheists. A further 4 percent identified themselves as agnostics. As of this writing, the latest GSS (2006) figures do not differ significantly; 2.1 percent express a disbelief in God, and 4.3 percent hold the agnostic position [7]. A recent Gallup poll reveals “only 3% of Americans can be considered to be hardcore atheists, convinced that God does not exist” [8]. George Bishop [9], working with over fifty years of Gallup data, noted that the number of Americans willing to identify as atheists has consistently remained below 5 percent. Other studies [10, 11] report similar figures.
Small numbers may be one reason why atheists have traditionally played a small role in public discussions. Glen M. Vernon identified them as a group “included in research designs so that percentages might total 100, rather than because it is a category worthy of analysis” [12, p. 220]. While Vernon’s work may have sparked interest from sociologists [13], Jerome Nathanson [14] has indicated that freethinkers are almost never consulted by decision makers, while religious leaders find easy access to politicians. As Eugene J. Lipman and Albert Vorspan suggest, atheists are thus second-class citizens, the “great, silent, forgotten minority in American life” [15, p. 316]. William Feigelman, Bernard S. Gorman and Joseph A. Varacalli analyzed GSS data and found that “comparing to religious affiliates, the religiously disaffiliated showed greater evidence of social marginality” [14, p. 140]. More recently, a national survey showed that “Americans draw symbolic boundaries that clearly and sharply exclude atheists in both public and private life” [16, p. 212].

Although small in number and relatively powerless, atheists also tend to be one of the most despised, stigmatized, and mistrusted of identifiable groups. The literature of political tolerance, starting with Samuel Andrew Stouffer’s classic work [17], nearly always includes atheists as a test to see if the survey subjects are inclined to deny named groups civil liberties. Significantly for this study, the surveys usually ask if a demand was made to remove a book from a public library authored by a member of an identifiable group (communist, socialist, atheist), would the respondent support the removal? An excellent review of the early literature in this area, including John L. Sullivan, James Pierson, and George E. Marcus’s [18] important work, may be found in that of Steven E. Finkel, Lee Sigelman, and Stan Humphries [19]. Later research into political tolerance has been summarized by James L. Gibson [20], who conducted his own survey in 2005 [21] using the “least liked” approach [22]. Respondents were asked to state which groups they liked the least and were then asked questions on how the civil liberties of these groups should be restricted. The results seem to have astonished Gibson: “Perhaps the single greatest surprise is that atheists (those who are against all religion and churches) would attract the ire of one in five Americans, a figure about equivalent to that for Communists and for those who would do away with elections and let the military run the country” [21, p. 103]. Only three identifiable groups (Ku Klux Klan members, Nazis, and radical Muslims) were ranked higher in dislike than atheists.

This conclusion is supported by other recent work that finds Americans unwilling to vote for atheist candidates for office [23] or support intermarriage with atheists [16]. Tom Arcaro’s survey of declared atheists found, “the stigma associated with being an atheist, especially in the American
Bible Belt, is real, pervasive, and oppressive. It is affecting the lives and livelihoods of many” [24, p. 55].

Anecdotal evidence of prejudice against atheists can also easily be found. A university professor was denied a departmental chair because of his antireligious writings [25]. As of 2010, there were eight states that had an unconstitutional ban on unbelievers holding elected office [26]. Very recently, the Mississippi branch of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) rejected a grant from the American Humanist Association, writing to the Association that, “although we support and understand organizations like yours, the majority of Mississippians tremble in terror at the word ‘atheist’” [27].3 Atheists also report cases of discrimination regularly in sympathetic publications. Marlene Powell offered a summary of grievances, including the issue of discriminatory pledges and oaths in public life. She claims “one often hears that discrimination against freethinkers is acceptable or to be encouraged because this is ‘one nation under God’” [28, p. 9].

It is beyond the scope of this article to determine exactly why atheists are viewed in so negative a fashion by American society. However, partial answers are offered by Richard J. Jenks [29], who discovered that “deviant” groups are often associated with negative qualities that do not match reality. Respondents to his surveys, for example, viewed homosexuals and atheists as being “lower class.” In fact, lack of religiosity correlates negatively with income [30]. Another useful work in understanding the hatred is Erin Halpern, Daphna Canetti-Nisim, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler’s study on hatred and political intolerance; hatred is provoked when, due to the perceived evil character of a group, the rights of the hating group are violated [31]. For instance, continuing victories by atheists in the courts on the issue of school prayer is an issue that could provoke hatred [32].

Libraries and Freethought

In the literature of librarianship, complaints are found that the profession has handled freethought material poorly. Much of the expressed dissatisfaction has come from Sanford Berman and Earl Lee. Both have taken issue with the manner in which the Library of Congress classifies and indexes freethought material. Berman [33] has even commented specifically on the Library of Congress’s treatment of Christopher Hitchens’s God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything (a work considered in this study); the Library of Congress assigned only one subject heading: Religion—Controversial literature. Berman points out that Hitchens’s work is cer-

3. The ACLU later apologized.
tainly not controversial to himself and that the subheading is used to reinforce the idea that proreligious material is "normal, mainstream, non-contentious, and acceptable" [33, p. 1]. Berman also reflects that libraries generally do not subscribe to freethought serials such as Humanist, Freethought Today, Secular Nation, or even Skeptical Inquirer [34]. Lee [35] is particularly critical of the classification of freethought material by the Library of Congress, claiming that material of this type has generally and deliberately been classed using Dewey Decimal numbers that would make it difficult for patrons to find the materials while browsing the stacks. Lee concludes that "books that represent non-mainstream views are often not taken seriously or purposely suppressed" [35, p. 29]. Frank Prahl [36, 37] provides an effective summary of the arguments and evidence presented by Lee and Berman. Steven A. Knowlton [38] reviewed the Library of Congress subject headings to see how many changes suggested by Berman had been made in the intervening thirty-four years. He found that most of the unchanged headings referenced Christianity. Prahl claims that the Library of Congress "strongly favors Christianity over all other religions" [37, p. 18].

We can even find justification in the library literature for the suppression of freethought material. Mark Y. Herring [39] is extremely critical of ALA's Intellectual Freedom Manual and supports the use of the seven virtues in constructing library collections. Three of these virtues are theological in nature, the most significant for this discussion being faith. Freethought material would have difficulty finding its way into a collection built on such principles.

In the freethought community, there occasionally surfaces some anecdotal evidence to indicate that freethinkers believe they are less than well served by libraries. It has been reported that a gift subscription to Freethought Today had been rejected by a university library (that had subscriptions to fifty-six religious publications) until it was accepted on appeal [40]. Anne Nicole Gaylor [41] wrote that the Tulsa Public Library had refused a gift of The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible. As recently as May 2009, Nan Sincero complained that she expected to find "Godless, by Dan Barker, and many other atheist books on the shelves of its county [Marin County, CA] libraries" [42, p. 1]. However, the works she sought were not in the libraries' collections.

Earl Lee crossed the boundaries between the two literatures by writing an article for Freethought Today [43]. At the time of his writing, most freethought publications came from small presses. Lee gave an excellent summary of the problems libraries face in adding such publications to their collections. He also included a section in his article on "How Libraries Hide

4. It should be noted that the freethought works under scrutiny later in this article all come
Books." This process, Lee claims, "protects the faithful from being offended by their [freethought books'] presence in the collection" [43, p. 12]. It also makes it much harder for people who want the material to actually find it.

Libraries and Censorship

The American Library Association and, by extension, its member librarians, are committed to free access to the world of ideas. The ALA has issued a statement outlining its position the Library Bill of Rights:

1. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
2. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval. [44]

Clearly, atheist publications fit into the category of materials about which ALA is concerned. The "views of those contributing to their creation" are, as we have seen, extremely unpopular. "Doctrinal disapproval" would seem to be what these books are about.

As part of its commitment to intellectual freedom, ALA tracks conventional challenges to books in its Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom. In July 2010, ALA reported that there were 460 challenges in 2009 but that "it is estimated that that there are four or five challenges that go unreported" for each challenge recorded [45].

None of the books we looked at in our study were the object of a recorded challenge [46, 47]. In fact, atheist books have not often been the target of recent censorship challenges. However, this has not always been the case. For instance, Herbert N. Foerstel [48] recounts the incident at Kanawha County, West Virginia, in 1974 when school text books were aggressively challenged for being "godless." A similar event occurred in Alabama in 1985 when parents challenged textbooks because "the religions of secularism, humanism, evolution, materialism, agnosticism, atheism and others" were being forced on their children [49]. Holbrook Jackson [50] reported that, in 1932, for adult readers, Sinclair Lewis's Elmer Gantry and

from major houses and that libraries would have no difficulty finding cataloging or making a purchase.
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Bertrand Russell's *What I Believe*, among many other works, were the targets of censors.

Libraries and Self-Censorship

If librarians can "hide" books by misclassifying them, they can avoid any problem altogether by ignoring their existence. Refusing to add books on a particular topic to collections is known as self-censorship. It has been described as a particularly insidious form of censorship because, in general, few people are aware that works have been systematically prevented from reaching the reading public [1, 2]. Whelan [3] reports an example of widespread self-censorship in the case of the book *Boy Toy*. The author, Barry Lyga, was certain his young adult novel about a twelve-year-old boy having sex with a teacher would provoke conventional censorship challenges. However, they did not materialize. In spite of excellent reviews, few librarians purchased the book, and censorship problems were nearly nonexistent.

Ann Curry conducted an interesting study of Canadian libraries and their purchasing decisions for the controversial book *American Psycho*. She concluded, "the reviews critical of the quality of *American Psycho* and the reported sex and violence in the book led librarians to de-emphasize the need for *anticipating* patron demand and prompted them to wait for *expressed* patron demand, a policy not followed for most books on a bestseller list or featured in the media" [51, p. 215].

It should be noted that accusations of self-censorship by libraries come from both the political right and left. Cal Thomas, an officer of the Moral Majority, complained that libraries refused to stock books that argued against the Equal Rights Amendment [52]. Jerry Falwell himself followed up Thomas's complaint with an article about the lack of conservative titles on many topics in libraries [53].

Of course, the simple exclusion of titles from a library's collection is not always a simple matter of censorship. A community's discourse "governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. Just as a discourse 'rules in' certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it 'rules out,' limits, and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it" [54, p. 72].

If a community's standards and discourse excludes a topic from consideration, we would not expect to find such material in its public libraries.
Clearly, if a work represents an idea excluded from consideration, its purchase by a library would represent a waste of funds.

Checklist-Based Evaluation of Collections

There is a significant body of work in the library literature that deals with checklist-based research [55, 56]. This method involves preparing a list of titles the researcher thinks should generally be included in library collections. The absence of the books indicates a problem—perhaps the presence of self-censorship on the part of librarians. Judith Serebnick’s useful review of the early literature points out that just making a list of controversial titles and checking library catalogs for their absence does not necessarily prove self-censorship on the part of specific libraries [57]. Serebnick notes particular problems with the selection of the materials designated as “controversial” and with the premise used in some studies that fewer than an arbitrary number of purchases was evidence of self-censorship.

Later work has attempted to answer some of these criticisms. The introduction of a control group of noncontroversial titles [58] allows researchers to compare library purchases with the subject matter to be checked. As well, Dennis Ingolf Island [59] took the approach of searching for titles that held opposing viewpoints. He concluded that academic libraries had a selection bias against evangelical books about the historical Jesus. Other studies of this kind dealt with gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered material [58], controversial subjects such as abortion [60], or the issue of racist materials in libraries [61].

A Regional Analysis of Censorship Tendencies

In the United States, the GSS measures the attitudes, opinions, and circumstances of a wide section of the population. The study is repeated every two years, and, although there are revisions, the majority of questions repeat from year to year. Since 1972, the GSS has asked a question (originally posed by Stouffer) that relates directly to this study. The question (code LIBATH and number seventy-six in the 2008 survey) asks all respondents to consider a person “whose ideas are considered bad or dangerous by other people. For instance, somebody who is against all churches and religion.” The respondents are then asked “if some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote against churches and religion

5. The wording of the question does not exactly match the conventional definition of an atheist, but the intent is clear.
should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?” The responses to this question reveal great regional disparity within the country. Using the Survey Documentation and Analysis tool [62], we obtain the results demonstrated in table 1.

Noting that nearly half the population in the East South Central (ESC) region (the states of Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee) would support removing atheist books from the local library, we hypothesize that librarians would feel the most pressure in this region to not include freethought material in their collections. This figure can be contrasted with the results obtained in the New England states.6 This study will use these two extremes to see if librarians in the region that seems to support censorship more are in fact excluding atheist materials from their collections. The null hypothesis is that there will be no significant differences between the two regions in the collection activity of books that are overtly antireligious.

Methodology

Title Selection
The attacks of September 11, 2001, precipitated the writing and publication of a new series of books arguing for atheism and warning of the dangers of organized religion. It was decided that the best guarantee of awareness by librarians of specific titles would be to select works that had appeared on the New York Times Best Seller [63] lists. As the study would be confined to materials published since the events of 9/11, works must have appeared on the lists between August 2004 (the publication date of Sam Harris’s The End of Faith) and, to allow libraries time to acquire and process the titles, the end of 2008.

In answer to criticisms of early checklist-based studies, this list was to be composed of both atheist and religious titles. This allows for a comparison to be made in purchasing practices. It was hoped that the study would illuminate differences in choices being made by libraries (if any) between these opposing viewpoints.

Atheist Books
There were four atheist titles which appeared on the New York Times Best Seller lists in the relevant time frame (2004–8). All of them were included in this study. A fifth title, The End of Faith, was added, as it was the first major new atheist work to appear in print since 9/11. Although the hard-

<table>
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<th>New England</th>
<th>Middle Atlantic</th>
<th>Eastern North Central</th>
<th>Western North Central</th>
<th>Southeast Atlantic</th>
<th>Eastern South Central</th>
<th>Western South Central</th>
<th>Mountain</th>
<th>Pacific</th>
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<td>Remove</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>1,430</td>
<td>1,965</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>2,480</td>
<td>1,062</td>
<td>1,212</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>993</td>
<td>10,724</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(21.7)</td>
<td>(28.9)</td>
<td>(31.8)</td>
<td>(31.8)</td>
<td>(40.2)</td>
<td>(49.5)</td>
<td>(41.5)</td>
<td>(23.8)</td>
<td>(22.7)</td>
<td>(32.9)</td>
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<td>Not remove</td>
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<td>3,513</td>
<td>4,205</td>
<td>1,651</td>
<td>3,682</td>
<td>1,084</td>
<td>1,750</td>
<td>1,449</td>
<td>3,375</td>
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<td>(58.5)</td>
<td>(76.2)</td>
<td>(77.3)</td>
<td>(67.1)</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>1,519</td>
<td>4,943</td>
<td>6,170</td>
<td>2,421</td>
<td>6,162</td>
<td>2,146</td>
<td>2,992</td>
<td>1,901</td>
<td>32,622</td>
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</table>

**NOTE.**—Numbers in parentheses are percentages.
cover did not appear on the Best Seller lists, the paperback (October 2005) was listed for thirty-three weeks [64]. In total, these books spent seventy weeks on the New York Times Best Seller lists. Librarians wishing to add books to their collections on the new atheist perspective would almost certainly choose from these titles. In contrast with the religious titles listed below, there were very few titles that, in public library collections, would substitute as selections for these five works (see table 2).

Religious Books
When titles on the New York Times Best Seller lists were examined, it was found that there were many more books supporting religion and religious beliefs listed than books that did not. The lists for April 2006 alone saw the appearance of no fewer than six new titles with religious themes. However, the religious titles appeared on the lists for briefer periods of time than did the atheist titles. A decision was necessary on how many religious titles to include in this study. Each additional title added for consideration would increase the workload by many hundreds of catalog searches. It would therefore not be possible to search all the titles that appeared briefly on the lists. In the end, eight titles that appeared most often were selected for inclusion. Other religious works made only brief appearances on the lists. The eight books selected appeared on the New York Times Best Seller lists for fifty-five weeks, which came as reasonably close to the atheist books’ total of seventy weeks as could be managed in the time available for this study. The number selected is somewhat arbitrary, and the reader needs no reminding that the religious titles come from a far larger pool of possible choices than could be possible for atheist publications.

One title selected, Sylvia Browne’s Secrets and Mysteries of the World, may strike readers as “New Age” rather than overtly religious. However, New Age movements are often regarded as religious. The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of New Age Religions makes the connection explicit: “The deep structure of New Age spirituality constitutes such constants as belief in the evolution of the soul through successive incarnations, monism, karma, the basic goodness of human nature, the power of the mind to transform reality, and so on” [65, p. 12]. Moreover, author Sylvia Browne is definitely a religious writer [66] and has even founded her own religion, “Novus Spiritus” [67]. As she has had many books that appeared on the New York Times Best Seller lists for brief periods of time, the author judged it best to include the work that remained on the lists the longest (see table 3).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Weeks on New York Times Best Seller Lists</th>
<th>Volumes in New England Region</th>
<th>Volumes in Eastern South Central Region</th>
<th>Last Appearance on Lists</th>
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<td>Dawkins, Richard</td>
<td><em>The God Delusion</em></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>May 13, 2007</td>
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<td>Harris, Sam</td>
<td><em>The End of Faith</em></td>
<td>...</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>110</td>
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<td>Harris, Sam</td>
<td><em>Letter to a Christian Nation</em></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>January 21, 2007</td>
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<td>Volumes in Eastern South Central Region</td>
<td>Last Appearance on Lists</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benedict XVI, Pope</td>
<td>Jesus of Nazareth</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>July 22, 2007</td>
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<td>Browne, Sylvia</td>
<td>Secrets and Mysteries of the World</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>May 22, 2005</td>
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<td>Collins, Francis S.</td>
<td>The Language of God</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>180</td>
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<td>Coulter, Ann</td>
<td>Godless</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>September 10, 2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>D'Souza, Dinesh</td>
<td>What's So Great about Christianity</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>November 18, 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jackson, Denise</td>
<td>It's All about Him</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>September 30, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamott, Anne</td>
<td>Grace (Eventually)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>260</td>
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<td>Mother Teresa</td>
<td>Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>October 21, 2007</td>
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Limitations to the Study Design

One of the difficulties presented by the regions was the variance in the number of library catalogs available. The New England region had many more catalogs to search. And while both regions had regional libraries, it was easier to extract information on holdings for individual libraries in the New England region. In the ESC regional libraries, data on branches and library size, populations served, and so on, tended to be amalgamated into larger units than in the New England region. This also would make any attempt to compare similar communities across regions problematic, and such analyses were not attempted.

Searching Library Catalogs

The investigation was carried out during January–February 2010. Every selected book title was searched in the native interface of all public library catalogs that could be located at lib-web-cats [68] for the two regions. The number of copies held by each library was recorded. Branch library holdings were included. Statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS software to show if there was a statistically different level of collection activity for the religious and atheist titles. Data on the libraries’ holdings and population served were obtained from the lib-web-cats website. Additional data (rarely needed) was obtained from the American Library Directory, 2009–2010 [69].

All paper format editions of these works were counted, including large-print editions. Audio recordings were excluded from the survey. Libraries whose online catalogs were not working at the time of the search were not consulted a second time. This was a rare event.

In cases where several public libraries shared a catalog, results were recorded separately for each library if population served and collection size information were also listed separately. In total, 635 public library catalogs from the New England region and 200 from the ESC region were accessible and searched.

As can be seen from table 4, there appears to be a distinctive difference in the way the New England and ESC libraries collect these materials. The New England libraries demonstrate a balance in collecting all the materials on the list. The total number of books purchased does not vary much for religious and atheist titles (2,956 vs. 2,520). In the ESC region, however, over twice as many religious volumes as atheist volumes were purchased (1,832 vs. 886). Also, the standard deviations differ, showing that in the South there is much more variability within libraries with regard to the
<table>
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<th>Libraries</th>
<th>Minimum Volumes in Any One Library</th>
<th>Maximum Volumes in Any One Library</th>
<th>Total Volumes in All Libraries</th>
<th>Mean Number of Volumes</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>2,520</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>4.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>On religion</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2,963</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern South Central:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On atheism</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>886</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>7.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On religion</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1,832</td>
<td>9.16</td>
<td>13.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
number of copies purchased. This holds true for both religious and atheist titles.

Using unpaired $t$-tests and an alpha level of .05, it was found that there is no statistical difference in the collecting of religious books ($t = -.45520, p = .443$) between the regions. However, there is a significant statistical difference with regard to the atheist titles ($t = -4.9386, p \leq .000$). The ESC region libraries definitely collect books dealing with atheism at significantly lower rates than libraries in New England.

It was understood as important to look at overall collection size and the acquisition of atheist materials. It may be the case that the total size of the collections differs so much between regions that there is an influence on the study. However, when we examine the collection sizes statistically, the unpaired $t$-test is $p = .519$, indicating that there is no significant difference in collection rates when considering library size.

While the above analysis indicates that libraries in the ESC region buy fewer atheist materials than New England libraries, this does not indicate necessarily that this is because of censorship fears. One indication that such fears may have been a factor is if we could see a difference in the number of libraries that purchased no copies of any atheist material whatsoever. To do this, we loaded the catalog search data into a MySQL database for quick analysis.

This analysis quickly revealed a major difference. In New England, sixty-two libraries, 9.8 percent of the total, had purchased no atheist books on our list. Almost the same number, fifty-one libraries, or 8.0 percent, had purchased no religious titles on the list. In the ESC libraries, the figures were quite different. More than one quarter (28 percent) of the libraries, fifty-six in total, had no atheist works from our list in their collections. Thirteen libraries, or 6.5 percent of the total ESC libraries, had purchased no religious works. This is very close to the New England figure.

Using MySQL, queries were run to rank libraries that had purchased no atheist materials. (For this analysis, we disregarded two libraries that had purchased no books from our list at all and one library whose catalog was not working at the time of this second check of holdings.) When we ranked by holdings, we found that eleven of the twenty largest (by collection size) libraries purchasing no atheist materials were from the ESC region. Remembering that the ESC libraries are outnumbered three to one by the New England libraries, this figure seems to indicate that a disproportionate number of large ESC libraries are not making this material available. A similar analysis of the largest libraries by population served shows that thirteen of the twenty serving the largest populations and purchasing no atheist materials belonged to the Southern region. In total, these libraries had purchased eighty-one copies of the religious titles.

To further check on the purchasing patterns of libraries in the two
TABLE 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Libraries</th>
<th>Books on Atheism</th>
<th>Books Denying or Hostile to Atheism</th>
<th>Books on Atheism Neutral to the Subject</th>
<th>Books by Sylvia Browne</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New England</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East South Central</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

regions, we revisited the catalogs of the twenty largest libraries that had purchased no atheist materials on our list. We searched them all to find out if they had any books at all with the subject heading “atheism.” We also checked to see how many copies of works by Sylvia Browne were in the collections. All volumes authored by Browne were recorded. Her works were selected to demonstrate that these libraries did indeed have funds to add material on religion, even fringe religion, to their collections. The results are summarized in table 5.

It would appear, if we can use the data in the table as a rough sample, that in many US public libraries, it is practically impossible to find a work on freethought. However, in those same libraries, it is easy to obtain works by religious writers such as Browne. As with the earlier comparison of religious versus freethought books, this finding suggests that the absence of freethought material is in some way about choice, not lack of money for purchases.7

Discussion

It is not difficult to formulate several explanations as to why there may be regional differences in the collection of freethought material. After all, there are regional differences in the populations of the states being considered. Returning to the GSS [62], we can see that only 1.7 percent of respondents in the ESC region said they did not believe in God and that

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7. Another simple check is possible to confirm a regional bias in the way public libraries acquire atheist material. In 1997, the Freedom from Religion Foundation sent 700 copies of Annie Laurie Gaylor’s book Women without Superstition: No Gods—No Masters to libraries throughout the United States and Canada. The list of receiving libraries was published in Freethought Today [70]. Nine of the Southern libraries in our study received copies; eighteen New England libraries were recipients. A check of current holdings reveals that five of the nine (56 percent) Southern libraries listed the book in their catalogs, while fourteen of eighteen (78 percent) New England libraries still have a copy. This is indeed a small sample but the results do not run counter to the findings presented elsewhere in this study.
a further 3.7 percent said there was no way to find out if God exists. That compares with 3.8 percent and 8.3 percent of those responses in the New England region. It could well be that librarians in the ESC region would consider money spent on atheist materials to have been wasted, knowing that they would not circulate. Yet, atheists are not the only readers of atheist books. Curious religious readers may also read these works, even if only to examine and refute their claims.

The advancing tide of fundamentalist Christianity, as outlined in Kevin Phillips’s *American Theocracy* [71], has not yet reached New England. We know that “a consistent finding is that conservative Protestants are relatively intolerant, i.e., they are willing to restrict the civil liberties of controversial collectivities” [72, p. 263]. This finding is reinforced elsewhere in the literature, as in work by Clyde Wilcox and Ted Jelen: “Evangelicals, fundamentalists, and Pentecostals are less tolerant towards groups of the left, groups of the right, and ‘apolitical’ groups which their religious beliefs condemn (homosexuals and atheists). Second, while these differences can be partly attributed to differences in demographic or political variables, or to general religiosity, denominational differences persist even after these considerations are controlled” [73, p. 41]. Given the responses on library censorship to the GSS and the general intolerance of fundamentalists, it is perhaps not surprising that this willingness to suppress liberties or ideas shows up as a symptom in public library catalogs. However, it may not be the case that there is a traditional censorship effort at work here. Michel Foucault informs us that power is not always repressive, as in denying civil liberties: “What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression” [74, p. 119]. In Foucault's terms, then, the discourse of the ESC society simply excludes atheist material to a higher degree than does New England society. As “power establishes a network through which it freely circulates” [75, p. 99], we should not expect public libraries to be free of limitations placed inside the discourse of the society in which they exist.

What is unknown is whether the librarians in the ESC region are not purchasing the books because they fear censorship challenges, because they personally lack sympathy with the subject matter, because the material is prohibited by the community’s discourse, because they think that the material would not be used or read, or because of some other reason.
Conclusion

This study’s data supports two notions with regard to American public libraries’ collection of atheist material: there are many libraries that exclude the material, and there are significant regional differences in rates of inclusion. We now have to ask if this is any cause for concern. After all, as we have shown, atheists are a very small minority of the US population and generally well despised throughout the nation.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the place of religion in society has become a hotly debated topic. The opinions of atheists are definitely of a minority, but one that should be heard. The suppression of a minority opinion, even an unpopular one, is unacceptable in an ostensibly free and open society. As James Gibson writes, “intolerance may constrain freedom not through government-sponsored public policies but rather through norms discouraging disagreement and sanctioning opinions deviating very far from the mainstream” [74, p. 98]. Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann writes of a “spiral of silence” [75] where people who disagree with prevailing public opinion are encouraged or forced by social norms to remain silent. Not providing atheist materials in public libraries is a way of silencing unbelievers and narrowing an important debate.

Why this may be happening is less clear but equally troubling. It would be instructive to know if community pressures or individual librarian choice is influencing the decision not to include atheist material in some collections. More research, perhaps a survey of librarians not selecting atheist books, would be useful in this regard.

This study has looked at only one small minority view in two regions of the United States. It may well be that public libraries are also under representing other controversial viewpoints in their collections. More study could certainly be done in this area. Gibson writes that “the importance of mass political intolerance in the United States is that it establishes a culture of conformity that seems to constrain individual political liberty in many important ways” [76, p. 338]. The American Library Association certainly has taken the position that libraries should present minority and unpopular opinions in their holdings. It appears, however, that with regard to atheism, American public libraries have more work to do to live up to ALA ideals. And, as mentioned, it is possible there are other subject areas and minority viewpoints that could be collected more widely.

The finding of a difference in collection rates between the regions will come as no surprise to many. That the null hypothesis was disproved, and that an area of high religiosity will buy fewer books on atheism than a region of low religiosity, is hardly shocking. Yet, the question of why this happens raises at least the possibility of self-censorship being a significant
factor. The correlation of GSS survey respondents on the question of censorship of atheist materials with the data collected here at least suggests that self-censorship plays a role in the collection of atheist books. Bringing about a greater understanding of all types of thought on religious matters will not be possible if some voices in the public arena are silenced. It appears that in the public libraries of some US communities, this is exactly what has been happening.

REFERENCES

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