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Volume 50 | Issue 3

Article 5

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2007

# A Christian Librarians Response to Government Secrecy

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## Recommended Citation

Wagner, Dora (2007) "A Christian Librarians Response to Government Secrecy," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 50 : Iss. 3 , Article 5.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol50/iss3/5>

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# A Christian Librarians Response to Government Secrecy

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## Opening Thoughts

*Do the actions and legislation of the government affect the Christian Library community? As a body of professionals, should we respond to growing secrecy, re-classification of once unrestricted documentation, and the growing problems associated with the Freedom of Information Act? What, if any, is the responsibility of Christians who recognize the value of information and the necessity of truth?*

## Being a Christian, Being a Librarian

First and foremost, we are Christians. Our lives are shaped by the acceptance of Jesus Christ as prophet, priest, and king. In this recognition, and because of the Spirit's movement within our lives, we continually grow in our ability to manifest love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5: 22-23, NRS). God becomes, ever more fully, the supreme authority to whom we must submit every aspect of our being.

Second, we are librarians. Regardless of our particular responsibilities within the workplace, all librarians profess the value of information by their actions: collecting, organizing, and disseminating print and multi-media resources. Furthermore, librarians educate the public on the use and importance of these resources.

How then, does our professional interest in information and its use run alongside our souls' interest in worshiping, serving, and seeking our incomprehensible God, Savior, and Spirit? Our soul self must intersect our professional self because our faith forms a worldview. We are Christians who are librarians; our beliefs should color our work.

Our faith necessitates we believe in and preserve truth. Our lives must be built upon

a firm foundation lest they deviate from God's design. Without an understanding of the ultimate truth: God is King who, through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection redeemed man and woman, we cannot function in right relationship with God, humanity, or creation. Without truth we would lack an understanding of our past, we would not understand the present situation, and we would be unable to comprehend God's greater plan for our lives as individuals and a body of believers.

Though the Biblical truth of salvation and discipleship is by far the most important truth any person can ever encounter and embrace, it does not mean, by any stretch of the imagination, a person should not seek truth in other aspects of life as well. Specifically, there must be a fidelity to truth in our government, and this truth must be *written* and *available*. Without a written truth accessible to the people of this democracy, the government can manipulate past and present. This manipulation results in historical half-truths, distorted realities, and an unclear democratic worldview.

As a community of believers we are also responsible for ordering the world in which we live. In the Genesis account of creation Adam is given dominion over the animals. This responsibility includes naming each beast, a means of creating order and future understanding. This 'naming' continues today because as people create information there is a need to continue creating and maintaining tools (i.e. names) that help communities communicate. This naming insures "orderly access," which is "fundamental and utterly necessary if the creature is to move ahead" (McDonald, 1979) on the path of **knowledge formation**. There must be past knowledge upon which to build future learning and understanding.

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## ABSTRACT

The nature of Christian librarianship requires professionals to remain aware of current political decisions made in our government that directly affect the public's access to relevant information. Utilizing past literature concerning what it means to practice Christian librarianship and exploring the current administrations' actions regarding The Freedom of Information Act, the author concludes the Christian library community must educate itself and its patrons and demand honesty and integrity from the government.

## Truth and Knowledge Formation

It is important therefore, that Christian librarians “take account of the Christian view of truth” (Smith, 48), recognize its value, and do all that is within our ability to preserve a record of truth on which our culture can continue to grow. Remember, part of our responsibility as professionals is to collect and preserve written and digital resources that, in turn, will shape society’s collective memory. As much as possible, the information available in the creation of society must be one, true and two, available. While truth does not necessarily require entirety, there is a need for a comprehensive base of information so the information recipient does not draw faulty conclusions.

For example, Christ did not explain to his disciples the scientific feasibility of his resurrection, nor did he give them a minute-to-minute account of the coming events and his imminent return. He did, however, provide sufficient information thereby enabling the disciples to form a concept of the coming events. (Whether or not the information recipient *applies* the information is a discussion for another day.)

Truth is not relevant to our lives, however, if it is inaccessible. In our Christian walk, this means applying Biblical principles to our own lives, loving others, and ministering to believers and non-believers alike. In our professional lives, it means making sure information is not only available, but that the appropriate information is available to the depth and breadth necessary for use. Permanent access is important so that, ultimately, history (faith or democratic) is not forgotten or rewritten. The disappearance of truth from cultural availability can lead to the creation of alternate truths not only within faith traditions but within democratic societies, as well. For example, in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Napoleon the pig gradually rewrites the farm community’s laws and history, thereby becoming not a leader but a dictator. Unfortunately, the animal community has little

recourse because there is no written record by which to hold Napoleon accountable.

This begs the question: what are the current threats to truth and the subsequent danger to the formation of knowledge that we as Christian information professionals must address?

## Current Threats

In *The Core Virtue of Christian Librarianship*, Gregory A. Smith reminds Christians who practice librarianship to recognize, theoretically and practically, that “we are called to provide access to information so as to lead our patrons to well-being in every aspect of life: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.” In America, this well-being includes democratic participation. Unfortunately, this country’s current administration is assuming a posture of growing secrecy, and the decreased availability of government information forces us, as Christian librarians, to evaluate the situation and take necessary action.

While many would assume terrorism is the impetus behind our nation’s growing secrecy, many argue this “administration’s embrace of secrecy ... has been evident since shortly after [the first] inauguration and [has only] increased exponentially after September 11.” (Podesta, 221). While there is no disagreement against a government’s need to classify information to save lives and insure national security, secrecy must remain in proper balance with disclosure. Examples of secrecy or delayed response to requests for information that appear unrelated to terrorist threat and at the same time imply a disregard to the a citizen’s participation in government and societal well being may include:

- The Environmental Protection Agency’s limiting of the collection of information concerning the chemical waste released into the environment (Banisar)
- The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration restricting information

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concerning the safety of automobiles (Banisar)

- Truthful disclosure of soldiers' cause of death to immediate family (Melcher)
- A mushrooming number of information requests that exceed the twenty day mandated response time (Blaton)
- An increase of 65,543 Freedom of Information Act requests since 2004 which equates to a 43% increase in pending and unanswered requests in 2006 (Secrecy Report Card 2006)
- The 2001 Executive order that revokes the Presidential Records Act: an act that at one time facilitated access to presidential records 12 years after the end of the president's term. There is, currently, an Amendment awaiting vote that would *reassume* disclosure. (Banisar)
- The 50+ restrictions in place on unclassified information (Secrecy Report Card 2006)

## Background

Created with the understanding that a democracy is a government in which information is absolutely vital, "The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) ... was enacted in 1966 and generally provides that any person has the right to request access to federal agency records or information" (Department of Justice, 2005). From its inception the act facilitated disclosure. Citizens could request information on government decisions, thereby facilitating public dialogue, citizen participation, and government accountability.

While it is naive to believe that secrecy does not have a place in the government for reasons of safety and security, it is irresponsible to ignore government trends towards excessive non-disclosure. Following the 2001 re-definition of The Freedom of Information Act there is a new posture of non-disclosure. Not only has there been a "reexamination [and removal] of public documents posted on the Internet," (Podesta, 222) but also a tightening on the availability of newly produced information. For example, the current administration has refused to release information "from World War II, the early

days of the Cold War, and Vietnam" which means that historians and scholars do not have access to valuable information that has "no conceivable connection to the terrorist threat" (Podesta, 224). Records documenting the past, present, and future are in jeopardy.

This Government's actions are not unique to the current political situation. Historically, this secrecy is typical behavior for American leadership when the nation finds itself threatened by outside political and social forces. It is, however, cause for alarm. To place this current climate in context, consider that the "U.S. government has created more national security secrets each year for the past three years than at the height of the Cold War" (Banton). Current efforts are "unprecedented in promoting policies that expand government secrecy to vital health and safety information, and removing publicly generated information from the public domain" (Podesta, 225). Since 2001, there has been a 95% increase in the number of government-classified documents (Waxman, 2004). These changes prevent access to information, which in turn:

1. Hampers a citizenry's participation in democratic discourse
2. Makes it increasingly difficult to hold leaders accountable
3. Impedes our understanding of the nation's history
4. Increases federal government costs: for every \$1 spent releasing a secret \$134 is spent to classify information. (Secrecy Report Card 2006)

In our current climate of fear and secrecy we are losing our "ability to distinguish what's really secret from what's not" (Podesta, 232). If truthful and adequate information is not available, it is not only difficult to build toward the future; it is impossible to construct a past.

## Action

Returning to Adam's responsibility of naming the animals (Genesis 1:26-28), "the creation mandate ... implies that much is going to be

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discovered.” Our role as librarians “organizing, [information and] making [it] accessible is pivotal in assuring this unrestricted and orderly access” (McDonald, 1979). Continual increases in secrecy and government reluctance to produce documentation for policy decisions creates an environment in which the public loses:

1. Its historical record
2. Its ability to reconcile collective memory with documented supports/ refutations
3. Its ability to gather information necessary for the participation in political and social discussion

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As Christian librarians, “the cultural mandate calls us to manage creation’s resources so as to bring glory to God and ultimate benefit to the human community” (Smith, 28). In our unique position as “broker[s] of organized information” (McDonald, 1979), we have the responsibility to speak out against this growing culture of secrecy and over classification as well as to educate our patrons of the situation and encourage their active pursuit of both information and change because, “the American people cannot remain vigilant if they are ignorant” (Podesta, 226).

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Activism to preserve the historical record and re-instate a “sunshine” government can take a number of faces dependent upon an institution’s goals and clientele. A grade school librarian may focus on fundamental information literacy concepts. A college librarian, however, may choose to push students to think more critically about how government information and accessibility shapes their participation as Christian citizens. One library may choose to hold an open forum and invite state government representatives to discuss current “hot topics” while another may choose to highlight this issue on the library web page and provide contact information to state representatives.

Whatever the plan of action, the time is ripe for activity. There is a dialogue between the people of the United States and their government leaders. The passage of The Openness Promotes Effectiveness in our National Government Act (S. 849) on August 3, 2007 and the pending legislation concerning the Presidential Records Act witness to this intentional dialogue. Revived government recognition of the need for disclosure and an effort to remain true to the principles of democracy is cause for hope and continued lobbying. The upcoming elections offer another logical point of entry for continued discussion of governmental policy surrounding *timely response* to Freedom to Information Act requests, classification of information, and national security issues. As the country selects a leader its people must understand what importance that new leader will place on the creation, classification, and dissemination of information.

It is important, however, to remember that awareness and action must also be coupled with honest prayer for our current and future government leaders and for the future safety of our nation. We are librarians, but, as mentioned before, we are first and foremost Christians who have the awesome opportunity to commune with our God and ask for His wisdom, protection, and blessing. †