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# Spiritual Literacy:

## a New Concept for a New Reality

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### ABSTRACT:

The idea of literacy is prevalent in today's society, especially among librarians. There is much discussion of technological literacy and the digital divide. There are volumes written on cultural literacy and how we interact with different groups such as younger generations. There are books dedicated specifically to literacy in the 21st century. There are growing specialized "literacies" but none dealing with religion, per se. It is critical that librarians are aware of spiritual undertones inherent in information, in order to provide balanced information to patrons.

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The definition of literacy has drastically evolved over the last century. There is the original basic term "Literacy" which is defined as "the ability to read and write." But in the 21st Century there are other types of "literacy" including:

- Visual literacy
- Media literacy
- Cultural literacy
- Technology/digital literacy

"Visual literacy" is "seeing and integrating other sensory experiences simultaneously."

"Media literacy" is the ability to decode, analyze and critically evaluate media.

"Cultural literacy" is knowledge of other cultures and languages.

"Technology literacy" is the ability to use technology to communicate, and access, information.

There is clearly a need for a novel concept which can be labeled "Spiritual Literacy."

### What is Spiritual Literacy?

"Spiritual literacy," is the ability to identify, decode, analyze and critically evaluate information and locate resources from divergent religious points of view. Spiritual literacy requires the ability on the part of the information seeker to understand the religious viewpoints that are prevalent among the author(s) and their affiliates. Spiritual literacy allows more enlightened interpretations as a result of thorough, balanced research.

While all types of literacies require the ability to find, evaluate, and use information Spiritual literacy is more esoteric, because it requires the ability, "to perceive, identify and evaluate subtle spiritual connotations within information." Regardless of your religious affiliation, spiritual literacy is present in your daily lives including: currency with "In God We Trust" on it; bumper stickers that read "Honk if you love Jesus"; or news reports about supreme court nominees' stance on abortion, ten commandments in court houses and of course gay marriage.

Societies concerned with diversity must include spiritual literacy in their repertoire. The principle of spiritual literacy is implicitly international. The premise is that true literacy – reading with comprehension – requires a great deal more than being able to retrieve information in different formats. Those who produce information incorporate their perspectives and convictions and report from their spiritual vantage point. Spiritually literate information seekers need to be able to identify embedded bias in the sources they use.

Spiritual Literacy is the ability to:

- Identify the need for religious information
- Assess information and its sources analytically
- Access information effectively from credible theological sources
- Evaluate information and its sources critically
- Incorporate spiritual information into one's knowledge base
- Use information expressly to accomplish a spiritual purpose
- Understand the spiritual issues relating to access and use of information

### Why Spiritual Literacy?

It is crucial information be evaluated in the context of spiritual literacy. For example, if you type "terrorist activities" into Google's search engine, within the first 10 results is the phrase "Militant Islam." One of those top ten results include an article from the Christian Science Monitor titled "Terrorist activity on the rise in SE Asia" (Clark, 2005). This is an example of how spirituality seeps in and effects daily information. People can easily begin to equate the term "terrorist" with "Islam," even though Timothy McVeigh, and other terrorists are not Muslims. The term "militant Islam" elicits certain emotions for people, but will undoubtedly provoke different images for American Muslims, Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jewish people.

Information seekers are inundated with spiritually loaded, subliminal messages which they must

learn to interpret. As more information is communicated through a variety of media, the ability to critically assess the information is crucial. Spiritual messages are used daily in advertising, media, and websites. Politicians use spiritual messages to persuade voters, often by denigrating their opponents. Some libraries market themselves as “Unapologetically Catholic Institutions,” so there may be a subtle spiritual slant present in their collections and consequently in the information retrieved by their patrons.

### Research on Spiritual Literacy

There is no current research on Spiritual Literacy which is why this author decided to create and introduce the term. It is vital in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and the resultant news coverage that information is as objective and balanced as possible. We live in multicultural societies and interact with people from different places in terms of religious backgrounds and belief systems. Sensitivity to spiritual difference promotes understanding and more importantly tolerance between people of different faiths. When knowledge seekers embrace the spiritual differences of others, they gain a deeper appreciation for different viewpoints. But most importantly the knowledge seeker can expand their own perspectives and reduce their egocentric interpretations. Spiritual literacy is necessary to meet the challenges of today’s more visibly religious society.

Working in a Catholic library perhaps heightens awareness of pervasive spiritual information. For example, when Reverend Jerry Falwell assaulted a television show for children, the “Teletubbies,” he blasted the show for allegedly promoting a homosexual icon in the adorable character named “Tinky-Winky.” People with contrasting spiritual viewpoints approached and analyzed this information in completely opposite manners. “Tinky-Winky gay? No way!” But others viewed this seemingly asexual teletubby’s habit of carrying a “bag” a tad bit too effeminate and feared there were subconscious homosexual messages being transmitted (Gay Tinky Winky, 1999).

More recently, a comparison of global coverage of the catastrophic Hurricane Katrina that devastated the American Gulf regions provided another example of pervasive spiritual messages in the information being disseminated to the masses. Religious organizations across the nation

have “adopted” evacuees. The government is planning to reimburse charitable organizations. FEMA officials said this would mark the first time that the government has made large-scale payments to religious groups for helping to cope with a domestic natural disaster. Some religious leaders contend that God is punishing New Orleans for its sinful ways (Campbell, 2005). However, critics point out that the French Quarter suffered relatively minor damage in the hurricane, compared to some other parishes which were more “religious.” Interestingly enough the Voodoo Spiritual Temple in New Orleans, Priestess Miriam and Allen remained safe (Please send, 2005).

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, a spiritual leader of the ultra-Orthodox Shas movement, claimed that Katrina was God’s punishment for George W. Bush’s support for Israel’s Gaza pullout. Yosef said recent natural disasters were the result of a lack of Torah study and Katrina’s victims suffered “because they have no God,” singling out black people (Rabbi says, 2005). Some Muslim and Jewish fundamentalists also hail Katrina as God’s punishment of America. Web Bloggers exclaimed the hurricane was God’s punishment in the quote, “In spite of being a superpower and of its technological development, America was unable to cope with the power of the Almighty.” A Kuwaiti newspaper published similar comments. These are just a select few spiritually relative items that appeared in information sources following hurricanes Katrina and Rita (Muslim and Jewish, 2005).

### Conclusion

In closing, it is crucial that people who are spiritually literate avoid emotional responses and critically analyze information by considering the sources and, more importantly, considering the sources’ prior experiences with the American power structure. Knowledge of different religions, their history and cultures enables spiritually literate people to identify the vantage points, slants, perspectives, and biases interjected into information. Spiritual literacy and critical thinking skills are an integral part of the way knowledge seekers frame their interpretations. It is vital that information seekers understand the source’s justification for their views as well as any inherent prejudices therein. †

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