

Prison bureau relents on purging books, will return most religion texts: Bureau was "swatting a fly with a sledgehammer"

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Yielding to pressure from religious leaders and members of Congress, the federal Bureau of Prisons has ended a purge at prison libraries of "nonapproved" religious books and materials. The purge was undertaken because of terrorism concerns. Books taken off shelves will be returned, the bureau announced September 26, except for material "that could be radicalizing or incite violence."

Those alarmed by the removals that started in June 2007 spanned the liberal-conservative spectrum after news stories noted the many standard works that were rejected.

Books not approved included works by respected 20th-century theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth, and contemporary fare such as Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* and Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

"The idea of government bureaucrats drafting a list of approved books on religion seems like something out of Soviet-era Russia, not the United States of America, where freedom of religion, even for those behind prison walls, is something we treasure," said the Christian activist organization Sojourners in an e-mail last month to its supporters.

Traci Billingsley, a spokesperson for the Bureau of Prisons, told the *New York Times* that the policy was prompted by a 2004 Justice Department report which warned of the need to prevent U.S. prisons from becoming places where those advocating militant Islamic beliefs or other religious views deemed "extremist" could recruit followers.

“It’s swatting a fly with a sledgehammer,” said Mark Earley, president of Prison Fellowship, a prison ministry group. “There’s no need to get rid of literally hundreds of thousands of quality books simply because you have a problem with an isolated book or piece of literature that presents extremism.”

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, wrote to Federal Bureau of Prisons director Harley G. Lappin on September 11 asking that the bureau publish the standards used in the project and the names of its religious consultants.

Three inmates in a New York federal prison filed a lawsuit challenging the policy on the grounds that it violated their free exercise of religion.

The Bureau of Prisons had said only a week before its September 26 announcement that it would not reconsider its policy in what it calls the Chapel Library Project. Morris Silverman, a lawyer for the three prisoners suing the bureau, told the *Times* that the reversal was a “major victory” though he is concerned about what the bureau will do next.

The statement said the federal agency is “committed to providing inmates all appropriate materials that support the pursuit of religious interests and commitments as well as other opportunities for self-improvement.” Safety and security concerns will remain, it added.

The review of all materials in chapel libraries will be completed by January, the bureau said.