

Revisionism and Professional Ethics

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The library of the Alliance israelite Universelle, situated in the center of Paris, is known as a very welcoming place for searchers. One day a notorious revisionist who didn't hide his ideological identity, came to our library. His presence disrupted our regular functions and posed numerous questions regarding professional ethics in this kind of situation.

Should a library specializing in Jewish history and studies tolerate the presence of an active revisionist?

Can a Professional Code of Ethics guide librarians in this particular situation?

Can a code clarify subtle dilemmas and ethical conflicts that occur at the workplace?

In this article I'll try to show the imperfections of the Code in a specific situation.

I'll try to expose the problem of a dilemma between answers derived from the ethical code and ethical questions I have experienced as a librarian. Then I will try to point out the moral responsibility librarians have toward History and libraries' collections.

Ethical Codes are supposed to guide professionals and provide solutions in potential problematic situations. The Code of Ethics expresses a diversity of values and tendencies; its aim is to help professionals on a rational or irrational level. In France, the Ethical Code that has been developed covers a large range of the librarianship profession. It deals with the User, the collections, guardianship and the profession itself. Without getting into a comparative study of ethical values in various types of Codes, we can name some of the essential values expressed:

Giving access to information, respect for Patron privacy, respecting users' intellectual freedom, no discrimination and no censorship etc.

Such values have been internalized by librarians: they are certainly integrated into the professional behavior.

The professional codes of ethics responds to democratic rules and values and it guaranties tolerance toward users.

But what can we do when the ideal of democracy is destabilized?

What can we do when citizens with destructive political positions come into the library?

What kind of ethics can there be?

Presentation

The library of the Alliance Israelite Universelle is a private library attached to the institution which carries the same name. The Alliance was created in 1860 and the library too. Its collections were acquired partly by book donations and by purchases. The library is not religious but, rather, contains studies on Judaism and Jewish history developed within the new disciplines that resulted from the European Enlightenment period in Germany, Britain and France.

The Alliance's library reflects Jewish emancipation and intellectual mentalities in Western Europe.

By the time World War II broke up the library of the Alliance was one of the most well-known libraries for its Judaica and Hebraica collections. When the Nazis invaded Paris in 1940, they immediately entered the Alliance library, looted its collections and deported them to Germany. The Nazis moved nearly 700 cases of books, manuscripts periodicals and archives to Germany.

All the books and the main part of the archives were taken to the Nazi institute for the study of the Jewish question in Frankfurt am Main and to the library of the Nazi party university in Berlin. Part of the collections had been processed by the Nazi administration; hundreds of the books were marked by the Frankfurt Institute. Today, the stamps are still visible on the books like sealed Nazi tattoos. In spring 1945, the Alliance library's collections were found by the American Army in Germany. They were stored in different places and were found in Offenbach from where they came back to Paris. Our collections were not destroyed by the Nazis, but on the contrary, they were carefully gathered together and so it was easy to identify them. The restitution started in 1946 and it took years and a lot of effort to re-establish the library collections and its catalogues.

The case:

Three years ago, a person who came to the library for the first time asked to consult an old edition of "The protocols of the Elders of Zion", an anti-Semitic forgery whose aim was to reveal the existence of international Jewish conspiracy bent on world power. An hour later the man came to the desk asking for a complete copy of this pamphlet that was one of the first translations into

French from the Russian. I happened to be at the desk at that moment and told him it was impossible to reproduce it for the simple reason it was old and in a bad shape. He insisted, so I asked for what purpose he needed the reproduction, he said it was for a reprint project. I asked for the name of the publisher, he said he intended to publish it in a journal and gave me its name. The name of the publication had a meaning that worried me.

The revisionist identity

The man kept insisting, manifesting stubbornness and refusal to accept our resp[onses]. At that point I felt something was wrong. I was intrigued and annoyed and I had to know more about his identity so I googled his name, and got the whole picture. I was submerged by information concerning revisionism and anti-Semitism. His holocaust denier identity was quickly revealed with the help of World Wide Web and I was very rapidly informed that he had been sentenced to time in prison for having spread anti-Semitic materials. He not only expressed his ideas on his web site, but I also found he was actually defined as a revisionist by the French law and condemned as such by the justice system.

The Dilemma

I immediately went up to inform my superior that we had a revisionist in our reading room. The library director knew straight away who this man was and hoped it would be his only visit to the library, but whether he was going to come back again or not, the problem was already there and everybody in the team was bothered and made different assumptions about the resolution we were supposed to make. Most of the staff members thought we didn't have any legal right to prevent him from consulting documents in our library. In France every citizen has the right to enter public libraries and consult books... My position at that stage was in a way fatalist, I felt as if there was nothing we could do against his visits, and thought that democracy protected every user even the most problematic ones, but still we hoped he wouldn't show up again. We all felt it was an intrusion and a provocation to come to the library of the Alliance Israelite for documents one can find in other Parisian libraries such as French National library BNF or the library of Oriental languages INALCO.

Three days later he showed up again and asked for documents in the field of Jewish history. The first documents were given to him for consultation but after a while I felt that the cooperation between a librarian in such a library and an

active Holocaust denier was very problematic. I decided, at that moment, to take a personal arbitrary attitude to limit him and the access we gave to our documents under the pretext they were not available or that they were being kept by the bookbinding service. My colleagues and superior approved my decision and backed me. It was necessary to make this man understand that we were not going to satisfy all his requests like automatons.

But he persisted in coming and appeared twice a week in our reading room.

At the same time I started questioning jurists and specialists who had dealt with the problem of Holocaust denial in libraries. I contacted various institutions for example; the Holocaust Memorial in Paris and was told that some years ago they had been confronted with a similar situation. Their library was a private one like ours and the solution they had chosen could be used for us too.

From questioning to taking position

Meanwhile our Holocaust denier, who was, by then, coming regularly to the library, asked to see a book from the Zadok Kahn collection. Zadok Kahn was not only France's chief Rabbi from 1889 to 1905 but was also a leading scholar in Jewish studies. His personal library with 2600 books was given as a donation to the Alliance's library after his death.

This entire collection had been deported by the Nazis and many of the books were stamped with the Frankfurt institute stamp.

When the book arrived to the desk that day, I immediately recognized its origin, and felt a strong unwillingness to provide this survivor book bearing the Nazi stamp to a person who denies the existence of the Holocaust and the murder of six million Jews.

In this particular situation I was in a conflict within the ethical field, a conflict between normative professional behaviour and moral responsibilities. The book I was holding in my hands acted like a witness from the war period, like a survivor giving its testimony to the dramatic realities this revisionist was denying. It was a shock to be confronted with this tragic past throughout the mark of the stamp on the yellowish page of this old book. At that moment my consciousness crystallized and I rebelled against the idea of providing documents to this person. I froze facing this Holocaust denying phenomena that is so amoral and perverse. How could I provide a rescued book which had returned from the Nazis to a revisionist?

I was actually acting according to the French law we call “Droit de retrait”, which means the right to retreat, in some cases, from one’s professional obligations.

For me it was unbearable and absurd to keep giving services to a person denying the existence of the Holocaust.

What kind of ethics can be expected in this kind of situation?

The psychological crystallisation that led me to refusal and rejection of this unwelcome person were probably the result of a maturation process within ethical parameters that I was experiencing.

I told him the book was not available, went up to the management offices and declared I was no longer going to serve this man and that I did not accept his presence in our library. Thankfully the directors approved my position and it was agreed that the next time he’d come we would tell him to leave the place and not come back again.

The institution adopts the librarian’s position

The exclusion from the Alliance reading room took place a week later at closing time. The director of the library asked him to leave, signifying that he forbade him to come again. The denier protested, arguing we were a public library obliged to receive all members of the public. The director reminded him we were a private library that had the right to define the conditions for admission of readers. The revisionist left the place without any violence but on his Web site he described the exclusion in insulting terms.

Then we had another chapter in this affair. He sent a letter to the general director of the Alliance asking him for authorization to use the library.

Finally the Alliance attorney sent him an official letter confirming the refusal to enter the library explaining that in consideration of his personal position and those expressed in his journal for which he had been convicted for defying the law he was not authorized to come to the library.

The attorney quoted article n° 6 from the statutes of the international military court annexed to the London agreement of August 1945 stating that a person

who contests by writing or by speech ... “the existence of crimes against Humanity is to be condemned to prison with an fine of 45000 € Being specified that such crimes cover the deportation and extermination of European Jews in countries under Nazi occupation during the Second World War.”

“You must understand”, wrote the attorney, “that the Alliance Israelite Universelle cannot give in any case any kind of help for doubtful and illegal projects by welcoming you on its premises. More than that, the library of the Alliance which is entirely orientated toward history, education, and in particular the history of the Jewish people, cannot tolerate within its centre a person whose ideas and activities express the absolute denial of the values it stands for.”

We should differentiate between the sense of responsibility I had towards our special books collections and the Ethical Dilemma created by my identity and the perverse positions of the denier. The Professional Code of Ethics that advocates supplying services to all users and which does not admit censorship clashed with an absolute ethical position of respect towards History. Ethics derives from Human Rights, whereas the memory of dead people is respected and the memory of the process of their assassination has a historical significance. Professional Ethics is based, among other Principles, on human rights, but in this case, respect for the human rights of the librarian was more important than the rights of the user. The librarian was in distress as a result of confronting the inhuman lie of Holocaust denying. Our communication with this revisionist inside the Alliance Israelite universelle library created a confrontation between two value systems which are completely in contradiction. The denial of the methodical massacre of European Jews is a new form of Anti-Semitism with the aim of contesting the existence of Jews in History; while the project of the Alliance library is to develop and enrich historical knowledge on Jewish communities around the world.

No compatibility could be found between these two opposing systems of values. Therefore it was impossible to admit this holocaust denier in our reading room.

His presence in our reading room created an absurd situation where a revisionist who usually doesn't recognize the Genocide of the Jews, appears in a celebrated patrimonial Jewish library trying to benefit from the culture of those whose History he denies. The absurd set of circumstances created a humiliating situation that we were not obliged to accept. Leaving him working on his

research in our library would have meant a certain acceptance and tolerance concerning his statements. If we had left him using our library, it would have signified that we, a Jewish organization, were weak and helpless in front of him and that our historical and intellectual existence was disregarded. The clash between what he represents and what we represent didn't leave us any space for tolerance.

Revisionism and the legal combat against it?

Towards the end of the 70's statements denying the historical facts of the European Jews' destruction started to be heard in France. A number of Holocaust deniers published pseudo historical research denying the existence of the Concentration Camps and the systematic massacre of the Jews.

Revisionists minimize the number of Jews murdered during Second World War. They say that only around one hundred to two hundred thousand Jews died during the Second World War, and that these deaths were from diseases in the concentration camps and not by systematic assassination through an industrialised process. Revisionists deny the use of Cyklon B by the Nazis for the extermination of human beings.

During the Seventies Holocaust Revisionists were fortified and got stronger benefitting from the right of Freedom of expression. They claimed the intellectual and legal immunity that Democracy was obliged to provide.

The French historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet had pointed out in his book "Les assassins de la Memoire" (page 7) that Revisionism didn't express any interest in other human groups that had been exterminated by the Nazis during the Second World War: t Gypsies, the mentally handicapped or Soviet prisoners of war.

They only focus on Jews; all their theories concern the Jews, because in fact Revisionism is anti-Semitism. It consists in presenting anti-Semitic positions and declarations which aim to rehabilitate the Nazis. They are extremists who act in order to arouse racism and disseminate hatred.

France, a country that was occupied by the Nazis and a quarter of whose Jewish population was exterminated, had a legal vacuum in this field.

After a period when Revisionism gained ground and after Jewish graves were profaned in Carpantras cemetery, a new law was passed, The Gayssot Law, which was enacted on July 13, 1990. It was one of the first laws outlawing Holocaust denial in Europe. Its intention was to restrict and punish those who published and pronounced against the actual dimensions of Crimes against

Humanity as defined in the London Charter in 1945. The Gayssot Law was passed in order to prevent the diffusion of Holocaust denial ideas in French society. Furthermore, it made it possible to bring revisionists to court and impose penalties on them.

In Europe only seven countries among the states member of the European Union, have laws dealing with the problem of Holocaust Denial. These were passed during the Nineties by Germany, Austria, Belgium, Spain, Luxembourg and Switzerland. Some of those countries had active responsibility for what had happened in the Holocaust period, while some of the other countries stayed passive and watched the crimes silently. It is interesting to note that countries that have laws against Denial are mostly situated in Western Europe, but that countries from Northern Europe, like Scandinavia and England do not have laws dealing with this problem. Indeed the struggle against racism and anti-Semitism is an important juridical field in countries like Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway, but the denying the Holocaust there is not yet being legally punished ; and the reason for that is undoubtedly their deep commitment to the principle of Freedom of expression.

In my opinion, the existence of the Loi Gayssot in France has protected us directly or indirectly, or rather permitted us to protect ourselves from this kind of provocation. The revisionist in this case knows that the Alliance is acquainted with his legal past; that he was convicted and spent time in prison after being charged under the Gayssot Law. He knows that this Law limits his activity and that he cannot look for legal immunity on grounds of Freedom of Speech. Hopefully, Democracy is able to protect itself from its own laxities.

Beyond the Dilemma

Back to the French Code of Ethics, this case teaches us something interesting in librarianship. As I have mentioned before, in the third part of the French Code deals with the notion of “La tutelle”. This element has been mentioned by Professor Paul Sturges in his article “Information Ethics in the Twenty First Century” published in 2009.

What the French Code says is;

3. The administrative responsibility (civil or private community)

- *the librarian takes part in the definition of the culture policy of his responsibility*

- *the librarian enforces the policy of his responsibility as long as this one does not go against the general laws, the specific and perennial missions of the library, as well as against the values defined in this code*

From the case I have described we can observe that the librarian's independent position was supported by the establishment for which she works.

More explicitly, the Head Office supported the librarian's position and adopted it as the official institutional position.

Does this case illustrate the relevance of what the French Code says in article 3?

Although the librarian can take an active part and enforce the policy of guardianship; this must be coherent with the code's values. That brings us again to the aspect of values.

The professional Ethics Code is usually understood as a set of functional regulations that librarians have already integrated into their professional way of working, but in my case facing the revisionist, it was impossible to; "*provide the users with all the documents necessary to their full and autonomous comprehension of the public debates, of the current events, of the great historical and philosophical issues.*" (French Code)

The reality of the workplace creates delicate and unusual situations that have to be handled by librarians and in this regard, the Code of Professional Ethics as a whole misses problematic aspects that were revealed by the experience of the dilemma described here.

As I said at the beginning of the article, Codes of Ethics are very democratic; they tend to be idealistic, which is normal since we deal here with a counsel of perfection for librarians. But if the Code fails to satisfy in particular situations, the librarian must search for solutions outside the Code and see what the Law and legal rulings can offer as support in a democratic society.

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