



[Back to Story - Help](#)

Prisons ban books over fear of radicals

AP Associated Press

By LARRY NEUMEISTER, Associated Press Writer

Sun Jun 10, 2:01 PM ET

Inmates at the federal prison camp in Otisville, N.Y., were stunned by what they saw at the chapel library on Memorial Day — hundreds of books had disappeared from the shelves.

The removal of the books is occurring nationwide, part of a long-delayed, post-Sept. 11 federal directive intended to prevent radical religious texts, specifically Islamic ones, from falling into the hands of violent inmates.

Three inmates at Otisville filed a lawsuit over the policy, saying their Constitutional rights were violated. They say all religions were affected.

"The set of books that have been taken out have been ones that we used to minister to new converts when they come in here," inmate John Okon, speaking on behalf of the prison's Christian population, told a judge last week.

Okon said it was unfortunate because "I have really seen religion turn around the life of some of these men, especially in the Christian community."

The government maintained that that the new rules don't entirely clear the shelves of prison chapel libraries.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Brian Feldman told U.S. District Judge Laura Taylor Swain that prison libraries limited the number of books for each religion to between 100 and 150 under the new rules. He said officials would expand the number after choosing a new list of permitted books.

Feldman said the removal order stemmed from an April 2004 Department of Justice review of the way prisons choose Muslim religious services providers. It is not exactly clear why it took so long for the order to be put into effect, but prison officials said they needed time to examine a long list of books.

Feldman said the study was made out of a concern that prisons "had been radicalized by inmates who were practicing or espousing various extreme forms of religion, specifically Islam, which exposed security risks to the prisons and beyond the prisons to the public at large."

Feldman said the review by the U.S. Bureau of Prisons concluded that prison chapel libraries were not adequately supervised.

"The presence of extremist chaplains, contractors or volunteers in the BOP's correctional facilities can pose a threat to institutional security and could implicate national security if inmates are encouraged to commit terrorist acts against the United States," the bureau's report said.

The review suggested audio and video monitoring of worship areas and chapel classrooms and screening of religious service providers. It also recommended that prisons reduce inmate-led religious services and consider constant staff monitoring of inmate-led services.

A Bureau of Prisons spokeswoman in Washington did not immediately respond to a message seeking comment.

Feldman said inmates are permitted to order books on their own and bypass the chapel libraries. "So fundamentally this is not a case about what books the inmates have the ability to read," he said.

However, inmates say the rules have had a chilling effect.

Inmate Moshe Milstein told the judge by telephone that the chaplain at Otisville removed about 600 books from the chapel library on Memorial Day, including Harold S. Kushner's best-seller "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," a book that

Norman Vincent Peale said was "a book that all humanity needs."

"There is definitely irreparable harm done to us already, and we would like the court to issue the injunction to get the books back as soon as possible," he said.

Inmate Douglas Kelly, who described himself as a representative of the prison's Muslim community, complained of "a denial of our First Amendment rights."

He said books on Islam already were the least represented in the library's collections and were reduced by half in the Memorial Day removal.

"A lot of what we are missing were definitely prayer books or prayer guides and religious laws on the part of the Muslim faith," he said.

The judge said the lawsuit might be premature because the inmates had not yet followed prison administrative complaint procedures. She declined to block the book removals, the remedy sought by the lawsuit.

Ron Kuby, a civil rights lawyer who has represented a former head Islamic chaplain banned from the state prison system after he was accused of making extremist statements, called the prison book removal "a mass Memorial Day book burning."

But he also said there might be limits to relief the prisoners can seek because prisoners' First Amendment rights are severely limited.

Copyright © 2007 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. The information contained in the AP News report may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without the prior written authority of The Associated Press.