What are Theological Libraries?

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I conceive of my work and that of my staff as a ministry as well as an aid in multiple future ministries. In a nutshell, the text we shared is thematic for me: We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses—past and present—speaking, dialoguing, sharing with those who would be witnesses today.


Since antiquity, literate cultures have created libraries to preserve human knowledge and make it available to readers. Theological libraries today share with libraries in general the central functions of a modern library, including selection, acquisition, preservation, and description of resources in order to provide access to them. Like other libraries, theological libraries assist and instruct readers, advocate for the relevance of the library and of its resources to the mission of its community, create spaces suitable to the user community, provide platforms for disseminating faculty and student work, manage funds entrusted for all these purposes, and participate in policy making related to the library. What, then, are the distinctive characteristics of theological libraries?

In the first place, theological libraries specialize in texts viewed as sacred and in literature within and about the religious traditions that revere those sacred...
texts. Some libraries are equipped with the expertise and facilities to collect and preserve manuscripts from antiquity. Beyond collecting manuscripts, translations, and editions of the sacred texts themselves, theological libraries accumulate the literature that grows up around the texts, produced by the communities that respect them. Related works include linguistic and textual criticism, commentaries, theological reflection, and application of the texts. Religious communities generate the literature of religious practice and community life, including ministry, ethics, worship, and religious arts. The memory of the community is embodied in archives and histories of the community, its activities, its controversies, its practitioners, and scholarly analyses of these materials.

In the second place, theological libraries vary in their constituencies. The constituent communities that create and support theological libraries are of different types: local or congregational, single-tradition, multiple-tradition, and extra-traditional. Although no typology fits every library, the main factor that differentiates these four types is the scope of the constituent community, whether in geography or ideology. Often the breadth of the constituency influences the depth of financial resources available to the institution and its library. The library participates in the teaching and learning efforts of its constituent community.

A theological library with a local constituency is one related to a neighborhood religious community. Since antiquity, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim congregations have kept collections of sacred books for reading and study directed by the congregation's leaders. Today an example of a local theological library would be a church library with a collection of tools for study of the sacred text, recordings of sermons or services, or videos for children inculcating the religious teachings of the congregation. Its users are likely to be local clergy or members of the congregation who are engaged in devotional reading, worship, teaching, or in religious instruction. Today the staff of a local theological library is usually constituted of volunteers from the membership, some of whom may be professional librarians elsewhere.

A theological library with single-tradition constituency would be mainly identified with a single religious denomination or movement. The educational institution typically offers liberal arts or professional education for members of the denomination as well as specialized training for religious professionals in that tradition. A variation on this pattern occurs when the institution identifies with a religious movement such as Pentecostalism or Evangelicalism rather than with a denomination per se. The users of these libraries are likely to be professors, students of the ministry, alumni, and local clergy. Although the population may be international, the cohesive factor is the common tradition. A Roman Catholic seminary that prepares priests for the church would be one example of the single-
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tradition type. Bible colleges and denominational universities are often of this type. Single-tradition institutions may vary in the degree to which their faculty or students are drawn from the tradition. Some single-tradition institutions operate at the graduate level. Many of these institutions in North America are accredited by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. Libraries of this type usually have one or more professional librarians.

A theological library with a multiple-tradition constituency operates in an ecumenical educational institution providing graduate education for persons seeking ordination in several traditions. Another example occurs when seminaries or schools of various traditions share a consortial collection representing a variety of faith traditions, each educating its own religious workers and scholars, sometimes on separate campuses near a centralized library. Users of libraries of this type are also likely to be professors, students, alumni, and local clergy. The supporting institutions often seek accreditation from ATS or similar national bodies worldwide. The staff of multiple-tradition libraries are also likely to include one or more professionals.

Finally, a theological library might have an extra-traditional context when its sponsoring institution, such as a secular university offering graduate degrees in religious studies, emphasizes the scholarship of religions as human cultural phenomena rather than the preparation of religious adherents for ministerial work. Users of these libraries are professors, students, and scholars worldwide. Such libraries often assemble large international collections in a wide variety of disciplines and media, such as sociology of religion, history, linguistics, anthropology, archaeology, ethics, philosophy, literature, and the arts. These collections concerning the cultural record inform the program in religious studies. In large libraries associated with research universities, there will be many professional librarians, one of whom is designated the religion specialist who selects resources and assists readers with inquiries in religious studies.

In the third place, theological libraries, especially of the single-tradition or multiple-tradition type, participate not only in the information of students, but in their spiritual formation for religious work. The library accomplishes this through an ethos of hospitality, not only in its intellectual openness to collecting a wide variety of points of view, but in the librarians' respect for the students' freedom of inquiry. The library building provides quiet spaces not only for reading but also for contemplation, worship, and prayer. The library often provides spaces for group discussion and events that stimulate it. Exhibits of archives and artifacts call attention to the spiritual heritage of the institution, especially during anniversary or memorial occasions. Like many faculty members in small institutions, librarians may be called on to provide spiritual support to students in moments of intellectual and personal crisis. Since many theological librarians
also hold advanced degrees in a theological discipline, they may also serve on thesis committees or occasionally teach courses.

In the fourth place, theological libraries respond creatively to changes in their religious communities, including technological innovations in information and religious education, changes in religious populations and publishing patterns worldwide, and threats to religious freedom in turbulent political situations. Advances in technology demand that libraries not only keep up with developments in hardware, systems, and metadata, but that they rebalance their acquisitions to supply more electronic resources as their schools shift to online instruction. While denominational populations and related seminary populations in the Northern Hemisphere are diminishing, the global South is experiencing significant denominational growth with consequent demands for theological education and for production of scholarly publications in relevant languages. Theological libraries worldwide collect scholarly materials by and about growing religious communities and find ways to facilitate their institutions’ scholarly conversation on a global scale. Theological libraries anchor a global perspective on intellectual freedom that can assist their faculty, students, and institutions to resist the challenges to scholarship and community that economic and political tensions present worldwide. The energy for these efforts comes from hospitality, that powerful engine of respect and appreciation for the value of others’ lives and for open dialogue with their perspectives on the divine. Theological libraries host intellectual inquiry because inquiry is an act of faith. They resource, harvest, steward, and disseminate the responses made by scholars, proponents, critics, and students to the claims of their faith traditions. Theological libraries value the accumulated wisdom of the ages, but they remember that a single voice may cry in the wilderness, speak under a tree, or sing in the courts of kings.

**Works Cited**

Further Reading

Collections and Periodicals
Theological Education 40, no. 1 (2004).

Individual Items


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