CHAPTER 2

Theological Librarianship as a Career Path

KELLY CAMPBELL AND ANDREW KECK

Introduction

The career path to theological librarianship is circuitous. Most theological librarians emerge from a career journey containing a variety of positions and roles in ministry, libraries, or higher education. In addition to various roles or careers, the educational preparation of theological librarians can vary. In this chapter, we will draw upon the literature of theological librarianship to help answer the following questions. What are theological librarians? Is theological librarianship a ministry or an occupation? What specific experiences or education are valued components to be a theological librarian? After reading this chapter, you will learn the common pathways to developing into and having a career in theological librarianship.

What are Theological Librarians?

As we begin to explore theological librarianship as a career path, the first step is to answer the question of what a theological librarian is. In reviewing the library literature from 1924 to 1994, the literature contains fewer than sixty-five articles or citations on the topic of theological libraries or librarians (Karp and Keck 1996a). However, the literature notes two general definitions of theological librarians. These two general definitions are analogous to two sides of a coin and continue to provide both tension and balance for theological librarians. The first

literature definition is of theological librarians as "people performing ministry" (p. 35). Some theological librarians define themselves as ministers and as being in the ministry of helping students and faculty. The second literature definition is of theological librarians as "people who provide linkages among theology, church, scholarship, education, diverse constituencies, and both scholarly and popular literature" (p. 35). Both definitions make the general assumption that a theological librarian is a librarian working in a theological or religious setting or a librarian supporting an organization in the field of theology or religion. The question of ministry or occupation will be explored further below.

Settings for theological librarians can be quite varied. When one expands the settings to include "linkages" among theology, church, and scholarly and popular literature, the settings become inclusive of many scholarly, educational, religious, and community networks. While the typical theological librarian might work in a seminary setting, there are various additional settings containing works which can be theological or religious in nature. These various settings include denominational libraries, universities or colleges with religious departments or degrees, archival libraries documenting religious or theological history and movements, as well as community and even national libraries. For example, a theological librarian works at the United States Library of Congress overseeing theological and religious subjects. Therefore, in the broadest sense, a theological librarian is a librarian providing library services within contexts holding the materials of and about religious and theological traditions.

While theological librarians work in different contexts, they also fulfill different roles or positions within and throughout institutions. Theological librarians work as subject specialists, cataloging librarians, library directors, instructional designers, educational technologists, research assistants, copyright specialists, digital humanities librarians, scholarly communication coordinators, event planners, and many other titles. Theological librarians' various titles speak to the broad and integrated importance of the library and information sciences. Historically, information was limited to print and archives materials; however, with the rapid increase and accessibility of information, theological librarians can utilize their organizational and information skills in an ever-increasing variety of positions. Theological librarians, with their skill sets and competencies, are valuable to institutions beyond the library and its traditional positions.

Beyond these various contexts and roles, theological librarians serve as partners in the educational process. The educational process can be narrowly defined as students in a seminary setting and broadly expanded to include clientele visiting a denominational repository. Theological librarians not only provide collections and policies; they educate people. They teach persons how to find the information they are seeking or help an individual understand the

various sources of information available. As an example, librarians working as instructional designers help faculty design their online courses and are experts in various pedagogies. Throughout their various roles, theological librarians are partners in the educational process and many theological librarians were drawn to the career largely due to the educational component.

Based on who theological librarians are, many in the profession would define theological librarians as a tribe. With a wide variety of pathways into the profession and diverse experiences and credentials, the tribe of theological librarians is open and accepting. Theological librarians serving beyond traditional libraries would self-identify as a part of the tribe; while others without experience or credentials serving in theological library roles would claim their place in the tribe. The rationale for the word "tribe" emerges from the theological and religious arena where denominations and faith traditions tend to be tribal. The beauty of the theological librarian's tribe is that our work is what joins us together not the contrasting and differing beliefs. In this tribe, members can work cooperatively together to support information and library resources while holding drastically differing beliefs and faith traditions. Working cooperatively to build collections, educate clientele (faculty, students, etc.), and preserve resources and materials for the future generate the work that brings various theological librarians and libraries together.

Due to the circuitous route, theological librarians come from a variety of backgrounds. Each theological librarian's pathway is unique and normally takes several twists and turns before settling into the field of theological librarianship. Before entering careers in the field, many theological librarians have had some prior engagement with a theological library, usually as a student or patron. A challenge for diverse recruitment into the profession is to reach those who desire to work in libraries but who are unfamiliar with theological libraries.

Theological Librarianship as a Ministry or Occupation

Theological librarianship can be a ministry but is not universally observed as such (Karp and Keck 1996b; Keck 1996). Some practitioners will make the case explicitly with formal and informal endorsements by their faith tradition (in some cases, including ordination). Others will view their work primarily as an occupation or profession without any explicit reference to considerations of faith or ministry. Many will frame theological librarianship with both categories, identifying aspects of their roles and work that primarily fit as ministry or occupation.

A number of factors can lead to a consideration of theological librarianship as a ministry:

- engagement in work that is explicitly service-oriented (such as reference assistance),
- working with patrons (clientele) who are engaged in and/or preparing for ministry,
- working with colleagues in the library or within the broader organization who view their work as ministry,
- working within a broader organization with specific religious commitments and/or understandings of ministry,
- viewing the library collections as representing special religious knowledge and/or collective witness of prior adherents,
- approaching theological librarianship as a personal calling into ministry.

Many of these are contextual to the specific library and work demands. A person employed within a context of preparing students for ministry is perhaps more likely to also see their own work within this framework. Institutions with their own deep religious commitments could inform how individuals employed within the institution may view their work. These factors are by no means determinative. A librarian may maintain an independent view of their work regardless of the clientele and institutional commitments. A librarian may have different religious commitments than their employing institution or no commitments at all.

Other factors considered above are more specific to the individual librarian in terms of how they come into the profession and view their own work. Theological librarians who enter the profession from discerning their own call to ministry may be more likely to find theological librarianship as a ministry. In other words, if one is prepared to see theological librarianship as a ministry, one is more likely to see it as such. Viewpoints can also change over time, especially when additional factors noted above may be at play. A theological librarian may initially see their work as an occupation and then develop an appreciation for it as a ministry as part of engaging with a ministry-focused organization and their clientele.

When considered as an occupation, the contexts for theological librarians vary globally as do the requirements and process for hire. In the United States, for instance, the Master of Library Science (or equivalent) from an ALA-accredited graduate program is normative. Hiring is done through formal search processes, often national in scope, in order to identify and hire the best librarian for a given position. Theological librarians, as a subspecialty of academic librarians, can be expected to have completed further graduate work in theology or religion in addition to the Master of Library Science. While not universally true, this is

especially true for library directors and those who work in collection development or reference.

Theological librarianship as ministry or occupation are not mutually exclusive perspectives and can be held simultaneously. Even if one believes theological librarianship to be primarily a ministry, the work can also be an occupation requiring specialized skills, education, and/or experience. In some places, librarians receive similar or parallel status as faculty with nomenclature referring to "library faculty," tenure or tenure-like provisions, and formal ranks. Similarly, even if one believes theological librarianship to be primarily an occupation, working with materials, people, and institutions with religious commitments can affect the context of one's work and how it may be viewed.

Education and Experience for Theological Librarianship

In the United States higher education system, the Master of Library Science (MLS) degree is largely viewed as the credential connected to the title "librarian." Plenty of people work in libraries without an MLS degree, but the title "librarian" is often reserved for employees with the requisite master's degree and is sometimes accompanied with a distinct set of benefits and responsibilities. Exceptions abound and this precise connection between degree, title, and benefits/responsibilities continues to be questioned by libraries where traditional "librarians" work alongside a growing number of other qualified professionals who happen to lack a Master of Library Science degree, or who possess other master's degrees in fields such as education or technology.

As noted above, the Master of Library Science degree is not always required for every position within the library. Some positions can be classified as paraprofessional and other library positions are classified as professional but require expertise and education focused in other specialized areas (such as information technology, data management, accounting, etc.). Finally, there are individuals who achieve typical librarian positions by virtue of "equivalent experience" in libraries that is deemed to take the place of a formal degree.

The director or head librarian at a seminary library can be a special case in theological librarianship in the United States. Within the Association of Theological Schools' *Standards of Accreditation,* the chief library administrator "ordinarily" is a voting member of the faculty and "normally" possesses graduate degrees in library science and in theological studies. While these standards set norms, there is nothing to prevent a school from appointing someone without

these educational credentials or to require further credentials (such as a PhD or EdD).

A survey conducted for non-US based theological librarians by the Theological Book Network (shared privately with the authors) revealed that slightly fewer than half of those responding noted a head librarian with a degree in library science. Of those with specialized degrees or education, slightly better than one-third of all respondents had degrees at the master's or doctoral level. As further responses indicated, there was great interest in further education and training in library science but limited opportunities in some parts of the world.

Within a degree or educational program, “library science” is a broad category covering the breadth of what librarians and libraries may be called upon to know and do. Topics can include library management, collection development, reference, cataloging, circulation, archives, digital resources, digitization, scholarly communication, information literacy, library instruction, library marketing, etc. Many library science programs in the United States also engage in information science, which may include database management, information architecture, data mining, programming, multimedia, and artificial intelligence. Although the American Library Association provides some standards as part of the accreditation of programs, individual information or library schools determine the precise learning outcomes and curriculum for the degree, and so there can be variation between schools and graduates regarding particular knowledge and competencies. Ongoing paradigmatic changes in libraries, scholarly communication, and higher education make lifelong learning beyond the degree essential for the modern librarian.

Experience desired or required for theological librarians involves technical competencies (see Johnson, Graham, Berryhill, and Keck 2012), subject knowledge competencies, and cultural competencies. Technical competencies can include mastery of cataloging and metadata practices, information literacy and research skills, electronic resource management, etc. These are helpful in designing general library operations and performing specific library tasks. Subject knowledge competencies include the various areas of theological inquiry and knowledge. These competencies are essential for cataloging as well as for providing reference assistance and instruction. Finally, cultural competencies relate to the diverse set of library clientele and a broader set of colleagues within theological education. These can be related to a set of soft skills that allow one to connect to various cultures and clientele of most theological libraries: faculty, administrators, master’s students, doctoral students, local pastors, and community patrons. Experience is particularly essential for the cultural competencies and certainly can advance, if not partially substitute for, formal education and training.

Conclusion: The Road to Theological Librarianship

A great conversation-starter among theological librarians is to ask how they came to the profession and the particular position they occupy. Each response is unique, but some common pathways can be discerned. At least four entry points can be discerned.

First, some librarians enter the theological library field possessing both formal theological training and a library science degree with their intent to work in a seminary, theological school, or religious library setting for their entire career. Many of these individuals feel that theological librarianship is a calling or ministry.

Second, librarians complete their PhD in theology or religious studies planning to become a professor, researcher, or lecturer; however, they cannot find a faculty position and find themselves in the library where they can utilize their subject expertise and teaching skills. Typically, these individuals find that the gifts of helping and working with students and faculty nicely complement their desire to have a career working in higher education. The literature supports this entry point into theological librarianship as Andrew Keck surveyed 371 American members of Atla (founded in 1946 as the American Theological Library Association) and found that many saw their work as 'parallel' to the theology professors. He notes Connolly C. Gamble Jr.'s 1962 presentation to Atla (Gamble 2006) that argued for the library as a "central teaching agency of the seminary rather than a mere warehouse for book storage."

Third, other theological librarians come to the field from broader academic librarianship. In some cases, they may work in a university setting as the religious or humanities librarian, serving as the primary connection between religious and theological faculty and library services.

Fourth, others enter the theological library field after working in the secular or business field and find themselves going back to school seeking to contribute back and to find value in their work. Thus, these individuals find the career of theological librarianship as a second career after their first.

The career path to theological librarianship is as varied as the contexts where theological librarians are employed, the precise work one is called upon to do, the professional and ministerial meaning ascribed to such work, and the preparations to do such work. This pathway to theological librarianship can be found globally; however, what ties theological librarianship together is a focus upon serving a diverse clientele interested and curious about religious traditions and studies accessed, documented, and preserved by libraries and archives. If a person is interested in a career in theological librarianship, the pathway is open.

Works Cited

Gamble, Connolly C., Jr. 2006. "Contemporary Challenges to Theological Librarianship." In *A Broadening Conversation: Classic Readings in Theological Librarianship*, edited by Melody Layton McMahon and David R. Stewart. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press.

Johnson, Tammy, M. Patrick Graham, Carisse Mickey Berryhill, and Andrew J. Keck. 2012. "Core Competencies for Theological Librarians Panel." *ATLA Summary of Proceedings* 66: 223–31.

Karp, Rashelle S. and Andrew J. Keck. 1996a. "Theological Librarianship: Toward a Profile of a Profession." *College & Research Libraries* 57, no. 1: 35–42. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl_57_01_35.

———. "Theological Librarianship." 1996b. In *American Theological Library Association: Essays in Celebration of the First Fifty Years*, edited by M. Patrick Graham, Valerie R. Hotchkiss, and Kenneth E. Row, 172–82. Evanston, IL: ATLA. https://books.atla.com/index.php/atlapress/catalog/book/6.

Keck, Andrew J. 1996. "Information or Divine Access: Theological Librarianship within the Context of a Ministry." In *American Theological Library Association: Essays in Celebration of the First Fifty Years*, edited by M. Patrick Graham, Valerie R. Hotchkiss, and Kenneth E. Row, 172–82. Evanston, IL: ATLA.

Additional Resources

Peterson, Herman A. 2001. "Theological Librarianship as a Ministry." *ATLA Summary of Proceedings* 55: 231–50.

Shaffett, John E. 2013. "Theological Librarianship as a Ministry." *ATLA Summary of Proceedings* 67: 69–83.

Smith, Gregory A., ed. 2002. *Christian Librarianship: Essays on the Integration of Faith and Profession.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland.