

# *Theological Libraries in Central and Western Europe*

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## *Introduction*

Theological and religious libraries have a long and rich history in Europe's collective memory and an important role in the preservation of the entire Western cultural history and heritage. For centuries these libraries were in the center of European thought and scientific research and were responsible for the creation of library infrastructure and public reading systems in many countries. Even today many of the most valuable European library collections and cultural heritage are in the possession of churches, mosques, synagogues, and other religion-related institutions and libraries.

This contribution aims to provide an overview of these libraries across Europe, particularly its Central and Western part, which covers today more than 30 countries and has about 500 million inhabitants. This is not an easy task, not only because of the number of countries to be considered and the diversity in cultures, languages, religions, policies, and socio-economic situations, but also because theological librarianship is very heterogenous and operates in a complex environment which varies from country to country, and is determined by socio-political and religious history, as well as changes in higher education. Another major challenge is the lack of comparative and cross-country research on European theological libraries. There is a fairly large amount of scholarly literature on the history of individual theological and religious libraries in European countries but very few contemporary and over-arching approaches and

studies (Geuns and Wolf-Dahm 1998; Geuns 1999 and 2000; Penner 2005; Dupont and Langlois 2011) in the field.

The situation of theological libraries across Europe, as described here, is mainly based on existing literature and information that has been gathered from theological library associations, their representatives, and websites. The contribution is organized into six sections (Brief History and Development; Current Status; European Theological Education and Libraries; Library Education Programs; Theological Library Associations; Challenges and Opportunities) and is meant to at least partially cover the above information gap and provide general information for new and future librarians or anyone interested in the subject of European theological librarianship.

## *Brief History and Development*

Europe boasts a very rich history of libraries, in which theological and religious ones play a dominant role for almost 1,000 years (approximately from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD). In this chapter, only major types of theological libraries and development phases will be mentioned. For more information about general library history in the Western world (e.g. Harris 1999; Staikos 2004–2013; Battles 2015) and libraries in the specific period, references are provided.

In Europe, as in most parts of the world, the first known libraries originated in the proximity of temples. Temple collections were among the earliest forms of both the proto-library and theological library on the European continent. Although references to temple libraries in Ancient Greece can be found (Harris 1999, 50; Murphy 2013), these libraries were more common in the Roman empire. Apart from serving for the education and training of priests, temple libraries also served as state archives and public libraries (Affleck 2013). It has been estimated that the average temple and priestly collections in the Roman period contained about 20,000 to 40,000 papyrus rolls (Harris 1999, 64). There are a few physical remains of pagan libraries from the classical era;<sup>1</sup> the references in literature are usually the only clues to their existence. After the decline of the Western Roman Empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, Roman pagan temple collections were either destroyed by the barbarians and Christians or decayed as a result of neglect and disuse.

The later part of the Roman Empire saw the beginning of Christian libraries (see Humphreys 2013), the most notable of which was the library of Caesarea in Palestine, which, with its 30,000 volumes, was the largest ecclesiastical library in late antiquity. There is not so much information about pre-medieval Christian libraries in Europe because of the strong persecution of Christians at the time,

especially by the emperor Diocletian. It is known that Pope Damasus (366–384 AD) organized a repository of the Church archives in Rome in the Church of St. Laurent. Most other early European Christian libraries were probably in the possession of theologians and monastic communities spread across Southern Europe.

Before Western Europe was overrun by the barbarians, the center of European culture moved in the 4<sup>th</sup> century from Rome to Constantinople and the Eastern Roman Empire, which assured the preservation of classical literature through the Middle Ages. Byzantium was known for its large imperial and university library in Constantinople and also patriarchal and numerous Christian monastic libraries (see Allison 2013; Schreiner 2013). Some of the most notable Byzantine monastic libraries, which are still operating, are the libraries on Holy Mount Athos in Greece and the Library of the Monastery of St. Catharine at Mount Sinai in Egypt, which, with its 1,500-year history, is reported to be the world's oldest continually operating library (Esparza 2019). The significance of Byzantine libraries for European librarianship is that they preserved much of the classical literature when it was virtually lost in the West (Harris 1999, 76). Both Byzantine and Islamic libraries served as a connecting link between the classical world and later European cultural development in the Renaissance.

Islamic libraries (see Wilkins 2013; Abattouy 2012; Gianni 2016) influenced European libraries particularly through their presence in the Iberian Peninsula and Sicily, which became the major centers of transmission of Arabic and classical knowledge and culture to medieval Europe. From 711, when Moslems entered Spain, until 1492, when they were expelled by Christians, Islamic libraries in Spain were the richest and most advanced libraries on the European continent. The most known among these is the Royal Library in Córdoba, which had approximately 400,000–600,000 volumes in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and employed 500 people. In addition to the Royal Library, Spain was also home to numerous university and public libraries as well as libraries of mosques (BenAicha 1986). Islamic libraries have contributed significantly to transmitting works of Greek, Persian, Indian, and Assyrian physicians and philosophers, which were later translated into Latin and used as textbooks in European schools at Bologna, Naples, and Paris (Algeriani and Mohadi 2017). Some European universities, like the University of Salamanca, were later modeled on the “houses of wisdom” found in the Muslim world (Harris 1999, 85). Jewish libraries (see Schidorsky 2013) were also present in Arabic Spain and, most especially, in Italy in the early Middle Ages. When Christians reconquered Spain in 1492, Moors and Jews were expelled and most of their literary heritage was either destroyed or taken by their owners.

During the 1000-year period in which Byzantine and Islamic libraries represented major centers of learning, Christian medieval monastic libraries (see McCrank 2013), particularly of the Benedictine, Cistercian, and Carthusian orders, kept the fire of learning in Central and Western Europe. The monks diligently copied and guarded their small collections of manuscripts and codices throughout the early middle ages. Italian monasteries were known for translating Byzantine texts, while monks in Muslim/Christian border areas in Spain and Sicily copied the contents of Islamic libraries and later spread them into other parts of Christian Europe. Some of these monastic libraries, such as the abbey library in St. Gall in Switzerland, still exist today.

Later, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when European social and intellectual life was moving more to the cities under the influence of trade, church and cathedral libraries (see Humphreys 2013) became a more prominent form of theological library. Although they were never as numerous as those of the monasteries and not as important in the preservation of the cultural history of Western Europe, they served as a bridge, chronologically and culturally, between the monasteries and the universities (Harris 1999, 98). Many prominent European universities, such as the University of Paris, were an outgrowth of cathedral schools that existed previously in these cities.

Although individual collections of medieval monastic and cathedral libraries remained relatively small, by the time of the Renaissance their network had grown very strong. With the growth of the universities during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, and especially after the invention of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, monastic and cathedral libraries were replaced by university libraries as primary centers of learning in Europe. Because of the long heritage of literary production and because theological studies was one of the main disciplines at the time, collections in religion and theology represented the largest part of early university libraries.

During the period of the Renaissance (roughly from the 14<sup>th</sup> into the 17<sup>th</sup> century) the libraries of the monasteries, cathedrals, and theological faculties continued to exist, but their collections did not grow as much as the private libraries of the humanists, princes, and cardinals who competed to have the best collections of Greek and Latin doctors and philosophers. It was in the Renaissance that the Vatican Library was formally established and began to collect a whole universe of knowledge. The Renaissance was also a time of great religious turmoil and changes, culminating in the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, which had deep effects on theological libraries across Europe.



Image 1: The Baroque Hall of the Abbey Library of St. Gall in Switzerland © Erwin Reiter, Haslach, Germany

After the 16<sup>th</sup> century and into the period of the Enlightenment, the overall position and development of theological libraries were greatly influenced and affected by religious wars, censorship, and waves of secularizations that led their collections to be confiscated, suppressed, scattered, or destroyed.

The first of these waves of secularization came with the Reformation and religious wars connected with it. Many monastic and cathedral libraries were either destroyed or saw their collections confiscated and given to royal treasuries, aristocratic courts, wealthy cities, universities, certain individuals, and the new Protestant clerical order (Garrett 2015, 61). The second wave of secularization occurred in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and affected mostly Catholic Europe, but later spread all over Europe in the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. During the period of cancellation of the Jesuit order (1773–1814), the Josephine reforms in the Habsburg lands (1773–1855; see Buchmayr 2004), secularizations in German

states, and the partitions of Poland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, numerous monastic libraries disappeared in Central Europe. Their holdings were confiscated and later mostly used for the development of national libraries. The cultural impact of the second wave of secularization was much greater than the first because 300 years of the printing press had, in the meantime, caused a large increase of theological library collections. After the second wave, the European library landscape and knowledge culture dramatically changed. Huge state-owned collections and smaller regional and university libraries with increasing relevance for science started to appear, creating a knowledge infrastructure that remained for the next 200 years (Garrett 2015, 61).

Waves of secularizations continued to affect theological libraries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In some countries, like France, laws on the separation of church and state were introduced. The status of the Church and its institutions, such as theological faculties, became private, and theological libraries could not count on receiving support from the government for their work. In the First and Second World War, many theological libraries were destroyed. Two of the best-known examples are the burning of the Central Library of the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium in 1914 and 1940, and book-burnings and libricides before and during World War II by the Nazis, where most Jewish libraries in Europe were confiscated, destroyed, and scattered (see Sutter 2004; Rose 2008; Glickman 2016). It has been estimated that, before the war, the Jewish libraries in Germany and its occupied territories held four million volumes. Only two million of them were retrieved after the war (Schidorsky 2013). After the world wars, communist regimes came to power in Central and Eastern Europe. Where theological libraries were not confiscated, damaged, or robbed, access to them was restricted and tightly controlled. The communists did not allow expansion of theological studies and their libraries, so the collections, including the precious old historical manuscripts, were neglected for almost five decades. It was only after the fall of the communist regimes in 1989 that theological libraries in most Eastern European countries began to revive. The only exception to this is the libraries in the countries of Southeastern Europe, where the breakup of Yugoslavia resulted in a series of wars and ethnic cleansing that lasted for most of the 1990s. During the fights for territories, many Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim libraries were destroyed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Kosovo in an attempt to obliterate evidence of faith, culture, and memory of people of the different ethnic and religious traditions that lived in these parts (Brailo 1998; Riedlmayer 2008; Battles 2015, 99).

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, church membership in Central and Western Europe across denominations dropped remarkably and, together with it, religious vocations. Many churches, abbeys, and cloisters were closed down.

Parallel to the decrease in church membership, Western Europe has been facing a strong influx of immigrants of Christians, Muslims, and other religions from all over the world, which is leading to a change of its religious landscape. Non-believers and adherents to a new spirituality, esoteric movements, and others are also increasing.

Amid these great challenges and changes in the social and political environment affecting churches and their libraries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an important change happened in the Catholic Church with the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Vatican II changed many things in the way the Catholic Church considers itself in dialogue with society, which includes also the role played by libraries. Before Vatican II, theological faculties and libraries did not cooperate very much, and the presence of lay people working in them was marginal. After the Council, many European theological libraries moved from purely ecclesial management of libraries that lacked professionalism to management by trained laypeople. In this period, many professional library associations began forming in Europe and their influence on theological library development has been significant ever since.

Since Vatican II, there has been more focus on the protection of church cultural heritage across denominations from the side of popes, bishops, and other church leaders. Pope John Paul II was especially instrumental in this regard and created the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church in 1988. The Commission has, since its founding, issued several documents, among which the most relevant for libraries were guidelines titled *Ecclesiastical Libraries and Their Role in the Mission of the Church*, published in 1994, and the *Circular Letter on the Necessity and Urgency of the Inventory and Cataloging of the Church's Cultural Heritage*, published in 1999. Pope John Paul II also referred to church libraries in his apostolic constitution *Pastor bonus* (1988, art. 101, §1–2), as has Pope Francis in the apostolic constitution *Veritatis gaudium* (2018).

Many other church leaders across denominations were actively involved in developing theological library associations and centers for the protection of religious heritage and documentation in their countries.<sup>2</sup> Some Catholic bishops' conferences, such as in Bosnia and Hercegovina (BK BiH 2019) and Croatia (HBK 2001), as well as the Church of England in the UK (Church of England n.d.) have issued guidelines for church libraries. In the Reformed Church in Hungary, there is a responsible body called ORGYT (Országos Református Gyűjteményi Tanács) and a network of clerical members responsible for the preservation of the Hungarian Reformed heritage.

## *Current Status*

It has been estimated that there are around 3,000 active theological libraries on the European continent today, with total holdings of around 100 million—often very valuable collections (Geuns 2000, 232). These libraries can be divided into two basic categories. The first are those that directly belong to and serve religious institutions (libraries of churches, mosques, and synagogues, religious orders, monastic and diocesan institutions, and ecclesiastical universities, seminaries, and faculties). The second are libraries oriented toward a wider public and not directly linked to any particular religious organization, such as libraries which are part of public universities, or information and documentation centers. According to Geuns (2000, 238), neither ecclesiastical nor secular theological libraries today have a majority on the European continent.

When it comes to state recognition, most of the laws on libraries in European countries do not mention theological, church, or religious libraries, except for the library laws of three German federal states<sup>3</sup> and Hungary.<sup>4</sup> They are also usually not included in the national library statistics or directories as a special category. Academic theological libraries are included in these directories as school or academic libraries, while those belonging to churches, mosques, and synagogues and their institutions (parish, diocesan, monastic) are usually ignored. But the most important religions and denominations in all European countries, e.g. Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox, Muslim, Protestant, are recognized as religions with everything they represent; thus, also libraries. Most European countries have agreements or conventions with various religious communities, such as concordats with the Holy See. In these agreements, the state usually promises to support the work of religious communities and their institutions by allocating a certain amount from the annual budget. Some countries, such as Italy, have special agreements only on archives and libraries (ABEI, n.d.). Although these types of agreements do not specify any fixed sums theological libraries can count on every year, their existence is very important because it confirms the interest of the state in supporting religious libraries and allows their participation in the local library community.

Generally, European theological libraries receive funding through the institution to which they belong (school, university, diocese, religious order). Many European academic theological libraries are part of the public university system and receive funding from the state budget. Where they are not part of the public system, they can always ask for support and apply for donations. Monastic, church, mosque, and synagogue libraries usually do not receive any direct funding from the state, unless they have significant historical value or are located in nice historical buildings. Then they receive government support for





Image 2: Archbishop's Diocesan and Cathedral Library in Cologne, Germany © [Pit Siebigs, Aachen] / Diözesan- und Dombibliothek Köln

preservation and restoration. In countries such as France, where there is a strict separation of church and state, theological libraries cannot receive funds as theological libraries; they have to be organizations outside of the church. However, sometimes a theological library can receive grants for a particular project for which a public library or an institution has an interest (conversion of catalogs, digitization of collections, etc.).

European theological libraries are more open today to work with each other. This trend has increased even more since the 1990s and computerization in the libraries. They are cooperating with national, professional, ecumenical, and denominational networks to make their collections visible. The majority of European countries have a national catalog and, within them, one can search for theological collections and resources mostly coming from theology faculty libraries. In addition, there are three joint catalogs of religious literature in Europe organized by theological library associations—VThK in Germany, UNITAS in Hungary, and FIDES in Poland—which also bring religious heritage from their smaller church libraries into the internet. Index Theologicus (IxTheo) is an international scientific open access bibliography for theology and religious studies maintained by the university library in Tübingen in cooperation with the

Protestant and Catholic faculty of the same university and supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG). With over two million titles, it is the largest free open source bibliography of theological publications in Europe. The same university library maintains another bibliography specifically for religious studies called RelBib. Records from IxTheo are included in the Global Digital Library on Theology and Ecumenism (GlobeTheoLib), as of 2019 integrated into [Globethics.net](#), a project of the World Council of Churches, which brings together resources on applied ethics, education, and religious studies from all over the world.

On a Christian denominational level, the libraries of the five Catholic universities in France—Paris, Lille, Lyon, Angers, and Toulouse—had built the portal Origène through their association (UDESCA), and the French Protestant libraries have been working in their union catalog Valdo. The rich heritage of Italian Catholic ecclesiastical libraries is made available through a cross portal, BeWeb. Monastic libraries have also joined forces to present their resources to the public. There are joint catalogs of Dominicans in Poland (<http://biblio.dominikanie.pl>), and Benedictines and Trappists in Flanders and the Netherlands (<http://www.monasteria.org/wabf>).

When it comes to non-Christian libraries, a large initiative has been taken by several Jewish libraries in France, which in 2004 launched their union catalog and network called Rachel, which has close to 200,000 bibliographic records and is integrated into major French union catalogs. Rachel aspires to become a Europe-wide consortium in the future and a key tool for bibliographic research in Jewish studies (Musnik 2014). Another important project related to Jewish heritage is Judaica Europeana, which is a network of archives, libraries, and museums from Europe, Israel, and the USA working together to integrate access to the most important collections of European Jewish heritage and make it available in Europeana (Winer 2014). To date, Judaica Europeana has integrated collections from 25 institutions in Europe, Israel, and the US. Among partner institutions are the most important Judaica collections in Europe, such as the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana of the University of Amsterdam, the Judaica Collection of the Frankfurt University Library, and the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. The Frankfurt Judaica Collection houses the most comprehensive historical collection of Jewish literature in Germany and is the responsible library for providing information services on Jewish studies (Fachinformationsdienst Jüdische Studien) on a German level. The library maintains a search portal ([Jewishstudies.de](#)) which gives central access to electronic and printed books and periodicals, as well as databases in the entire spectrum of Jewish and Israel Studies. Poland is also home to three catalogs and databases on Jewish studies. The first is called Centralna Biblioteka Judaistyczna [Central Jewish Library] and is a repository of digitized Judaica housed by the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute

in Warsaw and other archives in Poland. The other two projects are created and maintained by the Institute of Jewish Studies at Jagiellonian University. The first is called Judaica: Online Catalogue of the Materials on the History and Culture of the Polish Jews, and is concerned with Jewish history and culture listed in the inventories of Małopolska regional libraries and archives. The second is a database on Jewish self-government in Poland in the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> century. JudaicaLink is another European project which provides support to publish and interlink existing reference works of Jewish culture and history (encyclopedia, glossaries, and library catalogs) as linked data.

As for Islamic libraries in Europe, Germany is home to the MENALIB Virtual Library, which provides central access to the holdings, offerings, and services of the Specialized Information Service (FID) for Middle East-, North Africa- and Islamic Studies. As is the case with the IxTheo, RelBib, and [Judaica.de](http://Judaica.de) portals, MENALIB is also funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The portal has been maintained since 2016 by the University and State Library of Saxony-Anhalt in Halle. Many big and important German and European libraries and museums that possess Islamic collections contribute and partner with MENALIB. In the UK, Oxford and Cambridge University libraries have launched a free online catalog for Islamic manuscript descriptions called FIHRIST, which provides entries on Islamic manuscripts from all subject areas and of various geographical origins dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries now located in UK libraries. Cambridge University is also home to the Sunna Project, which aims to assemble the entirety of hadith literature and to prepare and publish definitive critical editions of every hadith collection. The Sunna Project is affiliated with the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre of Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge, and supported by the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation.

When it comes to Buddhist collections in Europe, the field is almost completely unresearched. The only research which can be found is on Buddhist libraries in the UK. Carlos Garcia-Jane (2015) identifies and describes 31 UK Buddhist libraries, most of which are monastic (11) and located in London and the surrounding areas. Most Buddhist libraries in the UK have between 2,000 and 4,000 books, with two holding over 15,000 items: Christmas Humphreys Memorial Library and the library of the Centre for Applied Buddhism.

## *European Theological Education and Libraries*

As was mentioned in the first chapter, the first European higher education institutions and their libraries were founded based on Islamic Houses of Wisdom and Christian monastery and cathedral schools of late antiquity and the early

Middle Ages. Universities, as a form of higher education, emerged from them during the Middle Ages (11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century), gradually expanding and moving out of the Christian community. Under the influence of the Enlightenment, the Napoleonic organization of states, and Humboldt's educational reform, modern research universities and colleges took shape at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and their founding and operation has since become fully governed by national higher education laws (Gallifa and Gassiot 2012). Many universities across Europe, and with them faculties of theology, became state property at that time, especially in those countries where the Napoleonic influence was important (Stewart 2001). With the growth of modern universities, the academy and higher education have been characterized since the 19<sup>th</sup> century by an ever-increasing deconfessionalization, professionalization, and specialization of study programs (Howard 2006, 11). Theology as a subject lost its medieval epithet as the "queen of sciences," and theological faculties their formerly exalted and privileged status in the academy. Many distinguished representatives of the Enlightenment thought at the time that theology had no place at the university (Howard 2006, 2-4). As a result, many dioceses, religious orders, and certain religious communities began, during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, to open new private colleges and universities across Europe for the purpose of renewing religious (Christian) higher education. For example, there are approximately 50 Catholic universities in Europe today, offering degrees in theology and other study disciplines.

Because of all these changes in the social and political environment and higher education system, the context in which European theological higher education institutions and their libraries are located and operating today is a very complex reality. To begin with, theological studies can be found in public universities as an academic discipline in its own right and also tied to a particular denomination—usually Catholic or Protestant. The first usually do not have any formal affiliation to any particular church and do not focus on ministerial training. This is the case, for instance, in many university departments in the UK, including the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. The second focus more on ministerial training and offer denominationally-bound degrees. Such is the case at many German and Scandinavian universities, as well as theological faculties in former communist countries which were again incorporated into public universities after the fall of their regimes. Next, there are studies in theology at private universities, colleges, and seminaries that are almost always founded by and affiliated with a particular religious community. Here belong all ecclesiastical, pontifical and Catholic universities, for example, as well as seminaries of different Protestant denominations. Lastly, there are also religious studies programs, which are offered sometimes in combination with theological studies or separately at both state and private universities.



Image 3: Maurits Sabbe Library of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium © [Erfgoedcel Leuven] / Maurits Sabbe Library

The *Global Directory of Theological Education Institutions* lists 1,288 institutions in Europe that offer theological education. The changes in the social environment, secularization, and decreasing numbers of students in the last 50 years, as well as changes in the higher education systems (such as the Bologna process and digitalization) have encouraged the centralization and fusion of theological colleges in Europe. In many (particularly Western) European countries, smaller seminaries were integrated into bigger faculties and universities. Although most theological faculty libraries belonging to public universities still have theological collections organized in special branch libraries, in some countries, at bigger universities, theological collections are now being further integrated into the main university libraries. This is particularly the case in Finland, which about ten years ago began a large initiative of merging independent higher education institutions, their libraries, and research centers into larger units, funded no more by the government but through foundations that would take charge of certain universities (Haavisto 2009, 5). In other parts of Europe integration of libraries has been mostly happening on a virtual level, where smaller independent seminaries and their theological libraries are joining the university digital networks.

The state of library collections in these schools varies, of course, from one state to another, and depends on whether they are part of a public or private university, which determines the level of financial support they can count on. Generally, those libraries within a college of a religious community are naturally focused on collecting material from their spiritual tradition, while public-sector libraries at universities, especially if they have religious studies programs attached to theology, are required to provide material from different spiritual traditions.

Access to electronic publications and digital databases is especially important for academic theological libraries nowadays. In Europe, libraries are using a variety of means to access these resources: individually or in cooperation with other libraries in the form of national or subject-specific consortia. Many European countries also have agencies that negotiate licenses on a national level.

In the context of legal deposit, there are certain libraries in some European countries that have been mandated to collect religious literature published in the country, as well as large parts of theological publications in native languages from other countries. Thus, in Germany, the area of religion was assigned to the library of the University of Tübingen, in France to the National Library in Strasbourg, in Poland to the Catholic University of Lublin, and in the United Kingdom to the library of the University of Oxford. This policy is still very useful as it significantly contributes to the possibility of making a wide selection of theological literature available to more users (Geuns 2000, 238).

Open access is another important topic in European academic and research libraries. More and more governments are supporting open access and requiring that state-funded research be made available in institutional and open repositories. Some countries, like the Netherlands, are planning to make all their scientific publications available through open access by 2024 (Blin 2017). Academic theological libraries in Europe support open access and are involved in the creation of many repositories, databases, and digital libraries, which they publish individually or in cooperation with their national theological library associations and societies. The most notable example is the IxTheo database from the university library in Tübingen, which also hosts some open journals.

## *Library Education Programs*

In Europe, as in most countries today, higher education (HE) is considered as a basic path for the education of librarians. Library and information science (LIS) study programs in Europe are part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which is the result of the Bologna Process—a series of ministerial



meetings, agreements, and reforms started in 1999 between European countries with the goal of ensuring comparability and compatibility in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications. HE programs in the EHEA are offered at three levels—undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral studies—which are usually referred to as the 'three-cycle system.'

Today there is a broad range of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs in LIS being offered across Europe (see Schniederjürgen 2007). According to Àngel Borrego (2015), there are 220 centers offering LIS education in 26 EU countries. Programs are offered at undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels, although there is a higher tendency to offer bachelor's degrees. Italy and France have the largest number of institutions offering LIS-related programs. Most LIS education institutions function as a unit or department within a specific host faculty or as a program within a particular department. Also, a growing trend has been observed for LIS academic institutions to transform themselves into iSchools (Horvat, Kajberg, Oguz, and Tammaro 2017, 7). As for the curriculum structure and orientation, Borrego concludes that there is no common European approach to LIS education. The number and disciplinary orientation of LIS-related centers vary widely from country to country.

There are two principal routes which one can take toward professional library qualification in Europe at the moment: an undergraduate LIS degree as the first route or a master's degree coupled with a first degree in some other discipline as the second route (Horvat, Kajberg, Oguz, and Tammaro 2017, 17). In some countries, like Germany, the second route is necessary if one wants to be employed at a higher grade of service (*höherer Dienst*). After finishing formal studies there is usually no certification or license procedure that needs to be passed. Having a degree is considered as a qualification. However, in some Central and Southern European countries, like Slovakia and Croatia, librarians need to pass a state exam at the end of their program in order to receive a formal qualification from the state and also compete for jobs in state-funded libraries.

Having a formal degree in library science is not mandatory to receive a job in a theological or any other library in Europe today. Library boards in religion-related institutions usually do not oblige candidates to have an LIS degree. Theological libraries mainly hire theologians to work in their libraries. Also, for certain departments, like acquisitions, special collections, or technical services, a degree in history or computing science may be more favorable than a degree in librarianship.

## Continuing Education and Professional Development Opportunities

In most European countries there is a wide palette of various continuing professional activities and programs on a national and provincial level targeted at all kinds of library workers and libraries. These programs are usually conducted by national libraries or national library associations, as well as specialized training centers and companies formed in cooperation with LIS schools and other related institutions.

When it comes to professional development opportunities specifically targeted for theological librarians in Europe, there are two continuing education programs, one in Germany and another in Italy, both intended for non-professional staff working in church libraries and organized by their national theological library associations. The program in Germany is organized by the Association of Ecclesiastical Libraries in the Evangelical Church (Verband kirchlich-wissenschaftlicher Bibliotheken–VkwB) and is divided into three modules: Basic course 1 and 2, and an Advanced course. The first two modules cover basic LIS topics such as formal and subject cataloging, information literacy and conservation, as well as public relations and the book trade. The advanced module offers more information about information literacy and copyright. The program is delivered in the form of one-week or 36-hour courses once a year at different locations in Germany and is available to all librarians regardless of confession. The second program in Italy is a new program started in October 2019. It is organized by the Italian Association of Ecclesiastical Libraries (ABEI) in cooperation with the Pontifical University Gregoriana and the National Office for Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage of the Italian Bishop's Conference (CEI). The program is divided into four modules: understanding the organization of the regional ecclesiastical network, protection and preservation, and back- and front-office library activities and tasks. It is delivered during a span of one year in the form of classes held at the Pontifical Gregorian University. Both associations have also organized introductory and advanced courses on the RDA cataloging rules.

Another training opportunity, where theological librarians can also participate, is organized by the Research Infrastructure on Religious Studies (ReIReS) project. ReIReS is an EU-funded project whose aim is to build a research infrastructure on religious studies by offering various research activities and transnational and virtual access to the most significant tools and sources in the field of religious studies. As part of its work, ReIReS offers six week-long schools on the use and study of special documents and also six three-day courses on digital humanities and historical religious studies at the project's partner institutions across Europe.



Other continuing education opportunities for theological librarians are usually combined with the annual conferences of theological library associations. Some associations and special committees within them, like in Germany (the *Altbestandskommission* of the AKThB and VkwB) and Hungary (the Hungarian Association of Ecclesiastical Libraries, or EKE), also organize special professional events and courses during the year where renowned speakers are invited to talk about topics related to general and theological librarianship. Sometimes these events are organized in cooperation with national library associations and other cultural and heritage institutions.

There are also two events for European monastic libraries. The first is a conference series called *Fachtage für Klosterkultur* (Professional Days for Monastic Culture) organized by the Abbey Library of St. Gall in Switzerland and the monastery and National Museum for Monastic Culture in Dalheim, Germany. The conferences take place at intervals of two years alternately in the Abbey of St. Gall and the monastery at Dalheim. The other event for monastic libraries is organized by the group of Benedictine and Trappist abbeys and various seminars in Flanders and the Netherlands called the *Werkgroep Abdij Bibliotheken* (WAB). Members of WAB use the same library systems, called BIDOC, and have annual events related to cataloging and working in this system.

On a European level, there is also an Erasmus+ exchange training program for staff. In this program, European librarians can spend a short time working in a library located in another European country and learn about their library practice and tradition. Theological librarians who work in institutions that are part of the Erasmus+ National Mobility Consortium can use this opportunity. Exchange programs for theological librarians have also been offered by the Maurits Sabbe Library in Leuven, Belgium. Also, many theological libraries around Europe frequently have guest students or library workers from Europe and all over the world visiting their libraries.

## *European Theological Library Associations*

The earliest attempt at forming an autonomous association of theological libraries in Europe took place in Germany in 1947, when the Association of Catholic Theological Libraries (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Katholisch-Theologischer Bibliotheken*, or AKThB) was founded. Soon after, similar associations of predominantly Catholic libraries were formed in other European countries (the UK, Netherlands, France, and Belgium) gradually growing into a federated body in 1961 called the International Committee for the Co-ordination of the Associations of Libraries of Catholic Theology (CIC). After the Second Vatican

Council, the CIC began to expand more into the ecumenical sphere and changed its name to the International Council of Theological Library Associations (*le Conseil international des associations de bibliothèques de théologie*). New statutes were adopted in a meeting held on 26 September 1973, and the association received royal approval in the Netherlands. In 1999, the Council, in order to emphasize the specifically European character of its activities, changed the name of the association into BETH: *Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie* / European Theological Libraries / *Europäische Bibliotheken für Theologie*.

## **BETH**

Today, BETH is an ecumenical federation of European national theological library societies based in the Netherlands. It brings together around 1,500 theological libraries across Europe with an estimated stock of more than 60 million volumes and an important collection of ancient manuscripts. Its purpose is to encourage the development and cooperation of theological and religious libraries on the European continent. The membership of BETH is divided into ordinary and extraordinary members. Ordinary members are different national theological library associations. Extraordinary members are individual theological libraries. Each year, BETH organizes a general assembly in one of the European countries on topics relevant to European theological librarianship.

## **Library Associations by Country**

In addition to BETH, there are a total of twenty theological library associations in Europe. Most of them (14) are represented in BETH as ordinary members.

As can be seen from the below table, some countries, like France, Germany, Italy, and the UK, have more than one theological library association. They are usually divided along denominational lines, but there are exceptions, such as in Italy with the ABEI and URBE. URBE is predominantly an association of ecclesiastical universities in Rome and the Vatican, while the ABEI is an association that represents mainly ecclesiastical libraries across Italy. Both associations share some of the same members.

Most of the European theological library associations are autonomous associations, with defined statutes and organizational structure. Some, like the Catholic associations in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Spain, are officially recognized by their national bishops' conferences.

The membership in most associations comes from various theological libraries in their own countries: academic, diocesan, monastic, etc. Some, such as the German AKThB, have members outside of their borders. The AKThB's members come from all the German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany, and Switzerland) but also from Italy, Luxembourg, Denmark, and Hungary.

Country	Association	Religious Affiliation	Year of Foundation
Belgium	Expertisehouders Levensbeschouwerlijke Collecties (VRB)	Mainly Roman Catholic, but open to all denominations	1965
Finland	Suomen teologinen kirjastoseura (STK)	/	2017
France	Association des Bibliothèques Chrétiennes de France (ABCF)	Mainly Roman Catholic, but open to all denominations	1957
	Rachel – Le Réseau des bibliothèques européennes judaïques et hébraïques (REBJH)	/	2004
	Réseau VALDO	Protestant	2008
Germany	Arbeitsgemeinschaft Katholisch-Theologischer Bibliotheken (AKThB)	Roman Catholic	1947
	Verband kirchlich-wissenschaftlicher Bibliotheken in der Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Archive und Bibliotheken in der evangelischen Kirche (VkwB)	Protestant	1936, 1980
Hungary	Egyházy Könyvtárak Egylete (EKE)	Ecumenical & Interreligious	1994
Italy	Associazione dei Bibliotecari Ecclesiastici Italiani (ABEI)	Roman Catholic	1978
	Unione Romana Biblioteche Ecclesiastiche (URBE)	Roman Catholic	1974
Netherlands	Vereniging voor het Theologisch Bibliothecariaat (VThB)	Ecumenical & Interreligious	1947
Norway	Forum for teologiske og religionsfaglige bibliotek (FTRB)	/	1972
Poland	Federacja Bibliotek Kokielnych „Fides” (FIDES)	Roman Catholic	1991
Spain	Asociación de Bibliotecarios de la Iglesia en España (ABIE)	Roman Catholic	1993
Switzerland	Verein der Bibliothekarinnen religionsbezogener Institutionen der Schweiz (BibRel.ch)	Ecumenical & Interreligious	2016
UK	Christian Librarian's Fellowship (CLIS)	Protestant	1973
	The Islamic Manuscript Association (TIMA)	/	2006
	European Association of Middle East Librarians (MELCom)	/	1967
UK & Ireland	Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries (ABTAPL)	Open to all types of theological and philosophical libraries	1956
	The Cathedral Archives, Libraries and Collections Association (CALCA)	Anglican	1975

Table 1: European Theological Library Associations by Country

## Projects and Activities

European theological library associations are involved in numerous projects and activities. The majority of them organize annual conferences, alone or together with other library associations in the country or across borders. For example, the two German associations—AKThB and VkwB—organize a joint conference every three years, as do the Flemish VRB and Dutch VThB every couple of years. Some associations, like the Italian ABEI, organize conferences often in cooperation with the Italian Library Association (ABI).

Also, almost all of the associations publish some type of publication: bulletin, newsletter, journal, yearbook, bibliographies, summaries of proceedings from conferences, and different monographs and booklets about the association or theological libraries in their countries. Some publications are published annually (e.g. *ABCF Bulletin*), others, like in the UK, Italy, and Hungary, three to four times a year. Most of them are non-peer-reviewed publications, except for the Polish *Fides. Biuletyn Bibliotek Kościelnych* [Bulletin of Church Libraries] and *The Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* by the Islamic Manuscript Association (TIMA). Poland is also home to the oldest European journal of church archives, libraries, and museums *Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne* [Ecclesiastical Archives, Libraries and Museums], which has been published continuously since 1959.

When it comes to the organization of different projects, German, Hungarian, and Polish associations are the most active. Two German associations have three joint committees (Old prints and manuscripts, Church academic libraries, Church document repository—Kidoks), an interlibrary borrowing program, and several joint databases, digital libraries, and repositories, including the meta catalog VThK. Hungarian EKE and Polish *Fides* are also involved in many projects, namely their joint catalogs UNITAS and *Fides*, as well as many specific repositories, digital libraries, and databases.

## IFLA SIG RELINDIAL

European theological library associations and libraries have also been involved in the creation of IFLA's special interest group Libraries in Dialogue (RELINDIAL) in 2012. RELINDIAL is a special group within IFLA which includes library associations, libraries, and research centers around the world that are involved in serving and fostering interfaith dialogue between cultures through a better knowledge of religions. The project was initiated in 2009 at the IFLA annual conference in Italy and carried on for the next eight years by Odile Dupont, president of BETH from 2007–2012. In the last seven years, RELINDIAL has published (by itself or in association) several publications that present examples of libraries and library tools serving interreligious dialogue around the world. It has also launched a successful project called Relindial Cartonera, the aim of



*Image 4: Members of BETH and the two German theological library associations, AKThB and VkwB, at their joint meeting in Heilsbronn in 2018. © [Susanne Hassen] / Evangelisches Sonntagsblatt aus Bayern*

which is to help people, notably children, of different origins to learn about one another's religion by creating a Cartonera book together. Many European librarians and library associations were and are still involved in the work of RELINDIAL. It is hoped that the important work which has begun will continue successfully in the future.

### *Challenges and Opportunities*

Since the onset of the digital era, the place and relevance of libraries as information providers in society has been generally challenged. In addition to some traditional and new challenges European libraries are facing at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as the reduction of funds because of successive economic crises and growing costs of electronic resources, digitalization, and digital transformation of science and copyright, there are some unique challenges affecting particularly theological libraries.

For academic theological libraries, the biggest problem is the decreasing number of students. The management of theological faculties is sometimes trying to cope with this trend by broadening the program offerings. In other places, faculties and programs are joined or integrated into other departments. All this

brings further demands and pressures on libraries, particularly with acquisition, collection development, and staffing. Because of the decreasing number of students, there is overall an increasing reluctance from state and secular agencies and charities to provide grants to religious libraries for resources and projects, and many national agencies or big national consortia are often not interested in subscribing to relevant databases for theological studies.

The second biggest challenge for academic theological libraries is the divide that exists between theological libraries and librarians working in big publicly-funded universities and those in smaller, private, church-funded seminaries. Smaller libraries cannot compete with bigger libraries in terms of providing access to all electronic resources. On the other hand, bigger university libraries are more and more losing subject librarians specializing in theology, or they are responsible for more subjects, such as philosophy or history. Their workflow is often much different from the librarians working in smaller and private theological libraries. This divide poses many challenges for future cooperation.

For church and monastic libraries, closure, restoration of rare books, digitization, and long-term preservation are some of the main challenges. This has been especially challenging for libraries in former socialist countries, whose old collections were neglected for decades in the former regime. Many libraries there dream now of restoring and digitizing their precious rare books and manuscripts and making them available to the world, but very often there are no funds to be found which would support these projects.

Diocesan and cathedral libraries, which are also becoming less and less rich, share many of the same challenges as the church and monastic libraries, but their biggest difficulty is often the lack of interest and understanding of bishops and other church leaders for the protection of the church's cultural heritage.

However, in spite of all the effects of secularization, religion is still one of the major issues and topics in Europe's public sphere. The topic is even more enhanced in the last ten years as Europe is experiencing another strong wave of immigration from countries with different ethnic, religious, and cultural systems. This rise in attention to religious themes in the general public and society is a great opportunity for theological and religious libraries to make themselves more present, visible, and accessible. Although Europeans may not be generally attracted to visit churches to participate in the liturgy nowadays, they are still attracted to the buildings and cultural heritage.



Image 5: Helsinki University Library with integrated collections in theology and religion.  
© [Veikko Somerpuro] / Helsinki University Library

As is the case with the popularization of churches in Europe, so it is with today's libraries. People are not primarily drawn to libraries to look for information anymore. Libraries are not their first choice; the internet is. Today, people come to the library most often for its programs or for a quiet place to work, alone or in study groups. In such a context, Simone Kortekaas (2019) advises that it is essential for all libraries to spread information about their holdings as broadly as possible, because if their records are not findable in Google and other search engines they won't be found. Similarly, if they are not available in a digitized way, they won't be read. Theological libraries need to make sure that, whatever library system they are using, the metadata is harvested by search engines. No library can rely anymore on the idea that people will come to their library website as a starting point for their research. In terms of digitization, if there is the possibility of digitization, theological libraries should digitize and give access to the full text. If they do not have enough budget for full digitization, they should at least describe their collections and make them findable for search engines. When it comes to collection development and acquisition, large university libraries are nowadays mostly buying big packages of electronic publications from important information providers and their collections are



more and more looking the same. There is still an important part of literature which is outside of these packages, and this is an opportunity for smaller theological libraries to focus on purchasing those titles that are not provided by the big theological schools. There are so many rare and unique documents theological libraries can offer to today's researchers, and this information needs to become as available as it is possible.

For all of this to happen, theological libraries need to work more closely together. The concept of integration and cooperation has become of vital importance for all types of libraries today. Although European theological libraries and associations are involved in many networking and cooperative projects at the moment, there is a lot more work to be done on the European, but also international, level. In many European countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, there is little cooperation between theological libraries because there are no library associations which would encourage it and advocate the interests of religious libraries in these countries. In Western and Northern Europe, there is often little cooperation between theological libraries belonging to large publicly-funded universities and smaller private seminary libraries (or even with one another). This weakens the whole branch of theological librarianship and its participation in today's culture. Therefore, it is essential that BETH and other European theological library associations and libraries actively engage themselves in unifying and fostering stronger cooperation between libraries regardless of their size and affiliation, as well as the type and nature of spiritual resources they are committed to protecting.

## *Notes*

1. Almost none for the Greek libraries, except the remains of the library at the Temple of Athena in Pergamum, which was also a famous royal, academic, and public library. One of the remains of Roman temple libraries is the Porticus Octaviae structure in Rome.
2. Many Catholic Bishops were instrumental in the founding of the Italian Association of Ecclesiastical Libraries–ABEL. In Belgium, Catholic bishops were included in the formation of the Center for Religious Art and Culture (CRKC) and the Documentation and Research Center for Religion, Culture and Society (KADOC).



3. Thüringer Bibliotheksrechtsgesetz § 1(6) (2008); Hessisches Bibliotheksgesetz. Wolters Kluwer Deutschland. § 3(1), § 5(1), § 8(4) (2010); Rheinland-Pfalz: Landesgesetz zum Erlass eines Bibliotheksgesetzes und zur Änderung und Aufhebung weiterer bibliotheksbezogenerer Vorschriften § 1(5) § 7(2) (2014).
4. Évi CXL. Törvény a muzeális intézményekről, a nyilvános könyvtári ellátásról és a közművelődésről. § 92(4) (1997).

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