

Introduction

JAMES ESTES, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, AND MYKA KENNEDY STEPHENS,
LANCASTER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Religion and theology librarians, those who work in theological libraries, and those who are subject specialists within larger academic libraries are at the nexus of two rapidly changing fields. One is the field of librarianship, which has been experiencing fast-paced change since the advent of the internet. The other is the field of theological education, which is undergoing a metamorphosis of sorts as religious affiliation patterns shift globally. Within a US and Christian context, the decline of mainline Protestant churches has reached a point that seminary graduates are more likely to find a part-time ministry placement than a full-time pastoral appointment. In 2017, nearly one-third of seminary graduates were preparing for bivocational ministry, blending secular and ecclesiastical employment (Deasy 2018, 69). While these fields have been in a state of rapid change for quite some time, global society has experienced a newer and more abrupt change within the last year. The completion of this volume coincides with a global pandemic of SARS-CoV-2, a novel coronavirus that triggers the deadly COVID-19 disease. For the editors in a US context, it also coincides with a particularly acute period of civil unrest and racialized violence across the United States.

Within this context and in recognition of Atla's 75th anniversary, it seems appropriate not to look back at where religion and theology librarians have been

and how we came to be at this milestone anniversary. Rather, we stand in the center of the whirling vortex of change around us and ask: What is happening here, at the intersection of the changing nature of librarianship and the changing nature of theological education? How do we continue to move forward with the forces of change in a way that strengthens and sustains this specialized field? Following generations of librarians before us, are there ways in which we can shift our stacks—reorient our thinking—to let go of outmoded and harmful tenets and make space for new wisdom and new discoveries?

A tremendous amount of change has occurred within the production life of this volume; more change than the editors could anticipate. The chapters included within this volume offer a glimpse into a vast web of emerging wisdom that continues to grow as religion and theology librarians grapple with social distancing, quarantines, and online modalities of librarianship. Consider it an invitation. *Shifting Stacks* invites ongoing consideration of a future that shifts and changes, seemingly with every collective breath. It seeks to facilitate conversation about these and other topics that may guide a reorientation of theological and religious studies librarianship that is adaptive and responsive to the changes in librarianship, theological education, and the broader global community.

Atla After 75 Years

In June 1947, a group of librarians and administrators met on the original campus of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary at First and Broadway in downtown Louisville to discuss shared concerns about the role of libraries in theological education. They brought to fruition the creation of a professional association for theological librarians a year in the making. The conference, authorized by the American Association of Theological Schools (the predecessor body of the Association of Theological Schools in North America, or ATS), drafted a proposed constitution for the American Theological Library Association with the stated purpose “to study the distinctive problems of theological seminary libraries, to increase the professional competence of the membership, and to improve the quality of library service to theological education” (“Proposed Constitution” 1947, 75). With this gathering of seminary librarians was born the American Theological Library Association, or Atla (formally rebranded in early 2019).

Shifting Stacks was envisioned to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Atla’s founding and sits in a lineage of earlier volumes: *The American Theological Library Association: Essays in Celebration of the First Fifty Years*, edited by M. Patrick Graham, Valerie R. Hotchkiss, and Kenneth E. Rowe—a festschrift of original essays published in 1996—and *A Broadening Conversation: Classic Readings in Theological*

Librarianship, edited by Melody Layton McMahon and David R. Stewart—a collection of noteworthy essays from the first sixty years of Atla’s history, published in 2006. This present volume celebrates 75 years of history, but it is not a chronicle of Atla’s deeds; rather, it examines the present situation of theological and religious studies librarianship and speaks to our future.

Theological librarianship sits at the intersection of theological education and librarianship, two dramatically changing areas of practice. Frank Yamada, executive director of the ATS, recently identified the current state of change in theological education noting the changing nature of diverse factors and their impact on theological education itself:

Personal anecdotes aside, there are data and pieces of evidence that demonstrate that my personal stories are rooted in deeper trends that have been at work within theological schools over the past twenty to thirty years: mergers; enrollment and financial challenges; the need for new educational models (including the role of digital technologies); the changing nature of faculty work; increased attention on student formation; and the changing nature of student demographics. The forces behind these winds of change come from both broader trends in higher education and the changing landscape of religion in North America. (Yamada 2020, 24)

As these factors have shaped and changed theological education, librarians wrestle with overlapping concerns: What is the role of information literacy (or even basic research) in “student formation”? How does the increasing cost of databases and other online resources weigh on a library’s often dwindling budget? With so much information available via the internet, do we need a library? How can libraries serve online courses or even fully online programs? Theological libraries are not immune to the broader issues that shape theological education, as any librarian can attest. These stressors are compounded by issues that shape academic librarianship at a higher level and include attention to new elements of library leadership and planning, including user experience (UX) design, open access (OA) and scholarly communications, social justice and critical librarianship, and the shared promise and challenge of emerging and constantly changing library technologies and systems.

With this in mind, the editorial board of Books@Atla Open Press issued a call for papers in early 2019. “What do theological librarians need to be ready for as we move forward in the 21st century?” we asked, inviting conversation on the changes underway in theological education, theological libraries, and the specialized field of religion and theology librarians. The topics we named were those that spoke to the current state of academic librarianship, such as collection development in a changing landscape, the impact of distance learning on higher education, the

emergence of open access, and so on. The present volume is representative of the responses to this invitation and, as the contents demonstrate, *Shifting Stacks* provides a selection of valuable and insightful responses to our invitation. At the same time, there are voices conspicuously absent from this conversation—discussions which the editors sought to cultivate but were unable to. While *Shifting Stacks* gives attention to conversations that are shaping how religion and theology librarians will live into the future of our profession, not every important conversation that has a bearing on our future is addressed herein, particularly with regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The editors hoped for more conversations about the reality of changing individual and institutional member demographics in an organization that is historically White, Protestant, and American. Conversations about Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) librarians in a profession historically marked and marred by racism; about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) librarians serving in historically discriminatory institutions; or about the perspectives of non-Christian professionals in a predominantly Christian member body are too often muted. The editors sought more explicit and honest conversations about diversity, equity, and exclusion/inclusion, but none were forthcoming.

A Shifting Future

As manuscripts started to arrive at the end of 2019, news was breaking of a mysterious new coronavirus in the Wuhan area in central China. As infections spread and deaths were recorded, the World Health Organization declared a global health emergency in January 2020 and, in February, named the virus COVID-19. On March 13, as we were editing the chapters for this volume, the United States declared a national emergency. Within a month, it was becoming clear in the United States what was already evident elsewhere: 2020 was swiftly becoming the most important and tumultuous year in living history under the onslaught of a global pandemic.

As the virus spread, emergency rooms and intensive care units were overflowing, and businesses, stores, schools, and cultural institutions sent employees to work from home—or began to lay them off. Various regional governments began to issue lockdown mandates. As of this writing, COVID-19 has claimed more than 610,200 lives and made more than 14.7 million people sick (Taylor 2020). The anxiety and uncertainty of life amidst a pandemic dominates the minds of many, often exacerbated by inconsistent and anemic responses from local, regional, and national authorities. Many businesses that closed temporarily have shuttered completely. Countless communications from businesses, vendors,

politicians, and community organizers sent to constituents as an attempt to ease fears often carried the same verbiage of compassion and commitment to the point of cliché. The ivory tower of academia was not immune. In March 2020, colleges and universities across the United States were forced to send students, faculty, and staff home, adapting face-to-face classes to online instruction, practically overnight. Bewildered and anxious students were at the mercy of equally bewildered and anxious faculty, most of them completely unprepared for a new crisis pedagogy. Staff and librarians struggled to help both. As the need for a socially distant pedagogy has not waned over the summer, administrators and faculties alike are attempting to discern the best course of action for the 2020–21 academic year.

Many of the ongoing concerns which seminary libraries have wrestled with and which are central to *Shifting Stacks* became, almost overnight, critical to the functioning of schools during a pandemic: the acquisition and use of electronic resources in teaching and research, the importance of open access resources for schools with fragile budgets, the challenges of teaching and serving an online educational environment. As administrations struggle to make decisions about phased reopening of operations in the 2020–21 academic year—often with minimal faculty or staff input, per reports on social media and elsewhere—libraries have to make significant adaptations in their operations and programming in order to serve an educational community reshaped overnight by an epidemiological crisis. Many of the topics that this volume sought to address were no longer merely theoretical issues; they became hot spots in the new educational landscape. The editors believe that this volume offers meaningful and important contributions to this conversation, while also acknowledging that the urgency of the novel coronavirus pandemic and its impact on higher education and academic libraries calls for material far more reflective of the new educational landscape.

The tumult of 2020 was not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic. The ongoing pandemic of racism reached a crisis peak during this time as well. On May 25, 2020, an unarmed and incapacitated Black man named George Floyd was killed by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The video recording of the event, one in a long series of unjust and senseless African American deaths, sparked a period of civil unrest and protests not seen in recent memory. The Black Lives Matter movement and its allies cried for social justice while protesters took to the streets with the message, “I can’t breathe,” and calls for reform and reparations. Police brutality and systemic institutional racism, which once hovered in our periphery, now commanded our attention. Universities, alongside academic and library organizations, issued statements condemning racism. Racial and ethnic groups within professional organizations, like the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, led the charge, which entire professional associations followed, like the Association of

College and Research Libraries and the American Library Association. A few grassroots statements emerged as well, from librarians moved to show solidarity and speak out against systemic racism that is pervasive in our institutions and collections. These statements embody our starting point as a profession and the need for focused efforts to dismantle White privilege and address systemic racism in both libraries and academia.

This is the cultural and social context of this volume's publication. Thus, the major concerns around diversity, equity, and inclusion identified earlier as a significant lacuna in this volume's contents are even more telling. We, as White editors, are fully aware of and lament the lack of dedicated BIPOC perspectives in this volume. We are also aware of the disproportionately large contribution from male voices in this volume compared to the percentages of men and women in Atla's membership (Bailey-Hainer 2017). Although we actively sought additional contributions from BIPOC and women librarians, the fact that we were unable to gather these contributions are a worrying sign of larger systemic issues and inequities within our profession.

A Call to Conversation

The major markers of 2020 (as of this writing)—pandemic and civil unrest—suggest more urgent realities of academic librarianship that demand further attention. Conversations in both librarianship and theological education are developing as we grapple with the current moment, emergent questions, and new discoveries. In addition to the topics covered in this volume, we invite readers to consider the following: What are the conversations that need to take place in our specialized industry, either as new areas of research or critical inquiry, particularly given the ongoing changes in higher education and libraries? How will we follow our conversations, statements, and reports with the hard work of response, reform, and action? We cannot deny that the nature of our profession as librarians in theological education and supporting religious studies degree programs is shifting dramatically and rapidly. It is not unreasonable to expect that additional shifts will continue as we live into an uncertain future. While the threat of COVID-19 has changed the ways in which we interact with one another and carry out the work of librarianship, the persistence of racism demands that we look carefully at the systems in which we participate and seek justice, reparation, and true reconciliation.

This volume's call for papers, issued in early 2019, mentioned several emerging topics that are not touched upon in the contributions we received. Upon review, there are several topics on that list that are highly relevant to the present reality.

There is a tremendous need for more study and reflection on these and other issues to strengthen theological and religious studies librarianship for an uncertain future filled with change. Therefore, we take this opportunity to re-issue a call for conversation on these topics, particularly issues linked to identity, online modalities, library assessment, and systemic racism and prejudice.

Before we can move our field forward, it is important that we define, or perhaps redefine, our identity. The first group of librarians who gathered in 1947 to create the organization that became Atla called themselves theological librarians. The adjective “theological” strictly means relating to the study of theology, though our field now includes librarians in a broader range of contexts. The chapters in this volume refer to theological librarians and theological librarianship, as well as religion and theology librarians and theological and religious studies librarianship. For some in our association, identity as a theological librarian relates to a sense of call and/or recognition of library work as ministry by an ecclesial body (Keck 1996; Stephens 2007). For others, it does not. Atla launched a new brand identity with the tagline, “collectors & connectors in religion and theology” as a reflection of the organization’s vision and strategic plan (Bartholomew 2019). While the legal name did not change, the new brand effectively and strategically minimized three terms that members had long bore as defining marks, appropriately for some and inappropriately for others: American, theological, and library. Following this shift in association identity, it may also be time to reconsider the terms theological librarian and theological librarianship when referring to the identity of Atla members and their work.

As libraries are linked to their institutions of learning, we must consider the impact of distance learning and online classes. Given that many librarians are now supporting students in online classes, we are experiencing *en masse* the challenges and opportunities of this modality of teaching and learning. It is undeniable that, as library services have also shifted to an online environment, our understanding of information literacy and information literacy instruction is also changing. It has become even more vital to stay abreast of current research in religion, theology, theological education, and academic librarianship. How does one do this on top of working full days, perhaps from home with distractions of family and pets, in an understaffed and underfunded institutional setting?

Library assessment practices may also need to be reevaluated as pandemic reality becomes a new normal. Suddenly print circulation statistics cannot accurately reflect the inherent value and importance of a library’s collection to its patrons. Electronic resources are becoming more crucial for online courses and students sheltering-in-place away from campus, but the statistical standards for evaluating use of these resources are changing, too, as COUNTER4 makes way for COUNTER5. Furthermore, the rapid pace of change and uncertainties that

accompany life in a pandemic make long-range planning difficult. How do librarians assess collections and services when these span physical and virtual spaces? How can libraries and librarians plan for inevitable yet unknown change? Are there strategies our libraries and institutions may employ that will cultivate an adaptive culture of responsiveness, rather than a reactive culture of chaos or, worse still, a stagnant culture that becomes quickly outmoded and irrelevant?

The demography of librarians in our association is shifting, slowly, away from predominately White, Protestant, heterosexual men and women. It is essential that we recognize this and act on it. How might Atla encourage membership growth among underrepresented populations? What systemic issues hinder our progress for a more equitable distribution of power and privilege in our field? A necessary starting point may be to center diversity, equity, and inclusion so that empowering BIPOC, LGBTQ, and religious minority voices becomes a focus of our conferences and publications, rather than token contributions from the margins. There is much work that needs to be done within our libraries, our institutions, and within Atla to simply begin addressing systemic racism and prejudice, much less dismantle it entirely.

These issues and questions are essential to consider if our profession is to move forward into the future in a strong and sustainable way. There are many avenues available for those who feel inspired to speak or write about any of these issues or other emergent topics that are not named here. The Atla journal, *Theological Librarianship*, is one venue for articles and essays. Those seeking an opportunity to speak might consider submitting a session proposal for a future Atla Annual. These topics would also make an excellent book proposal for a scholarly edition by Books@Atla Open Press. Please consider this an open invitation to submit your ideas, reflections, research, and more to one of these venues.

The Conversations in this Volume

What do theological librarians need to be ready for as we move forward in the twenty-first century? What is happening at the intersection of these two trajectories: the changing nature of theological education and the changing nature of theological librarianship? These are the questions the editors posed to the Atla community, and we received diverse responses from across the field. The conversations that we have included in this volume are indicative of the issues and concerns relevant to the future of religion and theology libraries—although they may have more urgency now than when they were written, given the impact of COVID-19 on finances and operations of religion and theology libraries and their home institutions. As librarianship itself is a continuously changing field of practice,

the editors offer the essays herein as important participants in an ongoing conversation—but not as the final word or only voice that matters. Rather, they are an invitation to further inquiry and continued dialogue.

For many Atla members, theological librarianship is fundamentally connected to the formational goals and purpose of theological education itself. Christopher A. Rogers, in “A Holistic Model of Engagement,” offers a reflection on theological education in terms of transformational theological literacy: how does theological education formatively engage with a seminary student’s vocational commitment? How can that seminarian engage critically and authentically with their religious tradition throughout their faith formation? Throughout his reflection, Rogers examines the pedagogical purpose of theological education and reflects on how the seminary library can be a meaningful and deliberative partner in this process of formation.

One of the most important developments in scholarly communications is the emergence of open access as a means of disseminating and accessing new research outside the economic barriers posed by traditional scholarly publishing. In “Foundations for an Open Access Policy,” Andrew Keck identifies precedents in the distribution of religious literature in early Jewish and Christian history and addresses the scholarly imperative of promoting knowledge as foundational supports for a theological library’s support for open access. He provides strategies for identifying challenges and engaging with key players to provide support for the development of an institutional repository and transforming the theological library from an information consumer to a knowledge producer.

While librarianship continuously develops and deploys technological innovations, some theology librarians may feel unprepared to follow these trajectories. In “Embracing the Future of Digital Libraries within Theological Libraries,” Paul A. Tiptey considers important advances in digital library collections, and suggests technical, economic, legal, and social barriers that must be addressed as theological libraries redefine themselves in light of these advances. Tiptey discusses how these barriers have been shaped and considers factors that must be addressed so that theological libraries are better equipped to move intentionally into an increasingly digital future.

Digital humanities—broadly seen as the application of computational tools and methods to the humanities disciplines—allows for new ways of analyzing and interpreting texts and corpora. In “Topic Modeling as a Tool for Resource Discovery,” Shawn Goodwin and Evan Kuehn introduce us to topic modelling as one important digital humanities tool for examining texts and identifying research-relevant patterns. They walk readers through a project that analyzes a body of texts from migration studies and public theology, in order to better understand the

process and use of topic modeling for theological research in emerging fields of study.

Collection development is not a new discipline, but librarians continuously refine its practice and develop new approaches to growing a library collection. In “Current Trends in Religious Studies and Theology Collection Development,” Megan E. Welsh and Alexander Luis Odcino closely examine both traditional and emerging practices through a study of professional literature and survey response data. Their survey of collection development librarians at seminaries and other research libraries reveals a wide array of collection development activities and anxieties, in light of patron needs and institutional context, emerging digital resources, and the challenge of declining budgets, ultimately supporting the need for flexible and adaptive collection development strategies.

Librarian conversations about the future of libraries and collections are generally oriented toward growth and transformation, or at least survival in precarious times. In “Giving Libraries Their Due,” Stephen D. Crocco addresses a much different aspect of the future of theological libraries and their collections. We cannot ignore the fact that several theological schools are closing or merging, oftentimes transitioning their libraries into a new existence either as a collection embedded in another library or dismantled and disbursed. Using the metaphor of organ donation and transplant and drawing on his experience with embedding the Andover Newton Theological School’s library collections into Yale Divinity School, Crocco makes a case for a considered and ethical process during these types of library transitions.

Atla is historically situated in North America, but it has long-established relationships with colleagues across the globe. In “Atla Down Under,” Kerrie Stevens and Siong Ng share the history of the Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association (ANZTLA) and the collegial relationship that that association and its members have formed with Atla and Atla members. While this global perspective from Oceania cannot speak for perspectives from other parts of the world, this chapter does highlight the growing opportunities for collaboration and the exchange of ideas across nations and cultures. Stevens and Ng show that the experiences of religion and theology librarians in the United States and Canada are shared by our counterparts in Australia and New Zealand. There is a global future for our field. When we embrace resource sharing and cooperation on a global scale, there will be no limit to what we are able to innovate among our libraries.

This volume concludes with a reflective and inspiring chapter by Carisse Mickey Berryhill. Known among the most recent members of our guild as the professor of LIS 568 LE: Theological Librarianship at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign’s iSchool, Berryhill reflects on her coming of age in the field

and how our profession may weather the inevitable changes ahead. Drawing on biblical wisdom and the history of transition and change faced by our predecessors in this field, and directing her words toward the clear anxieties of 2020, Berryhill encourages us to stay connected with one another and find strength in our commitments to stewardship, service, and wisdom.

We humbly offer this collection of wisdom as an overture to a much larger and deeper conversation about the future of our field. Amidst a global pandemic, faced with unfathomable uncertainty, there is opportunity. It is a chance to look more deeply into ourselves, more deeply into our work as religion and theology librarians, more deeply into the systems we construct, support, and participate in, and to find openings for embracing change. This kind of conversation is essential not just to survive, but for theology and religious studies librarianship to thrive as the twenty-first century progresses.

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