

Introduction

MEGAN E. WELSH AND IAN BURKE

When we think back to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we recall the scarcity of some basic resources (who knew toilet paper would be such a desired commodity!); we remember the uncertainty of how to contract and, therefore, avoid the new, deadly virus; we reflect on the privilege of being able to work from home; and we think about the concern we embodied as we faced a future with questions about when we may see loved ones again, and what we would do if we became sick. Feelings and experiences shifted throughout the pandemic where community, often-times over virtual platforms, interrupted isolation, and hope for a “post-pandemic” future disrupted fear and anxiety. While some common themes permeated our shared experience as we lived through this collective trauma, each individual experience was unique and, ultimately, our professional experiences of the pandemic varied just as much as our personal ones.

Our aim in this volume is to personalize the pandemic by curating chapters that describe the experiences and practices of theological and religious studies librarians during the first few years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the chapters in this book begin by bringing us back to March 2020, when COVID-19 began to impact Europe and North America, leading to restrictions in travel, imposed isolation, and closed library doors, all in an attempt to contain a new virus sweeping the globe. Like the chapter authors, we want you to recall the time when the pandemic began to deeply impact your life. Take a moment to consider how much you have learned, how you have grown, and what you have experienced since then. We want you to look towards the future while acknowledging that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and its immediate aftermath will reverberate through each of us, our libraries, and the field of librarianship in the decades to come.

As Patrick Milas states in his chapter, “Library Leadership in the Long Lockdown & Beyond”: “People take different amounts of time to process unprecedented and potentially traumatic information and events” (254). This book is published four years after many of our libraries closed and our lives shifted, and we are all still processing. We are still grappling with the pandemic’s impacts and how we live in a world forever changed by the danger of disease. The COVID-19 pandemic was not something that only affected theological and religious studies librarians. This was a time of great uncertainty and change, both within the theological and religious studies library community and around the world. We hope that this volume will be a source of inspiration detailing how the field of theological and religious studies librarianship navigated adversity with creativity and perseverance, and also as an aid to researchers seeking to understand how this particular professional community addressed the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Libraries within the Context of the Pandemic

As this volume is centered on a particular moment in recent history, we understand that further context regarding the history of the COVID-19 pandemic (and the various responses to it within the library profession) may be useful, particularly for readers for whom the experience is not a recent memory. Even at the time of writing, it can be difficult to recall the social distancing protocols from early

2020, or more recent masking requirements in public places and healthcare facilities. The goal of this section is to present a short history of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to discuss the roles of libraries within this broader context.

The disease now known as COVID-19 (an abbreviation for “Coronavirus Disease 2019”) was first identified in Wuhan, China in November 2019 as a “pneumonia of unknown cause” (Ghebreyesus 2023). On January 9, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that Chinese authorities had determined that the outbreak was caused by a novel coronavirus; on January 11, the first death from the virus was reported in Chinese media; on January 13, Thai health officials reported the first lab-confirmed instance of the viral infection outside of China. The first several months of 2020 saw a steady flow of news and public statements about the coronavirus as regional, national, and international public health groups worked to assess the severity and intensity of the new disease, which was declared a global pandemic in March 2020 (World Health Organization 2021). In the United States, the pandemic was declared a nationwide emergency on March 23. Many urban centers saw a spike in cases and deaths in April 2020, with New York City being particularly impacted (later analysis showed a 19% increase in mortality in 2019-2020 compared to previous years; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2023). To slow the spread of the then-unfamiliar disease, new restrictions on travel and socializing were put in place. Supply chain disruptions were common, both within the healthcare industry and in consumer settings. Unemployment spiked in 2020 as travel, entertainment, and other industries curtailed operations, while others could not work due to illness. While variants of the illness continued to cause major outbreaks, 2021 also saw rapid development and deployment of vaccines against the virus. Although vaccination campaigns faced vocal opposition from some parts of the population, the deployment of vaccines is credited with reducing the rate of hospitalization and deaths from COVID-19 during the “Delta” and “Omicron” variant outbreaks in 2021 and 2022 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2023). Following a period of reduced outbreak severity and growing confidence in treatment options, the WHO Director-General declared an end to the pandemic as a “global health emergency” in May 2023, while stressing that the disease and its variants remained an ongoing threat and that the disease had “laid bare the searing inequalities of our world,” with access to treatment continuing to be a struggle for poor communities (Ghebreyesus 2023).

The library community's early response to these stresses were noted in surveys conducted in March and May 2020 by the American Library Association and partner organizations such as the Public Library Association. Responding to the March survey, 98% of public libraries reported closing their facilities to the public, in line with state shelter-in-place orders. Most respondents also reported an increase in online services as well as difficulties handling the staffing changes implied by a shift away from physical services (American Library Association 2020a). This survey also mentioned a number of steps taken by libraries to help support their communities during the early pandemic, including expanding access to digital services, coordinating distribution of emergency supplies, and using makerspace equipment to create medical supplies such as face shields (American Library Association 2020a). A smaller-scale survey of the initial response to pandemic conditions from academic libraries was conducted by Hinchliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg (2020) and reported a rapid move to online classes and limitations to accessing academic library facilities.

A May 2020 survey included responses from academic and K-12 libraries, as well as public libraries. The majority of responding libraries of all types reported some level of budget decrease, particularly with regard to payroll and costs associated with maintaining print materials. In this survey, reopening facilities to the public was also discussed. Although there was no consensus on reopening strategies, common themes from plans to reopen included enhanced cleaning guidelines, material quarantine, and responsiveness to local conditions (American Library Association 2020b).

In 2021, along with James Estes, we conducted a series of surveys and interviews focused on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic within the theological and religious studies library community, and centering the experiences of library deans and directors. The results of our research were summarized in the April 2021 issue of *Theological Librarianship* (Welsh, Burke, & Estes 2021). This study built on prior work recording the initial library response to the pandemic, such as those mentioned above as well as resources and experiences discussed among Atla members (Atla 2020a; Atla 2020b). The responses to our research, conducted while many social distancing policies were still in place in the United States, described broad trends related to supporting remote work and learning. A significant minority of respondents to the survey also mentioned financial stresses and staffing changes catalyzed by the closure of campus facilities as higher education institutions sought to mitigate the risk of viral contagion. This research confirmed trends identified

in broader surveys of the US library community while highlighting the unique stressors library administrators in theological library settings faced at the onset of the pandemic.

Now, just four years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, some shifts—such as hybrid and remote work policies—have become normalized, while other changes implemented during the pandemic’s early stages—such as quarantine and disinfection of physical material or mandatory facemask protocols—have fallen away. Recording and memorializing this recent period of change could be of use to librarians and historians in the future; the 1918 influenza pandemic also led to a variety of library responses, ranging from facility closures, to book disinfection protocols, to the experience of supporting staff at increased risk of illness (Skinner, 2012). However, research on libraries’ responses to the 1918 pandemic is complicated due to the lack of primary source documentation outside of meeting minutes and personal diaries. While we sincerely hope that readers of this work do not have to deal with another pandemic in the future, we also hope that they might use this volume to gain some understanding of the experience of the authors and their institutions.

It is important for us to remember that the pandemic was not an isolated social phenomenon, especially in North America. It highlighted economic issues with disruptions to global supply chains, disparities between types of work (essential vs. non-essential), and pay inequities, especially faced by those who could not afford to work from home or were mandated by the nature of their job to work on site. In the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement rose in prominence once again as the world bore witness to the murder of George Floyd, a Black man killed during a police arrest in May 2020, and to the deaths of many other victims of excessive police force. Civil unrest, including fears about the health of democracy, and racial justice were as important concerns as the pandemic with which they coincided. The communities in which religious studies and theological librarians live are still wrestling with these issues four years later.

Chapters in Context

Topics discussed in this volume range in format, content, and presentation. Some chapters emphasize original research while others highlight personal reflections. Throughout the book you will also see

original watercolor paintings by Hannie Riley (please see Hannie's artist statement just after this introduction). We have grouped chapters thematically on the topics of: adjusting to pandemic life, employing pastoral care strategies and supporting students in a library context, understanding the unique impact of the pandemic on special collections and archives, discussing changing technology, and employing adaptive management practices.

Adjusting to Pandemic Life

Michelle Spomer crafted her chapter, "Looking Back: Glimpses of the Pandemic," with words and images sourced from members of Atla, a professional organization composed of religious studies and theological librarians. It serves as a reminder of early pandemic experiences to which many of us can relate, and functions as an excellent introduction to the content that follows throughout this volume. Expanding upon these experiences, Evelyn Frangakis, Jenifer Gundry, and Jeremy Wallace describe how the pandemic impacted and related to their specific theological library context with their chapter, "The Pandemic as Chrysalis: How the Library at Princeton Theological Seminary Emerged with a New Identity." This chapter provides the reader with a clear timeline of one library's attempt to cope with the pandemic and adjust to shifting priorities. In a time of such uncertainty and change, Robert Burgess offers a narrative of transition as he moved to a new role at a new institution in a new state. As he explains in his chapter, "Stranger in a Strange Land in a Strange Time," the pandemic directly impacted the trajectory of his career, and offered a surprising opportunity for growth and re-definition. Burgess also touches on changes to core library services and adjustments to outreach and library programming meant to engage patrons, especially students, during this difficult time.

Pastoral Care & Student Support

The pandemic afforded librarians an opportunity to reconsider how they care for patrons, colleagues, and themselves. This section discusses notions of care and how we can act on concern for those around us. Deanna Roberts and Jude Morrissey describe how they apply pastoral care specifically to their supervision of library student

employees in their chapter “Re-Visioning Student Staff Management Through a Pastoral Care Lens.” Discussing the impacts of the pandemic on students, Victoria Tsonos and Marta Samokishyn explore the lived experiences of students at their institution and offer recommendations grounded in sentiments of care and with consideration of the nuance and complexity of students’ lives. The chapters in this section remind us of our shared humanity and how we can harness kindness to connect with one another even during our most challenging moments.

Special Collections & Archives

While the pandemic impacted all aspects of library functioning, special collections and archives were uniquely affected. Based strongly in print primary sources and historic artifacts, special collections and archives personnel had to reinvent ways to engage their patrons while also considering how to best document the pandemic for posterity. Brian Shetler describes his experience as someone responsible for managing personnel and these distinct collections across two different institutions in his chapter, “The Changing Realities of Special Collections and Archives: Facing the Future with Confidence and Confusion.” In their chapter, “COVID-19 Web Archives: Evolving Catholic and Marian Devotional Practices,” Kayla Harris and Stephanie Shreffler share how they leveraged their expertise with archives and embraced technology in a remote work environment to capture digital artifacts representing the U. S. Catholic response to the pandemic and the increased devotion to the Virgin Mary that emerged.

Technology in Transition

While technology is ever-evolving, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital platforms, normalized the use of certain technologies, and legitimized online learning in higher education in a way we previously had not experienced. The tremendous growth of and opportunities provided by digital tools is evident in Hannie Riley’s chapter, “Equipping Myself: From the Old Normal to the ‘New Normal’.” Riley simultaneously acknowledged the stress and isolation of the pandemic while also viewing it as a time to engage in

self-directed learning and to integrate technology and digital tools into her practice of librarianship. In their chapter, “Panic, Pivot, Plan: Pandemic Course Material Management,” Elizabeth Miller and Caitlin Soma remind us “[t]here were still no library emergencies... but now the whole world felt like an emergency” (196). They describe the abrupt changes to workflows that accompanied the necessary shift to e-resources and the challenges of confronting “vocational awe” (Ettarh 2018) throughout their efforts to continue to provide access to library materials, both at the very beginning of the pandemic and as their institution transitioned back to more in-person activities. Benjamin Dueck further describes advancements in technology and the opportunities afforded by technological access, especially through the digitization of important and early primary source materials, in his chapter, “Spiritual Resonance in a Virtual Age: Reflecting on the Limitations that Digitized Primary Resources Pose for Theological and Religious Studies Communities.” Yet, Dueck also carefully considers how we interact with and internalize digital items, reminding us that engagement mediated by technology is distinct from consuming media in their original forms.

Management & Leadership

“Transformational leadership” and “change management” were prevalent buzzwords even before library administrators faced the challenges of leading through sudden disruption within higher education. Bobby Smiley describes the challenges he faced as an interim and then permanent library director, while detailing how the emergency pandemic situation influenced his managerial and leadership practices beyond the initial sense of urgency. Drawing on his own “lessons learned,” Smiley’s chapter, “Meditations in an Emergency,” ultimately encourages the reader to consider what good leadership looks like. We end this section and the entire volume with another chapter on leadership, “Library Leadership in the Long Lockdown & Beyond,” by Patrick Milas. Milas infuses this chapter with anecdotes that relate how the pandemic impacted his professional role as a library director and his personal experience, especially as a caregiver. Weaving these aspects of his lived experiences together, Milas offers us a glimpse into managing a seminary library through many changes, all while reminding us of the humbling experience of the early days of the pandemic.

Looking to the Past to Look Toward the Future

In 2020, we, the editors of this volume, met in person twice: once in February before the pandemic was declared an emergency and a second time in October. During the first meeting, we recall discussing the potential concerns about medical supplies, and whether wearing a facemask on flights might be prudent. While we had a level of concern about the looming threat of COVID-19, the meeting was not significantly different from any other throughout the many years that we have been friends and colleagues. In October 2020, we cautiously gathered for a picnic lunch outside of Megan’s house rather than meeting indoors. Ian had just flown to Colorado from the East Coast and wore a double-layered mask on the flight. Megan introduced Ian to her “pandemic puppy.” We ate and waved our goodbyes across more than six feet of socially distanced space, conscious of the wind direction and thinking about how once we would have hugged goodbye. Now writing in summer 2023, although variants of COVID-19 continue to be concerning, we welcome the present-day opportunities of traveling, eating in restaurants, and hugging once again. We hope that this book offers a warm embrace to you as you remember your own personal and professional experiences of the pandemic, and we hope it offers researchers in years to come a glimpse of how we persevered during an uncertain time.

References

- American Library Association. 2020a. “Public Libraries Respond to COVID-19” June 3, 2020. https://www.ala.org/pla/sites/ala.org/pla/files/content/advocacy/covid-19/PLA-Libraries-Respond-Survey-Aggregate-Results_FINAL2.pdf
- American Library Association. 2020b. “Moving Forward: Key Findings from New Libraries’ COVID-19 Response Survey.” https://www.ala.org/pla/sites/ala.org/pla/files/content/advocacy/covid-19/COVID_Survey_Results_2_Reopening_and_Financial_Details.pdf

- Atla. 2020a. "Information for Libraries in the Wake of COVID-19 – Supporting Online Courses and Other Resources." Atla (blog), March 13, 2020. www.atla.com/blog/supporting-online-courses-and-other-resources/
- Atla. 2020b. "Colloquial Conversation: A Month into a New School Year with COVID-19 Precautions." vimeo.com/464329604.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2023. "CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline." Last modified March 15, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html>
- Ettarh, Fobazi. 2018. "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves." In the Library with the Lead Pipe, accessed August 21, 2023. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.
- Ghebreyesus, Tedros Adhanom. 2023. "WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing – 5 May 2023." Last modified May 5, 2023. <https://www.who.int/news-room/speeches/item/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing---5-may-2023>
- Hinchliffe, Lisa Janicke, and Christine Wolff-Eisenberg. 2020. "First This, Now That: A Look at 10-Day Trends in Academic Library Response to COVID19" March 24, 2020. Ithaka S =R (blog). <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/first-this-now-that-a-look-at-10-day-trends-in-academic-library-response-to-covid19>.
- Skinner, Julia C. 2012. "Returned, then Burnt: Iowa Libraries, Contagion, and the 1918 Influenza Pandemic." *The Graduate History Review* 4, no. 1: 43-53.
- Welsh, Megan E., Ian Burke, and James Estes. 2021. "Uncertainty and Resilience: Experiences at Theological Libraries During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Theological Librarianship*, 14 no. 1: 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.31046/tl.v14i1.2729>.
- World Health Association. 2021. "Listings of WHO's response to COVID-19." Last modified January 29, 2021. <https://www.who.int/news/item/29-06-2020-covidtimeline>