

Theological library role changes due to COVID-19

By KELLY CAMPBELL

This spring, as the world began to grapple with the global COVID-19 pandemic, theological institutions and by extension theological librarians and libraries started to make a paradigm shift in their delivery systems. While some institutions were surprised by the changes needed and not well prepared to make such a dramatic shift, global theological libraries and librarians were—dare I say it—excited for this opportunity to demonstrate their value and skills.



Historically, theological librarians and libraries have been mainly considered (and, in some cases, still are) a support for the institution or financially necessary to fill a service within the institutional structure; however, theological librarians have viewed their professional calling and responsibility quite differently for some time. The global COVID-19 pandemic has allowed theological librarians and libraries worldwide to advocate for change in many theological institutions' perceptions and perceived values of theological libraries and librarians.

Changing role of the library in COVID-19

In 2018, the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) created the International Theological Librarian Education Taskforce (ITLET) to focus on global awareness and on the engagement and education of international theological librarians. The taskforce was a formal development and the result of several years of informal conversations between various global theological library associations. The global theological library associations involved include Bibliothèques Europeennes de

Theologie (BETH), Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association (ANZTLA), and ATLA. The taskforce membership includes theological librarians from ten different countries. ITLET's charge is "to strengthen and connect theological and religious studies librarians worldwide by identifying resources, creating educational opportunities, and developing skill enhancement materials through collaboration efforts." ITLET's charge is similar to the ATS Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative's commitments, values, and strategic directions.¹

ITLET meets on a bimonthly basis, with the meetings covering nine different time zones. In a recent meeting, theological librarians from around the world reported on how their institutions are turning to the library in the time of COVID-19. As each taskforce member reported on his or her institution's response to COVID-19, similar themes emerged from librarians across the globe. This new shared reality was that the library has become a focal point, not just as an educational resource but also an institutional/infrastructural resource and partner.

¹ <https://www.ats.edu/resources/current-initiatives/global-awareness-and-engagement-initiative>

In this time of global unknowns, theological libraries and theological librarians have risen to the challenge of pivoting to online teaching.

During this dramatic pivot to online education, theological faculty and students in Australia suddenly discovered electronic library collections that had been developed but then underutilized. Taskforce members learned that in the Philippines, e-books for course reserves were critically important. The member from India reported that theological librarians were being sought out as technological partners in helping faculty develop and deliver their courses online. Learning Management Systems were demystified for students and faculty because librarians were already familiar with them and utilized this type of software on a regular basis. The themes shared that evening from global theological librarians were consistent with experiences shared from North American theological librarians. While the themes were similar, the diversity and contextualization needed to answer these challenges were evident as well.

Furthermore, the meeting's discussion included the fact that publishers gathered necessary resources and started providing them globally to theological libraries almost immediately without any long discussions between librarians and publishers. In addition, global theological publishers expanded their "behind the pay wall" collections for a period of time to help partner with theological librarians and libraries. Access, which has long been a value of theological librarians, became a higher priority rather than the size of collections. The access was not to a volume of information but to quality information and resources. The above-mentioned changes and adaptations took place in theological libraries globally with relative ease. How did this happen?

One reason global theological libraries and theological librarians have been unfazed by the sudden paradigm switch as they have successfully dealt with it is their own perceptions of their roles as theological librarians and the professional skills they employ in fulfilling that role. Access has been a primary focus of theological libraries and librarians for several years in contrast with the old

"counting the numbers" methodology. Quality and engaging interactions with faculty and students are a better measure of a library and a librarian's effectiveness though they are harder to quantify and market for theological institutions. "Our library has 500,000 materials" is much easier to use in marketing bylines than "our theological librarians are partnering with you (the student) each step of the way in your theological journey."

A second reason theological librarians are surviving and thriving in changing times is that they know the value of collaboration. Through cooperative agreements, theological libraries are connected and prepared to share, collaborate, and support one another in the endeavor of partnering together for faculty and students. Theological librarians have seen the library as a place without four walls for decades. Collaboration mixed with collegiality, one of the values of the ATS Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative, is a powerful combination in difficult times.² In other words, COVID-19 has allowed theological libraries and theological librarians to become a "partner" of theological institutions in the educational process instead of just offering a service or a support.

This concept of the library as a partner in the educational process was raised more than 16 years ago by Timothy D. Lincoln. In his essay, "What's A Seminary Library For?" Lincoln made this precise argument.

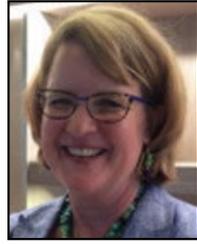
Knowing the over-arching purpose of a seminary library is important for seminary leaders as they allocate scarce resources of money and personnel. After briefly reviewing the role of libraries in recent literature of theological education, this article argues that seminary libraries do more than preserve classic Christian texts and assist patrons in finding information. The services of seminary libraries are important to the broad education of ministerial students. Thus understood, librarians are educators who should be partners in all discussions of teaching and learning and decisions about library budgets are not educationally neutral.³

² Ibid.

³ Timothy D. Lincoln, "What's a Seminary Library For?" *Theological Education*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2004), 1-10.

Hopefully, this recent shift in theological institutions' perceptions of global libraries and theological librarians will remain after this immediate "new reality" fades. This shared new reality that the library has become a focal

point, not just as an educational resource but also an institutional/infrastructural resource and partner, is too important of a paradigm shift to return back to "normal."



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