THE MORE THINGS CHANGE—THE MORE THINGS CHANGE: THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIES IN THE 1990s

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Introduction

The vitality and effectiveness of theological libraries at the end of this decade will be determined by three fundamental factors: (1) the current configuration of resources and services in these libraries, (2) the influence of certain primary forces or trends active in the broad sphere of scholarly communication—influences whose presence may already be detected and provisionally defined, and (3) specific decisions which theological schools and related agencies will make in response to both the given and the emerging trends. The importance of this third factor must be underscored. Institutions cannot be passive insofar as library development is concerned. The present configuration of library service will not simply yield to the new forces in ways which will produce quality collections and services. Institutions will be presented with opportunities to make critical decisions about their libraries and some of these decisions will directly influence the shape and programs—perhaps also the survival—of these institutions in the next century.

Thus, this essay has two purposes. The first is to identify and elaborate what appear to this writer to be the crucial forces and trends which will influence theological library development over the next decade. The second purpose is to identify the axes around which institutions will need to respond to these trends. This essay is intended to be an aid to institutional strategic planning insofar as library development is concerned. While each theological institution is heavily influenced by local factors, few institutions are immune from those larger environmental factors which appear not to be respecters of local conditions. Institutions may respond to these factors differently, but the general influences already being felt in academic libraries and scholarly communication certainly will affect the theological seminaries as well.

This environmental susceptibility is particularly virile in libraries. For a host of reasons, most of which have had to do with economics, theological libraries now participate actively in the foundational structures of bibliographic control which operate throughout North America.¹ Cataloging, acquisitions to a con-
siderable degree, inter-library borrowing, and reliance on bibliographic utilities require libraries to adopt certain standard conventions. The guiding assumption, in theological institutions and elsewhere, has been that the use of these conventions, first, has cost benefits favorable to an institution and, second, has established a healthy climate for library cooperation. Whether or not these assumptions are true, the fact is that it has become increasingly difficult (and in some cases expensive) for a theological library to depart from, or disregard, these international standards.

Local planning for library development will be complicated further by the fact that some of the trends now appearing in librarianship are contradictory or at least paradoxical. This means that institutions will have few unambiguous and unequivocal choices as they plan library development. Competing priorities and imperfectly alloyed compromises will make planning more difficult, but all the more imperative.

The Association of Theological Schools has not been unmindful of the peculiar circumstances and challenges facing its members' libraries. A survey of ATS members in 1980 revealed a high level of concern for libraries and library development. ATS responded by launching a comprehensive study of theological libraries. At the conclusion of Project 2000, a joint ATS and ATLA (American Theological Library Association) committee was appointed to assist the implementation of various proposals of Project 2000 and further concerns this study identified. This committee was chaired by Claude Welch and the final report of its work will appear soon.

An earlier decade also began with the publication of several articles dealing with theological libraries. The purpose of these articles, published under the title "Theological Libraries: Assets or Liabilities," was to help theological educators chart library development between the Scylla of research needs and the Charybdis of professional training for ministry. These articles may still be read with benefit. While the technically oriented essays appear dated, the programmatic and pedagogically provocative articles continue to stimulate.

The decades of the seventies and eighties thus have seen several significant initiatives related to theological library development. Also, they have produced a substantial body of documenta-
tion. That this essay is prepared at the beginning of another decade is quite accidental as decades have no intrinsic value in the ebb and flow of education. The particular decade ahead, however, will see fundamental shifts in educational methodology and especially in library service. It should not be accidental, then, that we seek to identify and understand the pressures which are shaping what may become the critical educational resource for the future.

1. The mission of theological libraries will become more complex. The roles of theological libraries and their place within institutions will require redefinition and these roles very well may enlarge.

The rapid growth and influence of electronic communication technologies are forcing profound changes in the methods of scholarship and the support schools give their scholars. The structure and services offered by theological libraries are being affected in particularly acute ways by these technologies. The chief issue here is the convergence of once disparate resources and capabilities. Essentially, the technology with which faculty members now write books and prepare lectures is the same technology with which librarians catalog and retrieve books and journal articles; is the same technology which produces audio and visual teaching resources; is the same technology which transmits each of these outputs to an international community of students, scholars and ministry professionals.

The personal computer, better referred to as a scholar’s workstation, is not a glorified typewriter or even a desktop library catalog. It is a tool of such multiple capabilities that most humanists have yet to begin to understand the effective range of services the microcomputer can render. The chief virtues of the workstation are (1) the power of linkages it provides, both internally and externally, to other scholars and resources, and (2) its powers of integration, i.e., its ability to bring multiple sources and resources to bear on a single problem.

The use of microcomputers by theological faculty members and students certainly is growing—perhaps now half of all persons directly involved in theological study are computer literate. The
numbers will continue to grow, but, more importantly, the demand for services attending the use of personal computers will grow more rapidly. Faculty members and students who are comfortable in this world of electronic communication will expect a vast array of services. They will know that these services may be offered through integrated systems and networks and they will expect the schools to provide these services and access.

Thus, two early and crucial questions facing theological schools are how will scholarly computing services be provided and to what extent can the schools afford to duplicate electronic communication technologies within their own institutional borders. This second question is important because it will become impossible—some would say it has already become impossible—for libraries to flourish without a sophisticated computer capability. Schools which provide this capability in their libraries have already made a substantial commitment to technology and must now decide if they wish to concentrate other computer assisted educational programs under their libraries or duplicate hardware, software and staff services.7

The pattern likely to emerge in most theological schools will be for academic computing services, in fact, to become the responsibility of the library. Minimally, these services will include writing and desktop publishing, networking, electronic mail, data and textbase access, computation, a range of bibliographic services, programmed and other computer assisted instruction, and laboratory instruction. Centering these services within the library will encourage resource sharing and cost effective staff utilization. The linkage between document creation, retention, bibliographic description, and dissemination will be a further powerful attraction of this particular configuration of computer services.

However compelling the reasons are for lodging these services under the theological library, these developments will dramatically alter the mission and focus of the library. Conservative institutions will welcome these new developments while retaining the traditional roles of theological libraries.8 Other institutions may let the new technologies erode the collection strengths of their libraries. In either case, the mission and roles will need to be reconsidered and revised in most institutions.
2. The collections in theological libraries will become relatively weaker. This trend will adversely affect libraries which essentially serve first degree students and will become critical for comprehensive research collections.

The first sign of erosion in our theological collections may be the loss of the concept of “a collection.” There is a critical shift underway in libraries generally and theological libraries are not exempt from the trend. The shift is away from thinking of libraries as collections to thinking of libraries as information and resource broker. Both elements have been a part of traditional libraries, and the current shift is one of emphasis and proportion, not of mutually exclusive programs. The traditional and familiar roles of a theological library are predicated on collections judged to be more or less sufficient for the teaching and faculty study needs of an institution. An active ingredient in this traditional equation is the principle of integrity. A collection is expected to fairly and broadly represent Christian thought and the primary literature which has influenced this thought. While few libraries have been expected to be comprehensive, most theological collections have operated within a framework of substantial wholeness and self-sufficiency whereby the daily expectations of their faculty and students are satisfied. Reciprocal borrowing privileges with neighboring institutions and inter-library lending could be expected to accommodate the occasional lacunae.

Now the convergence of electronic communication technologies discussed earlier will enable local libraries to provide access to a substantially larger reservoir of information and documentation. This reservoir includes not only the cataloged holdings of virtually every major research library, but also such specialized tools as major national bibliographies, major subject bibliographies, indexes and abstracting services, statistical, census, economic and other research data. Access to these resources is a bibliographic gourmet’s delight and the means of achieving this access is in virtually every library’s capability. Indeed, many scholars will have access from personal computers in office and/or home. At risk in these developments, however, is attention to theological collections, that is the definition of, and striving to acquire, that body of literature.
which sustains and undergirds the creative impulse of theological thought.

A more tangible reason for this pessimistic analysis that collections will weaken is simply the fact that financial support for theological collections appears to have weakened steadily over the past twenty years. In 1977-78, ATS member libraries spent an average of $17,150 on their collections. At that time the average cost of a hardcover scholarly book in religion was $6.29. In 1986-87 ATS accredited institutions spent, on the average, $57,970. However, the average cost of a domestic hardcover scholarly book in religion had increased to $26.89. This is a net loss of purchasing power on the order of 21% over twenty years. Curiously enough, over the same period scholarly book production in religion and theology in North America remained virtually constant with 1,271 volumes published in 1968 and 1,226 volumes published in 1987. This decline is measured according to the market price of books. When one compares accredited ATS institutional book expenditures per student one sees a 19.7% decline just in the last decade. None of the above figures considers the cost of foreign books. If anything, the inflationary pressures on foreign book markets have been even more severe.

Thus, there would appear little prospect that a deep economic factor in theological library development would reverse itself in the next decade. Rather we should expect a continuing loss of purchasing power in the face of inflation and book costs. Another factor which will contribute to a general weakening of theological collections is that theological educators and students will want a greater variety of documentation than is presently found in theological libraries. Much of this impulse will come from the third world. It is not necessary here to trace the contours of third world Christian thought or the ways in which this thought will influence North American scholarship. It is sufficient to observe that we have moved well past the time when North American scholars can be content to hear third world voices through translators and mediators. Our libraries simply must acquire indigenous scholarship and selected primary sources from third world religious communities.

And these communities are not lacking in publications. The
outside estimates of this publishing universe have been supplied
by David Barrett.\textsuperscript{12} Now the extensive religious publishing in the
third world which Barrett has documented does not suggest that
all or most of this literature is appropriate for acquisition by North
American institutions. Nevertheless, even if a very small percent-
age is judged appropriate for North American collections, this con-
stitutes a significant increment for our collections.\textsuperscript{13} If the North
American programs are to include a healthy component of third
world materials, then either substantial new monies must be
added to library budgets, or current collecting priorities must be
altered substantially.

The growth of third world literature in North American librar-
ies is both inevitable and necessary. The influx of another type of
literature is less certain, although one senses it has already begun
to happen. The importance of what may rightly be called secular
literature appears to be increasing in theological libraries. Histor-
ically many disciplines have been closely aligned with the theo-
logical curriculum, e.g., history proper, philosophy, classical studies,
psychology, and archaeology. Now, management, sociology, eco-
nomics and several specialized branches of ethics are producing
literature deemed important to theological study. These materials
may invigorate theological study, but their addition to theological
libraries even if purchased from steady state budgets, will only add
strain to resources already heavily taxed and the result will be
further weakened theological collections.\textsuperscript{14} The third major reason
for the long-term decline of theological library resources has to do
with the extraordinary pressures on the comprehensive research
collections.\textsuperscript{15} These collections are susceptible to the pressures
identified above as well as pressures peculiarly their own. One
such peculiar and major pressure on these libraries is the need to
preserve materials in advanced stages of physical deterioration.
The preservation issue affects research collections in two funda-
mental ways: despite all efforts to the contrary, some important
materials are being irretrievably lost. While estimates about the
percentage of individual collections in need of preservation as well
as aggregate volumes in advanced deterioration vary, the problem
is substantial.\textsuperscript{16} Research libraries simply must not let these en-
dangered collections disappear.
Also, it appears that the costs of preserving existing materials are being borne by existing, i.e., non-incremental, book funds. On this basis, every book preserved represents a new book not purchased. Thus, again short of substantial new monies for preservation, the net growth of the comprehensive research libraries will decline.

These problems facing the research libraries are exacerbated by the evidence that doctoral institutions are not supporting their libraries as they once did. While the number of ATS member institutions offering research doctoral degrees has grown, it is not apparent that support for research library collections has kept pace. In 1968, 33 accredited ATS institutions offered the research doctorate (Ph.D. or Th.D.). In 1989, 47 member institutions offer one or both of these degrees. Table I illustrates the essential problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>1967-68</th>
<th>1976-77</th>
<th>1986-87</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ave. Institutional Expenditure for Collections</td>
<td>$26,000</td>
<td>$52,640</td>
<td>$99,360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index (1967-69 = 100)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>194.9</td>
<td>427.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain (Loss) of Purchasing Power From 1967-69</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>(14%)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Per Student Expenditure</td>
<td>$ 116</td>
<td>$ 163</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain (Loss) of Expenditure per Student</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>(35.8%)</td>
<td></td>
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After an apparent modest gain during the 70s, support for comprehensive research collections has been diminishing in ATS institutions offering advanced degrees. Among other things, this means that the major responsibility for providing comprehensive research collections for theology continues to rest on a few institutions whose expenditures for collections is nearly keeping pace with book costs. It must be assumed, or devoutly hoped, that these schools will maintain their commitment to theological research and to the acquisition of research resources. Whether these re-
sources will be sufficient for the larger enterprise and whether they may be effectively shared with other institutions is another question. Academic libraries have been moving hesitantly towards charging fees for services, but now charges for interlibrary lending and charges associated with some use privileges are becoming quite common. Thus far the theological community has been immune to these developments, but we should not be surprised to see the large comprehensive libraries turning to these fees for needed budgetary support.

In all, we should anticipate that, at the end of this decade, theological scholars will have fewer resources, relatively speaking, than is currently the case. This weakening will include both prospective materials as well as earlier works. The one will atrophy because of deterioration and the other for want of funds. There is a reluctant irony in this. The erosion of research resources available to North American scholars will come at the same time as computerized cataloging and indexing programs will significantly strengthen access to resources. North American libraries are truly building a better trap in which to snare an emaciated mouse.

3. The educational role of theological librarians will change.
Services will grow in importance while the importance of collections will decline. The relative cost of libraries within institutional budgets will grow.

The changing role of theological librarians is best ascertained by considering the impact of computer technology, not on libraries, but on the ways and means of scholarship. The tools and the resources for scholarship are changing and the reliance on computers and computer-generated resources is growing very rapidly. As discussed earlier awareness of a vast universe of potentially usable literature also is expanding. Moreover, the computer technology which provides this awareness is dramatically altering the ways in which documents are cataloged or indexed, and hence the ways in which they are retrieved. The means for identifying publications, documents, and even specific contents or subsections of documents are becoming both more precise and more flexible. Computers provide for document and content searching by mechanisms which
scholars are finding immensely more useful than manual searching of library card catalogs. Searching the full text of documents utilizing key word indexes with Boolean logic and syntactic qualification is becoming commonplace. Furthermore, textbases important for theology are appearing. The Hebrew and Greek scriptures as well as substantial classical authors are available in machine readable formats. We hear electronic journals and electronic books also will appear. What is of moment here, however, is not that this documentation and these services exist and will increase, but that these are capabilities which even small and relatively modest institutions will need to provide to their scholars. Indeed, many scholars will have access from personal computers in office and/or home. Each entering class brings new technological demands to educational institutions and the trickle-up effect on faculty is relentless.

The trickle-up pressure on theological librarians is equally relentless and, in response, their pedagogical role will change. First, because the range of resources of potential usefulness to students and faculty is becoming so varied, the consultative role of library staff will expand. A simple example will illustrate the issue. The library and archives of the World Council of Churches may now be accessed via a computerized index. Furthermore, this index may be used directly by scholars anywhere in the world so long as they have a telephone connection to a suitable computer. Very shortly theological librarians will be expected to assist scholars in consulting these archives from North America. In order to provide this assistance, librarians will need expertise in computer systems and a working knowledge of the WCC archives. This pattern will be repeated in an everwidening pool of computerized and online resources. In each case the requirement will be that the library provide both conceptual and technical consultation, and these will be in addition to traditional bibliographic competence.

Library service will become more individualized. It is not an overstatement to anticipate that library staff will become research partners with other faculty members. Librarians will plan literature and data searches, help design file structure and storage, solve problems of file integration and publication. Essentially, librarians will become research consultants working with faculty and students on highly individualized projects.
And these services will not be provided only to an institution’s students and faculty, there will be demands that these services be extended to alumni and neighboring clergy. Theoretically, the same computerized services available within institutions are available also in the field. Yet, practically speaking, schools should anticipate that the professional clientele they wish to serve will want to use the computerized resources and access mechanisms provided by the school.

Thus, theological educators should anticipate the need to provide library services that now are just surfacing in forward-thinking institutions. The ability to offer such services will be measured in terms of professional library staff. Here ATS institutions will face major new challenges. In 1974-75, the average number of professional staff members in ATS member libraries was 2.08. This number has remained virtually constant in the intervening years in spite of substantial growth in the student population and a 26.5% increase in library collection holdings.22

Of course one way to read the data over the past two decades is to conclude that librarians have adapted extremely well to the changing demands of their profession and theological education and that they will be equally adaptive to the challenges which lie ahead. Yet, this assessment is likely to prove unrealistic and unrealistically optimistic. The complexity of the emerging service demands when factored across the student and faculty populations simply will require either more professional staff or a lengthy agenda of unfinished work. The negative effects of this will be felt in both research and teaching.

Institutions providing both services and resources in the next few years comparable to current programs will find that it will cost relatively more to do so. Several factors will influence this relative increase. Following the equation of services to personnel, library staff will be relatively more expensive. Institutions will need more staff and, relative to the overall personnel market, librarians will command higher compensation. This latter fact is already in evidence. Library staff compensation in ATS institutions has grown more than other personnel categories.23

The new services which institutions will need to provide their scholars and the collections which need to be acquired are, essentially, incremental to current library programs. Schools which
do not wish to erode current programs will need to secure new funds for the new enterprises. This expansion will be aggravated by the fact that library costs, at least in ATS institutions, do not appear to be correlated with student enrollment. Indeed, library support appears to be a relatively fixed budget percent across institutions which otherwise exhibit broad differences.24

Computers and their related devices along with software and maintenance will represent a growing expenditure for most institutions. Furthermore, computer systems seem ever to want to be upgraded and expanded. The development of these services is driven by an unusually competitive and ingenious market place. Schools certainly can resist these pressures and contain these costs, but only within flexible limits. The services based on this equipment will grow in sophistication and usefulness and this, in turn, will drive the appetite for advanced equipment. Most of the innovation in this area comes from the commercial and for-profit sectors and educational institutions will have little choice but to acquiesce. The schools will need to exercise unusual prudence in developing these resources. Librarians will become ever more crucial players in institutional planning. The informational and bibliographic components of these resources will require disproportionate attention and librarians will be indispensable planning officers. Many schools will need to modify their compensation programs and/or their administrative structures to assure that they have the ablest possible library leadership.

Summary

There are significant and powerful new forces at work in higher education. These forces are affecting the fundamental ways in which scholars do their work, schools conduct their enterprises, students study and educational institutions as a whole serve their various constituencies. These are fundamental changes. In theological education in North America it would appear that the libraries will be on the leading edge of many of these developments. Long respected for cultivating linkages with the past and tradition, now schools may discover that their libraries are the primary instrumentalities for creating vital contemporary linkages to the
wider community of scholarly discourse, to the churches, and to ever wider constituencies which the schools seek to serve. Yet, to begin to achieve the full measure of service and benefit which theological libraries may offer, planning mechanisms must improve, resources must expand, and librarians must step forward to accept the responsibilities which the schools will place upon them.

FOOTNOTES

1 This feature of library practice was already noted (and lamented) by John Dillenberger, "Traditional Library Functions and the Economic Factor," Theological Education, Vol. VI, No. 1, 1969, pp. 70-78. There are numerous indicators that theological libraries continue to adhere to national and international bibliographic conventions, bibliographic utilities, and services.


4 This report will be included in the 1990 ATS Biennial Meeting report book published as Part 6 of the Bulletin.

5 Published as a special issue of Theological Education, Vol. VI, No. 1, 1969. Reference will be made to some of the articles contained in this issue.


7 It is well to remember that the average ATS member institution has 277 students (in all degree programs), 13 full time faculty, 8 staff members including professional library staff, and annual education and general expenditures of $1.96 million. (Derived from Fact Book on Theological Education (hereafter Fact Book) 1987-1988, Tables 8, 22 and FF-1.) These are not large educational institutions.


10 Table KK in the respective Fact Books shows that the school spent $109 per
student in 1976-1977 and $192 per student in 1986-1987. Over the past decade the cost of books increased by 219.3%.


12 See his *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982. Barrett estimates that Third World countries may have produced nearly 8,660 religious books at the time of his survey. These same areas published 6,136 religious periodicals (see Global Table 31).

13 The average ATS institution acquires 2,612 books a year and receives 447 periodicals. (*Fact Book on Theological Education*, 1987-1988, Table KK. Data is for the 1986-87 school year.) If the average North American theological library were to acquire say five percent of the religious titles published in the third world this would represent a 40 percent increase in the level of acquisition.

14 Furthermore, books in business, law, philosophy, and the social sciences cost nearly a third more than books in theology (*Bowker Annual*, 34th edition, Table 3, p. 452).

15 A comprehensive theological research library is marked by several, but not necessarily all, of the following features: very large holdings, probably now in excess of 250,000 volumes; an acquisitions program which is international in scope; materials in working scholarly language as well as vernacular languages are acquired; (most of the research collections add more than 4,500 items each year); substantial serial holdings and acquisitions, perhaps numbering more than 1,500 periodical subscriptions and as many as 1,000 standing orders for monographic series and sets; deep historical coverage and virtually complete documentation from earlier periods of theological thought; collections of manuscripts, rare books, and other unique or exceptional research material; a collection development program which aims at thorough documentation.

16 The ATLA Preservation (Board of Microtext) estimated that some 218,000 titles represented in North American theological libraries were published between 1860 and 1929 and likely to be in modest to advanced states of deterioration. (*Collection Analysis Project Final Report*, American Theological Library Association, June, 1981.) The actual number of endangered titles is much higher especially in light of relatively poor quality paper used for publishing during and immediately following the world wars of this century.

17 The revised ATS statistical reporting forms are beginning to track expenditures for preservation.

Unfortunately, the ATLA Preservation program cannot be expected to alleviate the financial problem caused by preservation needs. It is based on a commercial production model rather than cooperative model, making its unit cost to institutions relatively high.

18 Of the 33 doctoral institutions listed in 1968, two are now part of the Graduate Theological Union, and three are affiliated with the Toronto School of Theology. In 1987, seven doctoral schools are part of the TST and the GTU reports as one doctoral institution.

19 See footnote 10 for source for data in Table I.
21 The WCC will issue requesting scholars a password and the researcher must use a REALLINK software. The fees associated with this service are minimal.
22 In 1986-88, the average number of librarians in ATS institutions was 2.13. See *Fact Book, 1987-1988*, Table 22, and *Fact Book, 1975-1976*, Table KK.
24 See the Analysis of Expenditures tables in the *Fact Books* (for 1987-88, Tables FF-MM). Student enrollment in ATS institutions has grown by 87 percent since 1969, while the purchasing power of library budgets has declined. Now it would appear the enrollment rates have leveled off if not declined. The enrollment decline discussed in the 1987-1988 *Fact Book*, Table I, and pages 1-2, is minimal, amounting to less than one percent in two of the three years for which a decline was reported.