**Online Reference Collection for Theological Libraries**

Steve Kays

Department of Information Science, Wayne State University

INF 6120: Access to Information

Dr. Hermina Anghelescu

December 3, 2021

**Abstract**

An exploration of the online reference collection in theological libraries. First, there’s an examination of the environment that theological libraries are situated in, most often as academic libraries within a college. The online resources that theological libraries have to offer are situated within the work of digital humanities, and there’s an examination of digitization in theological libraries. There are several challenges when it comes to digitization in theological libraries, both in general legal ways, but challenges can also arise institutionally, most often in budget discussions. Despite these challenges it’s paramount that theological libraries take their place in the work of digital humanities and maintain a vibrant online presence with a robust online reference collection.

**Online Reference Collection for Theological Libraries**

Over the course of several interviews that I’ve had with librarians that work in a theological library I’ve begun to pick up on several major themes in the conversation. One of those things is the nature of reference work itself in those spaces. The biggest topic in that space about reference, pertains to the online reference collection.

I find this topic to be incredibly interesting, most notably, because I am planning on going into the field of theological librarianship for my career. I’ve spent the last number of months speaking with theological librarians about the nature of the career, and what their day-to-day work entails. I’ve received really good feedback, and that is no exception when it comes to reference services. After several conversations with theological librarians, it’s become clear that the online reference collection is the biggest conversation topic in that space moving forward, which is a very important topic in of itself. It is vital that theological libraries have a robust offering of online resources, along with a vibrant online presence moving into the future.

**Theology Libraries**

To start, it would be beneficial to lay the groundwork on the sort of work that theological librarians do, and what sort of environment they themselves work in. Doing this now, will give helpful context for the rest of the paper, and will helpfully show some of the challenges that theological librarians think through. The book *Introduction to Theological Libraries* quotes from another work of Anne Womack where she says that:

Theological librarians are at once all these things: academic professionals with sophisticated language skills, information technology experts, building managers, budget jugglers, pastoral counselors, and stewards of our institutions’ learning resources. (Curic, pg. 148)

The nature of the work is wide ranging. I’ve spoken with several theological librarians who have verified this, there is a variety in the work that they carry out and in the environment that they work in. One such way that their work is unique is that theological libraries are academic libraries, so they work in a college setting. That means there is a university administration over the library. I cover this now because it will helpfully illustrate some of the challenges there can be with offering online reference resources, particularly with the budget, but more on that later in the paper.

**Online Resources**

This leads me to the major topic of this paper, online resources, or the online reference collection in theological libraries. The different theological librarians that I have spoken with have highlighted the importance of having a robust offering of online resources. There are challenges that, really, most academic libraries face. Those challenges would pertain to databases. But another challenge is the very essence of the materials that they work with, so something that they deal with more specifically in their field. One of the librarians that I’ve spoken with mentioned that due to the types of the materials that they work with, it can be hard to find online resources of those works. I believe both challenges point to a central theme, that being the work of digital humanities.

**Digital Humanities**

What precisely is digital humanities? This turns out to be a great question, as there has been a lot written on it, but there’s not necessarily been a consensus reached for its definition. But I found the Duke University Libraries resources on digital humanities to be helpful and wanted to highlight them. Included in those resources, it mentions an article from Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, which explores what exactly constitutes the work of digital humanities:

At its core digital humanities is more akin to a common methodological outlook than an investment in any one specific set of texts or even technologies…. Yet digital humanities is also a social undertaking. It harbors networks of people who have been working together, sharing research, arguing, competing, and collaborating for many years.... a culture that values collaboration, openness, nonhierarchical relations, and agility. (Glauberman, 2016, para. 2)

The American Theological Library Association (Atla) has started to explore what the digital humanities could look like specifically in the theological library setting, where most of the studies being done are of a religious nature. Atla highlights the fact that in the work of the digital humanities there is a combination of collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and attention to materiality, and states that there is a rich potential for more fully investing in the work of digital humanities in the spaces that engage in religious studies. I agree with Atla on these points and think that it’s vital for theological libraries to continue investing in these sorts of practices, the connection that comes through the digital humanities being one of the more powerful benefits of investing in an online presence with a robust online collection.

**Connections**

In August of 2016, an article entitled *The Changing World of Library Reference* by Andrew Richard Albanese and Brian Kenney was published on the Publishers Weekly website. The article examines how patrons’ needs have been changing. The article mentions that librarians should not be playing a passive role with information needs in their environments. In the article Miguel Figueroa, the director of ALA’s Center for the Future of Libraries is quoted as saying “But even as finding information becomes easier, connecting remains a challenge, and connecting is the key to learning, and doing. And that is an opportunity for reference and library instruction” (Albanese, 2016, para. 16). Several librarians in the article mention that “connecting” was key to the future of reference. This changing landscape is in large part due to increasing digitization in the information landscape, including museums, libraries, etc. More and more information has become available online for patrons’ direct access. How does increasing digitization affect theological libraries?

**Digitization in Theological Libraries**

The book *Shifting Stacks: A Look at the Future of Theological Libraries in Celebration of Atla’s 75th Anniversary* was a very helpful resource in this area. The book greatly summarizes the benefits of increasing digitization:

Digital libraries are transforming scholarship and research practices by increasing accessibility to materials that would otherwise not be accessible, by having no physical boundaries and providing around-the-clock availability, by allowing researchers and scholars to use any search term to investigate patterns in large amounts of text through friendly interfaces while increasing speed and accuracy of research, and by allowing print-disabled users to use technologies to read scanned books.(Collins, pgs. 51-52)

Through digitization, the landscape is changing. As most theological libraries are in academic settings, it’s important to note how digitization is transforming scholarship. It’s vital that theology libraries understand this and continue to grow their online resources. The work of scholarship is opening to more and more people, and that’s a great thing.

Another aspect of how digitization has affected theological librarians is in the nature of the work that they do. Collins writes, “Digital libraries have also spurred on innovation within the library, challenging librarians to learn new skills for learning, research, and creation(pg.52)”. The variety of tasks that theological librarians have has been slightly covered in this paper, but this adds another component to the job as well. It’s important for theological librarians, and aspiring theological librarians like myself, to continue growing those technological skills. It’s not only for your individual career, but for the benefit of the theological library that you work for, allowing for the best experience as possible for the patrons that use your library.

**Challenges of Digitization in Theological Libraries**

**Legal**

It’s important not to just gloss over the challenges of digitization. They are there, and perhaps the biggest hurdle to deal with and think through with digitization is copyright law. The thing with copyright laws is that they are not clearly defined in black and white terms, there are a lot of gray areas that information organizations need to traverse through. *Shifting Stacks* again helpfully spells out different ways that theological libraries should respond to copyright laws, “Institutional copyright policies must spell out two principles: first, all materials are generally under copyright, including unpublished materials, and second, there are some exceptions with fair use limitations” (Collins, pg. 50). As pointed out, there needs to be copyright policies put in place, and that there should be parties involved who are tasked for handling copyright for the organization. The book also makes the argument that the copyright policies need to be based on law, “These responsible parties must interact with legal counsel and must differentiate between professional association guidelines and actual law. Archivists and librarians must rely on law and not guidelines developed by organizations acting in their own organizational interests” (Collins, pg. 50). This is a very important point. But the book doesn’t stop there, it looks at the concept of “fair use” as well.

The book argues that within those copyright policies there needs to be language concerning fair use, “Institutional copyright policies must enumerate fair use privileges, asserting the full right of fair use allowed in each case. In order to accomplish this, policies need to be written to accommodate the grayness of copyright law, especially as regards fair use” (Collins, pg. 50). Again, the book highlights the gray aspects of copyright laws, and that information organizations need to traverse through those areas wisely. The book highlights that there are no fast and easy answers when it comes to copyright law, each instance will come with its own context, and it’s important for theological librarians to remember that going in.

**Institutions**

As I mentioned earlier in the paper, another challenge that theological libraries can face in this endeavor is the fact that for a lot of theological libraries, they are members of a college or institution. As such, those libraries don’t have a great deal of autonomy, it’s important that the libraries vision aligns with the vision of the institution. It’s important that the theological library in a college setting have a good working relationship with administration, but also the other organizations in the college as well. That good working relationship with administration is key. One of the areas in which this becomes abundantly clear is when it comes budgeting. The administration of the college ultimately sets the budget for the library. One theological librarian that I’ve spoken with said that these conversations can be a challenge. There’s a sense that the library must prove their worth, and that can really come in play with the library’s online reference collection. Databases are very helpful, and they are crucial to the research needs of patrons who frequent academic libraries, like a theological library, but databases can be expensive. The theological librarian that I spoke with described that the budget negotiation process with administration can be complex and challenging because of this, because you need to show the administration the worth of the databases, despite the costs.

How should theological librarians look to handle the institutional challenges that can arise? *Shifting Stacks* again provides helpful clarity on this topic, “Two key factors are trust and normalization. By building the foundations with trust first and engaging in the faculty process, the result will be an approved and active open access policy that helps to feed the digital repository” (Collins, pg. 40). This sentiment echoes the same takeaways that I received from the theological librarian that I spoke with. It’s important to make sure that the library lines up with the vision of the institution, and to have a good working relationship with administration. What are the benefits of building trust in the institution and normalizing the digitization process? *Shifting Stacks* lists the numerous positive takeaways:

First, positioning this work as “normal” in relation to historical precedents within the religious tradition, activities of other aspirational schools, and with a value for promoting faculty scholarship within a global environment. Second, this work must be normalized into institution workflows and faculty publication practices. While the effort can be difficult, a successfully implemented open access policy and digital repository can begin to have a significant virtuous cycle of increasing the scholarly profile and impact of a theological seminary. (Collins, pg. 41)

The benefits are multifaceted and boost both the library and the institution’s profile. Theological libraries having a vibrant online presence are vital, but the benefits go past just your institution. Having open access to a robust offering of resources is great for scholarship and creates strong partnerships and connections. The benefits, very importantly, extend to patrons of the theological library.

**Example of Digitization in Practice**

I thought it would be pertinent to give an example of what this open access and online presence looks like in action. One needs to look no further than the [Atla Digital Library](https://dl.atla.com/) to see this on display. There you will find that you can explore religion and theology collections, there are over 100,000 resources that are accessible. This is a great start, and I hope that all theological associations and libraries continue to do this sort of work and make more and more of their resources available online.

**Conclusion**

It is vital that theological libraries continue to both recognize the need of having an robust online reference collection, that they continue to grow those online collections, and they do their part to push that more and more of their materials would come available in online formats. First and foremost, there’s a standard reason for this, the increasing digitization within the information field. Theological libraries need to keep pace with this and have their place in the field of digital humanities. But the need goes deeper than that, and importantly so.

Digitization has led to several exciting opportunities. Open access has presented scholarship to large amounts of people through the internet, there are a whole host of partnership opportunities through digitization, and it helps foster connections. Theological libraries continuing to expand their online resources greatly benefits patrons, as the book *Shifting Stacks* powerfully points out:

In the digital age, it is important to remember that every user is a creator and every creator is a user; therefore, it is imperative for libraries to be more than just gatekeepers of information. Librarians and archivists are called to help their clientele think critically, ask questions, foster creativity, and create (or simply foster re-creation of) information. (Collins, pg. 51)

Perhaps one of my favorite things from seeing librarians working in action, is seeing them provide for patrons and users information needs. And not just them providing information, but instilling and empowering patrons and users with growth in information literacy. As the Publishers Weekly article that I mentioned earlier showed, patrons’ needs are changing. Increasing your online presence and your online collection are answering those patrons needs, which I believe is the most important reason to invest in the increasing digitization of resources. It’s my hope that theological libraries continue to recognize the importance of this work, continue to invest more into, and have a presence in the digital humanities.

**Bibliography**

Admin. (2014, June 4). *Measuring and assessing reference services and resources: A guide*. Reference & User Services Association (RUSA). Retrieved December 5, 2021, from https://www.ala.org/rusa/sections/rss/rsssection/rsscomm/evaluationofref/measrefguide.

Albanese, A. R., & Kenney, B. (2016, August 26). *The Changing World of Library Reference*. PublishersWeekly.com. Retrieved December 5, 2021, from https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/71322-we-need-to-talk-about-reference.html.

Anderson, C. (2018, July 20). *Digital Humanities and the future of theology · cursor\_ zeitschrift für explorative Theologie*. Cursor\_ Zeitschrift für explorative Theologie. Retrieved December 4, 2021, from https://cursor.pubpub.org/pub/anderson-digitalhumanities-2018/release/4.

Anthony, E. J. (2020). Ecologies of Space in the Paradoxes of Technology and Community: Adaptability and Resilience in Libraries, Churches, and Theological Schools in a COVID-19 World. Dallas; ATLA.

Atla. (2021, November 1). *Digital Collection hosting through Atla Digital Library now available*. Atla. Retrieved December 5, 2021, from https://www.atla.com/blog/digital-collection-hosting-through-atla-digital-library-now-available/.

Bailey-Hainer, B. (2019, April 11). *The power of collaboration: Digitization in European theological libraries*. Atla. Retrieved December 4, 2021, from https://www.atla.com/blog/the-power-of-collaboration-digitization-in-european-theological-libraries/.

Collins, M., Estes, J., Stephens, M. K., Rogers, C. A., Keck, A., Tippey, P. A., Goodwin, S., Kuehn, E., Welsh, M. E., Odicino, A. L., Crocco, S. D., Stevens, K., Ng, S., & Berryhill, C. M. (2020). *Shifting stacks: A look at the future of theological libraries in celebration of Atla's 75th Anniversary*. Atla Open Press, An Imprint of the American Theological Library Association (Atla).

Ćurić Matina. (2020). *Introduction to theological libraries*. *Books @ atla Open Press*. Atla Open Press. Retrieved December 3, 2021, from https://books.atla.com/atlapress/catalog/book/34.

Dar, M. (2020, November 10). *How covid-19 has transformed reference services for public and academic libraries*. Library Journal. Retrieved December 5, 2021, from https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/how-covid19-has-transformed-reference-services-for-public-academic-libraries.

Feldman, S. (2018, September 14). *Reclaiming reference at the library*. PublishersWeekly.com. Retrieved December 5, 2021, from https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/78010-reclaiming-reference.html.

Glauberman, J. (2016). *Digital Humanities @ duke university libraries: Defining digital humanities*. LibGuides. Retrieved December 4, 2021, from https://guides.library.duke.edu/digital\_humanities.

Graham, M. P. (2021). *Preserving the past & engaging the future: Theology & religion in american special collections*. *Books @ atla Open Press*. Atla Open Press. Retrieved December 3, 2021, from https://books.atla.com/atlapress/catalog/book/43.

Keck, A. (2021). *Administration in theological libraries*. *Books @ atla Open Press*. Atla Open Press, an imprint of the American Theological Library Association (Atla). Retrieved December 3, 2021, from https://books.atla.com/atlapress/catalog/book/47.

RUSA. (2017, June 13). Guidelines for Implementing and Maintaining Virtual Reference Services. Chicago.

Wong, M. A., & Saunders, L. (2020). *Reference and information services: An introduction*. Libraries Unlimited, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC.