Reference tools: the essential texts

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Introduction

Is there such a thing as an essential reference text? In this paper, I hope to raise questions rather than offer answers, but I hope that by doing so, it may assist you to answer the question for yourself "Is there an essential reference text for your library?"

It has been suggested by William Johnson that we live in a golden age of reference books. In his *Recent reference books in religion*,[1] Johnson evaluates more than 60 single volume works on religion published between 1990 and 1995. He regards a number of these as the finest ever published in their field, and suggests that in no other six year period have so many appeared. Way back in 1951, Constance Winchell's *Guide to reference books* published by the American Library Association[2] listed 258 entries in the religion section, but by the 1995 edition there were over 575 entries, with about one third of the total religion section published in the preceding ten years.[3][4]

Johnson comments that no library, not even the most prestigious and best financed, stocks all or even most reference works in a given field. His research would suggest that most academic libraries stock between 40 and 60 per cent of them. This does indeed suggest that, given such a wide choice, a selection needs to be made between what is essential and what is not. What is essential for one library will not necessarily be so for another.

In 1989, speaking on reference tools at the ANZTLA conference, held in Auckland, Lawrence McIntosh defined an appropriate reference collection as "of sufficient size and quality to support instructional needs and facilitate faculty research programmes."[5] Another suggested definition of an adequate reference collection is that which enables as many correct answers to be provided to questions as possible.

The libraries that we all work in have significant differences. The factors which influence these differences are, I am sure, obvious to you.
- the country that the library is in. We have four countries represented here, and that is a significant factor.
- the religion or denomination of the parent body will influence choice, as will the angle of approach.

The clientele served may have widely varying needs. The users of your library and reference collection will have a significant influence on the direction in which you build your collection:
- Does your institution teach at diploma or degree level?

- Do you have postgraduate students? Do you have students at all?
- Do your students attend class on campus or are they studying from a distance?
- If they are studying from a distance, do you offer answers to reference questions for them, or can you provide tools to enable them to find answers themselves?
- What are the significant areas of research supported.

The budget of course, has a significant influence on what can be regarded as essential. For example, one of the bigger theological libraries might well consider the expensive Barth bibliography essential, but it would be outside of our area of research support, and outside of our budget. On the other hand, who would be without the *Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church* or the *Anchor Bible dictionary*; the *New Jerome Bible commentary*, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* or the *New dictionary of liturgy and worship*.[6]

If a definition of essential is to do with the number of times a volume has been stolen and had to be replaced, then where I come from, the prize would have to go to the *Harper's Bible Commentary*,[7] which we have now replaced at least twice, despite having a security system in place. Obviously, our students have read Johnson's evaluation of this text, in which he comments: "almost alone in the field, this Bible commentary dissects controversies non-confessionally."[8]

The influence of country and culture shows in the most worn item in our collection – the first volume of *The dictionary of New Zealand biography*.[9] We have a significant need for New Zealand church history source materials, and for us they are essential tools. This is influenced by the courses taught and the direction of a significant amount of post graduate research. Any tools to enable us to access and/or locate sources of NZ and Pacific mission and early church records will become essential purchases for us. Any bibliographies or dictionaries that assist in accessing or providing source information in the area of Maori studies or religion is more than essential, but I would be extremely surprised to find such tools in the library of Luther Seminary.

All these factors come together in the collection development policy of your library, whether it is formally on paper, or in the head of the librarian. And this should be the document which will inform your choice of essential texts. This will take into account all the factors mentioned above such as your clientele, location and the mission of the parent body. Another factor will be your knowledge of other local libraries. I know that there are several clusters of libraries which have written or are writing shared collection development policies. So it is your clientele community and the wider theological library community that will have significant influence. Helen Greenwood is fond of quoting from one of her university professors: "Know your community, know your collection". And in the selection of reference books, there are always the usual selection criteria of being guided by what others have said about a book, by the standing of the author, of the publisher and all those factors which we are familiar with. McIntosh suggests that there is an additional criteria in selecting reference tools as opposed to books for the general collection. That is the need for accuracy, or as he puts it "built in reliability"[10], as it is being used to give authoritative answers.

There are a number of good authoritative and evaluative guides to reference sources for various areas of biblical and theological research. They list hundreds of titles, many of them familiar to you. The most recent is the already quoted William M. Johnston, *Recent reference*

books in religion[11]. The first edition was published in 1996 followed by a new edition in 1998. The new edition adds little except a few pages update at the back. The emphasis is on major works published since 1970, with about one quarter published during the 1990's. His 1996 edition lists 317 titles, and the revised edition another 30 titles.

You will all be familiar with Lawrence McIntosh's *Religion & theology: a guide to current reference resources*[12] which was published in 1997. This lists 655 items, and has an advantage for us working in the theological library scene in Australasia and the Pacific that it was written out of the experience of providing reference services within an Australian theological library. The emphasis is on items published since the early 1980's, with inclusion of older material where appropriate.

Other sources include the four volume Gorman and Gorman[13] *Theological and religious reference materials*, 1984-1986, Robert Kepple's *Reference works for theological research*[14], 1992 and McCabe's *Critical guide to Catholic reference books*,[15] 1989. Further details are available in McIntosh.

The Yale Divinity Library has on their web site, a list and description of their reference tools and bibliographies for Christianity. This could be used as a guide to other libraries wishing to determine texts for their collections.

At that Auckland conference 10 years ago, as part of the reference tools session, Lawrence McIntosh carried out an impromptu survey to determine what those present regarded as the essential top reference tools. Unfortunately those findings have not survived and my hopes of doing a "ten years on" follow up have not been possible. However, from the questionnaires that I have circulated at this conference, I offer the following results as to what this group gathered here would rate as the top 10 of essential texts across the varieties of the libraries represented here. The survey results showed a huge range of titles selected as your choices of essential texts. Interestingly, the only titles that were chosen more than five times, were the ones cited above -- the *Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church*, the *Anchor Bible dictionary*, the *New Jerome Bible commentary* and the various titles in the "New dictionary of.." series.

In that ten year period, however, there has been a revolution in what may be described as a reference work. McIntosh, in defining a reference work as "publications which are consulted in order to obtain authoritative information"[16], goes on to suggest that many of these will in time be replaced by new formats. In this decade there has been a rapid evolution from a print-centred world to a digitally intensive one, and correspondingly, a shift in what might now be regarded as essential texts.

In 1997 the *Association of Research Libraries* conducted a survey of their academic members on how academic libraries incorporate electronic information resources into their reference activities and the subsequent effect on library services. The survey showed that, although print still predominates, it is much less important than it was, and there was a trend to phase out some print resources.

If any tool were to be essential, that which enhances access to the rest of the collection would come high up on my priority list. For example, indexes, abstracting tools and bibliog-

raphies. Print forms of these have been well utilised by most of us, but the revolution in movement from print to CD Rom is well illustrated by the ATLA's indexing tool, *Religion Indexes*. The use of periodicals in our library has increased probably ten fold since we installed the CD Rom version of *Religion Index*, and offered tutorials in its use. We have had the printed versions of *Religion Index* I and II and the *Book Review Index* for as long as I can remember, but it was usually only level three or postgraduate students who made much use of all those volumes. Now the CD Rom version is always in use, by all levels of student, and there is always someone in the periodicals area of the library. Being cautious librarians, we retained our subscriptions to the print versions for some time, eventually making a decision to phase out the print formats of all but *Religion Index One*. It was a bit like the retention of the card catalogue after putting everything on a database.

This raises another question for discussion. If a library purchases, or purchases access to, an electronic version of a reference tool, is there a justification for also holding the print version?

A scan of the literature in professional library journals for the period 1990 to 1999 shows very clearly the orientation to discussion and consideration of electronic sources for reference enquiries. Almost every article about reference services discussed the ways in which access to reference tools had been extended by the use of the internet or CD Rom replacements for printed texts.

And when the budget is too small but you still need the information? The theological library world is a small one, and one of the best ways to find answers to reference questions that your reference texts can't help you with, is "with a little bit of help from your friends." Networking is a wonderful thing, and one of the best things about the ANZTLA conferences is the opportunity to meet other people, and to visit other theological libraries to be just plain nosy about what they hold that you don't. The ANZTLA listserv is a place to post your question when you are really stuck, and the ATLA listserv, Atlantis, is another. It is also worth finding a way to run an eye over faculty book collections. One of our faculty has one of the best Judaica collections in Australasia. I only saw the depth of it when I went to his home for dinner one night.

Another source is the World Wide Web. In the survey mentioned above, many librarians commented that they answer an increasing number of reference questions through the web. Again, you need to apply the same criteria of critical evaluation to website sources as to printed reference tools before accepting a site as offering "authoritative information".

In conclusion, I would suggest that it is not possible to define a set list of the essential texts for a reference collection. Instead, there is a need to take into account all of the factors talked about, to create that collection which will enable you to provide correct quality answers to as many questions as possible.

Endnotes
1. William M. Johnson, *Recent reference books in religion*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1996.
2. Constance M. Winchell, *Guide to reference books*. 7th ed. Chicago: American Library Association, 1951.
3. Diane Choquette, "Religious and theological reference resources: then and now." In American

Theological Library Association. *Essays in celebration of the first fifty years.* Evanston: ATLA, 1996.

4. Robert Balay (ed.) *Guide to reference books.* 11th ed. Chicago: American Library Association, 1995.

5. Lawrence D McIntosh. "Reference tools and their assessment." Paper presented at the ANZTLA conference 1989.

6. F.L.Cross and E.A.Livingston (eds.) *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian church.* 3rd ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1997; David Noel Freedman (ed.) *The Anchor bible dictionary.* New York: Doubleday, 1992; Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (eds.) *The New Jerome biblical commentary.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1993; *New Catholic encyclopedia.* Palatine, Il.: Jack Herarty in association with the Catholic University of America, 1967-1996; *A new dictionary of liturgy and worship.* London: SCM Press, 1986.

7. James L. Mays (ed.) *Harper's bible commentary.* San Francisco: Harper, 1988.

8. Johnson, *Recent reference books,* 101.

9. W.H.Oliver and Claudia Orange (eds.) *The dictionary of New Zealand biography.* Wellington: Allen & Unwin / Department of Internal Affairs, 1990.

10. McIntosh, *Reference tools.*

11. Johnson, *Recent reference books.*

12. McIntosh, *Reference tools.*

13. G.E.Gorman and Lyn Gorman. *Theological and religious reference materials.* Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984– .

14. Robert J. Kepple. *Reference works for theological research.* 3rd ed. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992.

15. James P. McCabe. *Critical guide to Catholic reference books.* 3rd ed. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1989.

16. Lawrence D. McIntosh. *Religion and theology: a guide to current reference resources.*

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