

From ecclesiastic to theological libraries: how religious libraries cope with diversity in Europe

Andre Geuns

Introduction

At last year's annual ATLA conference, the main theme of this year's meeting was announced in rather general terms: international theological librarianship. This theme has been a focus of attention for both ATLA and BETH (formerly known as the Conseil) because it is considered "beneficial to both Conseil and ATLA members". The organisers of this year's Conference added a complementary element to the general theme: "Embrace the diversity". This expresses ATLA's conviction that international theological librarianship involves coping with diversity, a proposition that European librarians can surely endorse. Without being technical and overly precise, "to embrace" has something poetic that leaves it open to a myriad of interpretations. To embrace implies at least two participants, each of whose individuality remains intact in the action. In the best cases, the "hug" could lead to the creation of a completely new creature, again with its own individuality. Should the event result in the elimination of one of its partners, one could speak of a deadly embrace, a case surely not intended by the theme of our meeting.

In Europe national, geographic, cultural and religious diversities are numerous and deep. Our history shows that in many cases the embrace of our diversities has tended to be a deadly one. The most evident manifestation in recent history of the suppression of diversity is National Socialism and its absolutist theory that, when put into practice, suppressed other races and left destruction and disarray throughout Europe.. Differences were effectively recognised and indicated. Prisoners in the Austrian Mauthausen concentration camp were required to wear a triangle having a distinctive colour according to group: Jews, Gypsies, political prisoners. This practice both displayed diversity and established inferiority to the dominating race.

I refer to this negative example because it resulted in the conviction that Europe had to change and led to the creation of a new spirit of union and solidarity among European peoples and their diverse cultures. This diversity is an element we will always carry with us. Thus year, Europe is celebrating the fiftieth anniversary (18 May 1950) of its first steps toward a major integration of our diversities, when twelve NATO foreign ministers adopted a programme for strengthening ties between western nations. We have started out in a new direction, have commenced a new adventure. No one knows where this will end. Old habits are not easily abandoned, the need to discard old certainties and reactions force us to question our willingness and determination to work in this new spirit. It is evident that a monetary union on its own will not suffice. Some form of political, social and cultural integration will be required. The question is how theological libraries and librarians can play a role in this stunning process.

The rise of Associations of Religious Libraries

The origin of religious libraries on the European continent lies a long way back in human memory. Although church libraries had worked for centuries to collect and preserve theo-

logical documents, often preserving ancient manuscripts, there was initially little concerted co-operation and no form of association. The libraries of those times jealously guarded their valuable and often impressive collections, their independence and their limited access. The disastrous situation following the Second World War forced them to go beyond their own enclosures and seek support from similar libraries and colleagues. Consistent with the general political and cultural climate that urged Europe's political leaders to strive for greater unity, librarians felt for the first time the urgent need for much closer co-operation. Faced with the need in 1947 to rebuild what had been thoroughly destroyed, the librarians of private universities, seminaries, abbey, and monasteries in (then West) Germany decided to found the "Association of Catholic Ecclesiastical Libraries" (AKThB). Libraries in other countries followed suit, gradually growing toward a federated body in 1961: the International Committee for the Co-ordination of the Associations of Libraries of Catholic Theology" (C.I.C.). This is where we now stand.

The twelve associations now operating within Europe represent about 1500 libraries. Ten of these comprise the institutional members of BETH; the other two are affiliated to BETH and represent libraries in Hungary (EKE) and Switzerland (SUISSE). Nine major theological libraries unlinked to national associations are the individual members. BETH still has much work to do. Numerous European countries have no association for existing libraries; many libraries have not yet opted to join their national association. The most noteworthy case is Italy whose national directory lists 1500 ecclesiastical libraries while only 300 are members of ABEL. It is estimated that about 3000 religious libraries, with a stock of 100 million often historically valuable volumes, are active in Europe.

To open its doors to this great variety of theological collections and welcome this many-sided diversity, BETH has been obliged to change its official name on three occasions. It started in 1961 as an exclusively Catholic institution (International Committee for the Co-ordination of the Association of Libraries for Catholic Theology). In 1972, it was opened to the libraries of theological institutions that have no direct link with the Roman Catholic Church (International Council of Associations of Theological Libraries). Finally, two years ago, the European Association decided to stress its European character while opting for a shorter, more striking title (BETH or European Theological Libraries). The three-fold name change demonstrates the increasing need to include the different types of libraries spread throughout Europe. It is an expression of the need to embrace diversity. Associations affiliated with BETH had done the same earlier. While only two of them modified their name, a majority of them gradually adopted an affiliation policy that was not directly linked to a specific church or faith. The French librarians recently abandoned their ecclesiastical attribute, replacing it with the more general term "Christian". The Dutch association, which started in 1946 as an ecclesiastical organisation, adopted the more general expression "theological" in 1974. While these changes might seem unimportant, they indicate the librarians' desire to enlarge their co-operation to include a greater range of libraries.

The typology of the European Associations

BETH's institutional members, being national associations, do not share identical characteristics. A first and major distinction relates to their belonging to a particular church. There is, however, no clear-cut line. In most cases, church-related associations reflect the situation in a country that has a clear majority presence of one church and a minor presence of members of other denominations.

A second distinction encompasses the associations' attitude toward non-Christian religious libraries. The by-laws of eight of the twelve associations (ABCF, ABEI, ABIE, AKThB, EKE, FIDES, VKWB, VRB) only accept Christian libraries. Although some may be willing to be more lenient, no non-Christian libraries are listed as members. Four associations, however, (ABTAPL, ABTIR, VTB, SUISSE) are open to non-Christian libraries, although only two (ABTAPL and SUISSE) have enrolled a few Buddhist, Islamic and Hebrew libraries. It would not be unrealistic to posit the future membership of non-Christian libraries, given the increasing immigration from other countries, cultures and religious traditions.

A third aspect that should not be underestimated in Europe is the presence of theological literature in institutions that have no direct connection with any ecclesiastical organisation. In many cases, these are libraries run by public authorities, such as national and/or university libraries.

While some of the 12 European associations have no significant impact outside their national frontiers, seven have a certain appeal for foreign libraries or librarians: AKThB has 18 foreign partners (11%); VKWB, 3 libraries (2%); ABCF, 9 (4%); VRB, ABEI and SUISSE each has one. Only ABTAPL claims a considerable quantity of foreign associates: 70 of the 190 libraries (27%). This is probably due to the open policy ABTAPL has pursued and to the widespread accessibility of the English language. The presence of foreign libraries in ABTAPL clearly surpasses the proportion of foreign institutional affiliates in ATLA: 17 of the 284 institutional members (6%).

ABTAPL is the association with the greatest active response to a modern multicultural society. I am convinced that the experience acquired by our British colleagues can be of assistance to other European nations who now or who will soon confront changes arising from augmented social and cultural diversity. Increasing immigration and the need for integration pose one of the major challenges to European nations. Libraries can and should play an eminent role in this process of harmonisation in human society.

Are our libraries equipped to answer the numerous demands of a culturally diverse community? The answer to this question is still rather vague and incomplete due to a lack of sufficient data. One element in the response is the great variety of theological libraries, and the rich heritage of documents they possess. An analysis of these holdings reveals two main categories. First there are libraries that serve ecclesiastical institutions directly (eg. Libraries of religious orders and monastic, diocesan and seminary libraries). These libraries generally operate for a specific group of users and have limited accessibility. Second are libraries orientated toward a wider public and not directly linked to any particular ecclesiastical organisation. This two-fold division has implications for the co-ordination and functioning of theological libraries in Europe.

Challenges for the future

1. Co-operation among ecclesiastical and non-church libraries

Neither category has a monopoly position in Europe. While the public sector's role in fostering integration and harmonisation in a multicultural society is easy to predict, it is logical to assume that church organisations would be concerned first with their own flock, on condition that they do not become exclusive or hermetically closed to the presence of other relig-

ious convictions or communities. Libraries containing religious literature that are run by more neutral or public authorities are not urged to limit their accessibility to any specific segment of society. By definition, they are required to serve a broad public without regard to creed. European libraries have a rather long tradition in this field. Many libraries continue to care for collections of religious documents, although the situation is not identical everywhere. Some nations have a consistent policy on this matter. Within the context of legal deposit, Germany, France and Switzerland have assigned certain libraries to collect all religious literature published in the country as well as a large selection of original language theological publications from other countries. Germany, for example, has "Sondersammelgebiete". For religion this has been assigned to the library of the University of Tübingen. In France, the National Library of Strasbourg has the responsibility (Pôle d'Excellence). This policy has contributed greatly to making a wide range of theological literature available to a very broad group of users. This task is one that ecclesiastical libraries would likely be unwilling or unable to perform.

Among conditions for the harmonious organisation of theological library services is that ecclesiastical and general theological libraries respect one another, co-operate, and try to complement one another in their undertakings. This is the main motive in the change from 'ecclesiastical' to 'theological' in library names: the desire to involve both categories in common action. It is encouraging to note the recent increased participation of public libraries in BETH, brought about, in part, by the greater openness and accessibility of ecclesiastical libraries. The recent evolution in European society urges us on to go further in this direction. Political leaders in Europe are increasingly convinced of the importance of a well-functioning multicultural and multifaith society. Some recent examples: the President of the French Republic received an official visit from four high-ranking representatives of the Islamic community, implicitly recognising that Islam has become the second religion in France. Starting this academic year, Islam is being taught in some German schools. The University of Bologna (Italy) inaugurated a library for its Centre of Islamic Sciences on 13 January 2000. Yet much remains to be done to foster a greater understanding of diverse cultures and traditions. Even when religion cannot be considered the unique underlying factor in this comprehensive attitude, culture and civil society have an important role to play in the process. Theological libraries of all types will have to contribute to this process.

2. An international project: ETHERELI or Multilingual Thesaurus for Religion

In the framework of this Conference, it seems fitting to stress the intercultural aspects of this project. Previous thesauri and cataloguing systems, such as U.D.C. or Dewey have certainly proven their value, but they can be considered children of a time when cultural and theological trends were mainly dominated by western Christian traditions. Approaches to religious reality are, and will increasingly be, different. The influence of other traditions, the reactions of other ethnic groups have an impact on theological reflection. Religious beliefs are numerous and sometimes are mutually exclusive. A common language – essential in this case – does not yet exist. This is an obstacle to mutual understanding and exchange of thought. This difficulty exists firstly within the Christian tradition, even before taking into account the properties of non-Christian religions. For example, Catholics speak of "Eucharist" or "Mass" while Protestant traditions tend to refer to a similar reality as the "Last Supper" or "Evening Meal". Many misunderstandings has been caused by this disparity of terms. Attention to terminology coming from non-Christian traditions might cause still greater problems for traditional or new cataloguing systems. The contribution of emerging countries is certainly positive, and confronts us with the question of our willingness and ability to reach mu-

tual understanding. This applies also to theology and thus to theological librarianship. If ETHERELI intends to "embrace the diversity" authentically, these factors cannot be overlooked. International librarianship will have an important role to play here. It would be hard to imagine the production of this kind of thesaurus without the cooperation of people from different countries, cultures, languages and religions. I am convinced that we stand at the start of a new and exciting experience. Given the multitude of languages and cultures present in Europe, we should take the lead here, but I would like to invite peoples from other continents to provide contributions that arise from their point of view. This may take the solutions to problems more intricate, but they will certainly be more rewarding for all. To navigate more easily and more accurately the enormous amount of available information on each religion, in itself a vast and diverse world, libraries and their users need better tools for accessing this variety. ETHERELI is not the only such effort. The University of Derby's Religious Resources and Research Centre is making a serious effort in the same direction with its *Religions in the U.K.: a multi-faith directory* (Weller, ed. 1997). This deals with the principal world religious traditions with significant communities in the UK and other inter-faith initiatives in Great Britain. Another example in *MultiFaithNet* a newly developed internet gateway to global electronic resources and interactions of world religious traditions and communities and the practice of inter-faith dialogue. These European initiatives should be compared with efforts in this field being made in other parts of the world. The co-operation of many will be urgently required.

It is therefore a pleasure for me to announce that ETHERELI has recently been integrated in a wider project. The national libraries of Great Britain, France, Germany and Switzerland launched the MACS project, a multilingual access application for all fields of science. BETH has been asked to take charge of defining terminology to be used in the various sectors of theological knowledge, while relying on the technical support of the general project. This contact between MACS and BETH shows that broad projects of this kind depend on large-scale international cooperation. BETH alone does not have available the means necessary to provide the required technical support, while single ecclesiastical library structures might not be ready or able to take care of all the implications of multicultural and inter-faith approaches in this vast matter.

3. Co-operation in Europe and beyond

The assumption of a new name aims to express more clearly the European context in which we operate. As demonstrated, co-operation among theological libraries in Europe does work, even with its geographic limits and with the majority of libraries operating in a Christian context. We will have to repeat our appeals to the libraries of Eastern Europe, still poorly organised because of their limited means. Two factors make this situation stressful: increasing secularisation and the expansion of a pluralistic society. Yet libraries have a great opportunity here. Although many people have lost real contact with the churches, some of them are still attracted to the cultural and artistic phenomena these churches have produced and continue to produce. Libraries are part of this picture; people who seek an answer to life's questions can frequent them.

Immigration and the geographical confluence of beliefs it brings are still a recent phenomenon. Most "new" religious communities operate in a sphere of propaganda and proselytism. Many of the "new" churches' libraries may not yet be in a position to commit themselves to an authentic dialogue with their Christian colleagues. The UK, with a longer history of settlement and migration, has already confronted the integration of new religious resources into

national life in the form of the great world religions. This makes ABTAPL the only European national religious library association with inter-religious membership, even if the numbers are not yet great. Slowly but surely other nations will undergo the same evolution. In the near future we can expect a discussion of, and policy for, enhancing our understanding of and sensibility for the multi-ethnic and multi-faith milieu in which we will be living. We can only hope that our answers will be more genuine and generous than in the past. It will not be easy for some Europeans to modify routine; it may be difficult to change customs and attitudes. The experience with assimilating Jewish libraries into religious library associations is not really a positive omen. Although there have long been Hebrew libraries on the European continent, only a few of these libraries participate in the associations, and then only in the UK and Switzerland. No contacts exist as yet in other countries.

We, like ATLA, consider ourselves an association of theological libraries without regard to creed or church affiliation. This makes it difficult to explain why these libraries are absent. To be honest, inter-religious dialogue runs the risk of becoming a question of pure brainstorming when libraries of different religions never meet, do not know one another or never work on a common project. Dialogue without practical applications, such as shaping library policy, could become a sterile exercise that only adds fuel to prejudice, intolerance and disrespect. We have had enough of these sentiments in the past.

As to geographical limitations, it should be noted that BETH did not completely abandon its international ambitions. Recent contacts, mainly with ATLA but also with RLIT (Latin American theological libraries) and ANZTLA (Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association) should be interpreted as efforts in this direction. After all, European coordination is also international since we are still different nations. Yet we must admit that, in practice, we have not gone very far. Except for ABTAPL, contacts with libraries on other continents are still rare and only occasional. Very often they are reduced to the exchange of books relegated to the closed stocks of out-of-use volumes. Surely these documents might still find a new and, in some cases, positive destination and thus serve a good cause. But honestly, dumping our surplus is not really a generous and authentic contribution to international librarianship, with all respect for the people who provide this service. Little is currently being done in Europe for the exchange of theological librarians between various countries. Only ABTAPL has sponsored a few exchanges. The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Germany) promotes international exchange and offers financial help. To my knowledge, no one from the theological sector has thus far applied.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to repeat the appeal I made to you and to colleagues in Europe at last year's conference to consider the creation of an international federation of associations of theological libraries, in a form and with a structure open to discussion. My impression is that the idea has made little headway since then. Of course we should not create another coordinating body just to hold meetings and tour the world but our ideas about "embracing the difference" could remain very abstract and provide little enrichment. What will happen, once this Conference closes? Do we return home with lofty proposals that will change nothing because of a lack of follow-up? It is already difficult to keep up with all the ideas, trends, opinions and creeds that are in circulation in a particular region of the world; it is still more problematic to intercept feelings, reactions, customs and ways of life that are geographically and humanly very far from our own. Librarians are supposed to be in a good position to play a key role in this exchange of opinion, mentality and attitude in a spirit of open confrontation

and respect for one another.

The new reality in Europe has taken the first steps in recognising, harmonising and integrating its numerous differences, the authentic treasures of its culture. There is still a long and hazardous way to go, but it is worth trying. Theological librarians should not make the mistake of falling behind. Once we have set off in this direction in Europe, we will be better equipped to share ideas and projects with colleagues from other parts of the world.

References

1. ATLA *Annual report 1998-1999*, p. 15.
2. Note its etymological origin (em+bras/brachium in Latin): to take or clasp in the arms (*The New Hamlyn Encyclopedic World Dictionary*) ISBN 060050297X
3. See Schmalor, Hermann-Josef, *Die Arbeitsgemeinschaft katholisch-theologischer Bibliotheken (AKthB)* in Genneberge, G. (ed.), *Conseil International des Associations de Bibliothèques de Théologie, 1961-1996*. Leuven: Bibliotheek van de Faculteit Godgeleerdheid van de K. U. Leuven, 1996, p. 9 (ISBN 9073583173)
4. *Summary of Proceedings of ATLA 1998 Conference* (Leesburg) pp. 237-242 and 1999 Conference (Chicago) pp. 247-252
5. The main data of this paper have been furnished by a recent questionnaire sent to all institutional members of BETH, complemented by data from the national directories of ABTAPL, AKThB, VKWB,VRB AND VTB.
6. For further information on both projects see the article: Weller, Paul "Multi-faith information resources: religions in the UK and multifaithnet" in *Bulletin of ABTAPL*, v.5, no. 2, June 1998, pp. 19-33.
7. See the article: Geuns, A. "What shall we do with the Conseil?" in *Bulletin of ABTAPL*, v. 7, no. 1, March 2000, pp. 7-10.

Further information on BETH and its membership can be found on the website at <http://www.theo.kuleuven.ac.be/beth>

Andre Geuns
President, BETH

Reprinted with permission from Bulletin of ABTAPL, v. 7, no. 3, November 2000, pp. 13-22.