

# *The World Council of Churches Library an international library?*

*Pierre Beffa*

In May 1946, two years before the official founding of the World Council of Churches, an ecumenical library was created, the first of its kind, by Dr Visser 't Hooft. However he had some difficulties in defining an ecumenical library. It seems he wanted to give precedence to 'Kirchenkunde', that is, to the description of doctrine, discipline and organization of the separate churches. Over the years, the characteristics of an ecumenical library would be clarified as the movement itself evolved, but from the beginning, it was an international library obliged to follow certain specifications.

- a) an international staff, coming from different parts of the world and mastering several languages
- b) a mandate to build a collection coming from all over the world, in many languages, many more than the ones known by the library staff, but of course covering the field of ecumenism, The World Council of Churches could provide some help.
- c) awareness to serve a world constituency: the member churches, their clergy and laity all genuinely interested persons
- d) to adopt clearly recognized international procedures. For instance, the decimal classification was chosen in the beginning, later abandoned in favour of Dewey.. It seems that Visser 't Hooft found the Decimal classification "too catholic". But daily contact with the work of Melvil Dewey has convinced me that he was not a theological genius!
- e) to be located in Geneva, an international city having more that 50 very important international libraries, with contacts between these institutions that are both necessary and profitable.

If in the beginning the WCC library was the only ecumenical library, the situation changed rapidly. In 1970, a consultation of libraries specializing in ecumenism, brought together 51 ecumenical libraries, mainly from Europe and North America, but also from Africa and Asia. These libraries were able to establish an exemplary collaboration which has subsequently been characterised by a spirit of service, exchange and giving.

As anyone knows, the problems of classification can become excruciating. My predecessor set out to solve this problem. He proposed a classification for the whole field of ecumenism. He published his work in the 1976 yearbook of the American Theological Library Association. I have revised this classification several times to take into account the frequent structural variations of the WCC which have mystified more than one librarian. It will soon be available online on the WCC website. Many institutions adopted or took inspiration from this classification, which constitutes a simple but important link between them.

We were able to collaborate with other libraries on several projects. For instance the *International Ecumenical Bibliography*, between the years 1967 to 1992. We worked closely with the team producing *RIC*, between 1968 and 1992. Together with the Institute in Jerusalem, we produced a thesaurus in French and in English covering the ecumenical field in

theology. We also benefited greatly from the work of sister libraries, especially from the library of the Centro Pro Unione in Rome which each year issues the international bibliography on bilateral and multilateral dialogues between the churches and the confessions.

In 1986, the time came for us to become computerized. In the first phase, we made an inquiry among the international libraries in Geneva and, like the World Health Organisation and the United Nations, we chose a system called URICA. It worked for more than ten years to our total satisfaction. On this system we did attempt to build a thesaurus of keywords in 6 or 7 languages. It was technically possible, and offered real possibilities, but unfortunately the task was too big for our small staff. It shows how important it could be to undertake such big projects in a milieu where international collaboration can be established. Subsequently, the computer firm maintaining URICA chose to change its management policies, and the URICA product was almost abandoned. In any case, with URICA no new developments were in sight, and internet technology was arriving. We had to change our system and this time we adopted the VTLS system which is used by the Swiss National Library and all university libraries of the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The WHO and UN also changed to a different system. The main reason for having VTLS is that, being so strong in the Geneva area, the VTLS company will perhaps be a more reliable partner in the future. An international library must be anchored locally all the same.

The people who come to work in our library are from all over the world. Normally, they stay for one or two weeks only, because the cost of living in Geneva is quite high but they bring their experience and knowledge and, when several such researchers are present at the same time in the library, the exchange can be very enriching.

During all the years of its existence, the WCC library has maintained very close contacts with many partners. The Director is secretary of BETH, member of ATLA, faithful participant of the Swiss group of theological libraries, member of the Swiss association of libraries and librarians, and member of the association of international librarians in Geneva. All these links are precious to us because, since our constituency is international, it helps enormously to know people in the various sister institutions by name.

Today, the WCC library has a presence on the internet. People everywhere have access to our catalogue online. Deliberately, we have taken the risk to invite researchers to borrow books or documents almost without restriction from our library. It was the only thing to do to convince our authorities to continue to support the library. For them, the library must serve the world constituency or disappear. But they underestimate the present difficulties with the mailing systems, and do not see realistically enough the conditions of an impoverished world. It is possible that items are stolen on the way. In contrast, we will try to put online full text documents which are needed in institutions of theological training and which we are the only ones in a position to offer.

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