From then to now: a brief historical survey of the American Theological Library Association

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I have been asked to provide a concise overview of the genesis, development, and prospects of the American Theological Library Association (ATLA). I unhesitatingly allow that this is a sketch; I am leaving out far more than I am "putting in." Let me also confess that I write about ATLA as an unabashed enthusiast; in my seven years of membership, I cannot think of a single aspect of my experience which has been anything but positive.

Remarkably, ATLA seems to be comprised exclusively of people who love the work to which they are called, and who wish to collaborate with Reminded people as much as possible. For a theological librarian, what could be better than that?

What is ATLA?

ATLA defines itself in the following statement:

"The mission of the American Theological Library Association is to foster the study of theology and religion by enhancing the development of theological and religious libraries and librarianship. In pursuit of this mission, the association undertakes:

1. to foster the professional growth of its members, and to enhance their ability to serve their constituencies as administrators and librarians;

2. to advance the profession of theological librarianship, and to assist theological librarians in defining and interpreting the proper role and function of libraries in theological education;

3. to promote quality library and information services in support of teaching, learning, and research in theology, religion, and related disciplines, and to create such tools and aids (including publications) as may be helpful in accomplishing this; and

4. to stimulate purposeful collaboration among librarians of theological libraries and religious studies collections, and to develop programmatic solutions to information-related problems common to those librarians and collections."

A look at the energies and historical circumstances which brought the association into existence goes a long way toward helping to understand where these current priorities came from.

Origins: How ATLA Came into Being

Academic curricula designed specifically for the training of clergy were a relatively late development, and evolved somewhat differently in North America than in Europe. The oldest American colleges (Harvard, Yale, William and Mary, etc.) had from the beginning a strong theological orientation, and indeed many of their graduates went into the Christian ministry. Theology, and even more acutely the matter of "theological soundness" were anything but abstract concerns in the life of late 17th and early 18th century America. Matters of doctrine, and more particularly the freedom to live according to one's understanding of that doctrine, were at the heart of the original impetus for the first settlers leaving the Mother country and founding new colonies. That such issues continued to weigh heavily in the minds of Americans is demonstrated by

phenomena such as the First Great Awakening (1738-1784) and the tension between "Old School" and "New School" Presbyterians. Such strongly held opinions gave rise to a period in which the colleges' ability to train men for ministry became suspect; some ministers began independent, home-based mentoring relationships with students, known as "Schools of the Prophets." One of the leading examples of this practice was the "Log College" founded by William Tennent (1703- 1764) in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania, (just north of present-day Philadelphia). Tennent's school was a precursor to The College of New Jersey, which eventually became Princeton University (of which the seminary where I work was a part until 1812.)

Only in the second half of the 19th Century did formally instituted theological schools (both as university-affiliated "divinity schools" or as free-standing "theological seminaries") become commonplace. Even once this model became established, it was a long while before the need for broader standards - something which could reach across institutional, cultural and even theological traditions - came to be widely recognized. Not until 1918 (!) was a national organization for theological schools formed (The Conference of Theological Seminaries and Colleges of the United States and Canada), which in 1936 became the American Association of Theological Schools (known today simply as the "ATS" or Association of Theological Schools).

Not surprisingly, the coordination and standardization of theological libraries in North America was a corollary of these earlier efforts at the broader institutional level. The primary impetus for the founding of ATLA emerged from a 1934 report produced by Professor Mark May (and others) of Yale University, The Education of American Ministers (see bibliography below). This report included a section on theological libraries, contributed by Raymond Morris, who had recently moved to New Haven to take up the position of Assistant Librarian of the newly formed Yale Divinity Library. Morris based his assessment of the state of theological libraries in the United States on a survey he had sent to 131 libraries, Morris' survey presented a rather dismal picture, and he offered six recommendations toward a remedy. Interestingly, three of the six addressed the need for higher standards for staff training. Two more recommendations confronted the inadequacy of budget resources ("the percentage of the total institution budget that is devoted to the library should not be less than 9%"). Morris concluded by recommending that institutions wean their libraries away from dependence on donated books: "All the institutions under consideration in this study need a substantial increase in the appropriation for books and periodicals, to carry on the minimum needs as indicated by their curricula. Until this money is supplied these collections will remain inadequate and insufficient."

For several reasons, Morris' observations were noteworthy: first, it marks the earliest indication of the major leadership role Morris himself was to play within (what was to become) ATLA over a lengthy career; second, it frames its prescription in terns of overall institutional health (i. e. the impossibility of having a vibrant seminary without a healthy library); third, as constructively as possible, it draws attention to a need for library collaboration which would shortly be addressed by the formation of ATLA.

Though the ALA (American Library Association) had for some years included a "Religious Books Round Table", it was becoming clear that library concerns needed to be addressed which related directly to the health of the American Association of Theological Schools and its constituent members. Hence at its 1946 biennial meeting, AATS appointed a committee to plan a meeting of library representatives from its 110 member institutions. This gathering took place in June 1947 at the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. More than fifty delegates were present most of them librarians. In the space of two days a name, a constitution and a slate of officers were adopted, and the American Theological Library Association had come into existence.

Exploits: Major Developments, 1947 to the present

The tension between "grand ambitions" and limited financial resources is a familiar scenario to anyone who has worked in library administration; this was plainly a concern at the outset of ATLA. But it is just as clear that this challenge was more than equalled by some energetic and creative minds, and the benefits of tackling these challenges in a concerted manner was recognized from the outset.

The very best way to illustrate how the association has increased the effectiveness and influence of theological libraries in North America is to outline the principal projects and challenges which ATLA has taken on.

◆ Conferences

It is impossible to overstate the positive effects generated by the ATLA annual conferences, throughout every phase of ATLA's half-century of existence. These benefits range from the simple provision of an annual exchange of ideas with colleagues, to the opportunity to participate in Interest Groups and Denominational Fellowships, to being able to hear distinguished guest speakers, etc.

When one considers the cumulative effect of more than fifty years of conferences, it could safely be concluded that no single action on ATLA's part has had a more constructive effect on the professional development of theological librarianship than the convening of the annual conferences.

◆ Personnel

In perusing the contents of the Annual Conference Proceedings from the early years, the issue of upgrading personnel standards was clearly of sustained interest. Discussions on what the standards ought to be, and how they could be attained, were frequent. These efforts were assisted considerably in the late 1950s by ATLA's securing of grants from the Lilly Endowment for $9,000. The program which received funding was intended for improving the educational qualifications of theological librarians. The same funding agency supplemented the initial grant a year later with a three-year extension, in the amount of $27,000. (Eventually the money received for this program from Lilly exceeded $100,000). In the mid-1960s, further funding for addressing personnel and training issues was received from the Sealantic Fund, for $35,000.

ATLA's making professional development a top priority, and its securing these sizable grants to implement its ideals, went a long way toward raising the standard for leadership, both in individual libraries and in the association itself.

◆ Grants

As anyone who has ever been involved in the process of composing or evaluating grant applications is aware, it takes a tremendous amount of labour, and attention to detail, to prepare a grant application. It requires also a lot of "savvy" to draft applications with a recurring record of acceptance.

Mention has already been made in passing of ATLA's receiving grants for professional development programs in the late 1950s through the mid-1960s. Here are some other examples of ATLA's distinguished record in securing funds to finance its activities:

1956 - Sealantic Fund: $80,000 grant for Microtext

1987-92 - National Endowment for the Humanities: $1.5 million for Microform and Preservation.

From a financial perspective, and even from the perspective of "institutional morale", the grant received for the ALTA Library Development Program from the Sealantic Fund (beginning in 1961) can be seen almost as a "watershed" for the association. An initial grant of $875,000 from Sealantic was issued with the proviso that each dollar from this amount directed to an ATLA member library had to be matched by a dollar from the parent institution. The result was monumental: an overall 25% increase of library expenditures at 85 participating schools during the three years of the program.

What is especially worth noting is that ATLA made strategic use of its ideas, its professional expertise, and its planning capabilities to put forward a strong case for funding. Success tends to breed success, and the association's track-record in such initiatives continues to be strong right up to the present time.

◆ Microform Projects
ATLA commissioned a Committee on Microphotography as early as 1949, and (with the help of grant money from Sealantic once again) established itself as the leading producer of microforms in the fields of Religion and Theology. Under the chairmanship of Raymond Morris (beginning in 1957), the ATLA group worked closely with expert personnel at the University of Chicago, and by the time Morris was succeeded by Charles Willard in 1974, 250 periodicals and 400 monographs had been produced. In the early 1980s the Microtext and Preservation groups of ATLA were brought together to collaborate on preservation scanning of both serials and monographs, projects which continue to the present time.

Additionally, along with the Index products, the microform series have been a major source of revenue for ATLA over the years.

◆ Indexes
The need for reliable indexing, primarily of serials in religion, was recognized even before the formation of ATLA, and over the years the range of the years covered, of the titles covered, and of the media in which the indexes are available have all continued to broaden.

The first index (IRPL - Index to Religious Periodical Literature, later known as Religion Index One) was initiated in 1948. Once technology made it possible to automate the compiling of records, supplementary indexes for Multi-AuthorWorks (Religion Index Two) and Festschriften were initiated in the early 1980s. Outside the professional horizons of theological librarianship, there is no question that the various ATLA Religion Indexes represent the association's greatest contribution to the broader world of scholarship.

Prospects: New Initiatives from ATLA
For a relatively small organization, within a comparatively little-known branch of librarianship, it is clear that ATLA has shown uncommon energy, resourcefulness and even the occasional touch of audacity during the course of its development.

Based on what is happening at present, what are the prospects for future initiatives of ATLA? Here are some examples:
• ATLA Online Serials Exchange: (Summer 2000 -
ATLA member libraries have benefited from the mutual exchange of lists of surplus periodicals

since 1948. This process is currently being moved to the World Wide Web (URL: http://www. atla.com/Se/Serials-Exchange.htmi). This stands to make it even easier for libraries which lack individual issues of a given serial (or even longer print- runs) to secure them from other member libraries. Especially for smaller libraries ,which are trying to augment their serials holdings, this ease-of-access will be a huge asset.

- ATLAS (ATLA Serials Project) : (Summer 1999-)
In the summer of 1999, ATLA initiated a project which will make available some fifty core periodicals in digital form. (http://rosetta.atla-certr.org/CERTR/AARSBL/ ATLAS.html)

The purpose of ATLAS is to digitize 50 years' worth of 50 journals related to the academic study of religion and make them accessible from the Web. In some cases, where a journal has been in existence for more than 50 years, ATLAS may include the entire run of the journal. In May 1999 ATLA announced that it had received a grant from the Lilly Foundation to develop and sustain the ATLAS project for three years. Access to ATLAS journals is offered to both institutions and individuals.

ATLA CDRI (Cooperative Digital Resources Initiative) : (Spring 2001-)
With the support of the Luce Foundation, the ATLA Cooperative Digital Resources Initiative intends to establish a freely available, web-searchable, central repository of digital resources contributed by participating libraries, as well as links to related free- standing projects.

CDRI will enable member libraries both to create digital resources and to benefit from the digital projects of other libraries. (For more information, visit: http://www.atia.com/cdri/cdri. html#schedule)

- **Task-Force on Training for Theological Librarianship (Spring 2001-)**
In the Spring of 2000, a new Professional Development Committee was formed, and given general oversight for supporting existing related programs, as well as initiating new ventures in this line. As an outgrowth of PDC activity, this Spring a "Task Force on a Theological Librarianship Course" has been created, under the chairmanship of Father Kenneth O'Malley of Dominican University, Chicago. This group has been asked "to explore the feasibility of ATLA's developing a credit course in Theological Librarianship."
This assignment has been made in response to several obvious needs: though in the U.S.A. and Canada several graduate library schools have periodically offered courses in theological librarianship, none has done so with any regularity; there is some merit in the idea of ATLA itself providing the guidance and content for such a program; the presence of the VAVW and of steadily-improving software for offering online courses opens up the potential of making such a course available more broadly than ever.

- **Special Committee of the Association to Promote International Collaboration (January 2000 -)**
Representatives from BETH have always been welcome guests at the annual ATLA conferences. Yet there has been a growing recognition of the need for more sustained liaison with the international community of theological libraries. This new Special Committee, chaired by Charles Willard of the Association of Theological Schools, has been formed to broaden awareness of activity outside North America, and to foster increased communication and collaboration between associations.

Summary
A great deal more could be said about ATLA's role in asserting the importance of theological libraries within the ATS accrediting process, of its activity in publishing reprints, monographs, and so on. But the idea here has been to provide a sketch, with an emphasis on ideas and activities,

and the items listed in the bibliography will direct those who are interested to more detailed resources.

Speaking for myself, as one very active member of ATLA, I would hope to see more of the following in the days to come.

- We in ATLA could benefit from more contact and dialogue with members of ABTAPL and BETH (this is recognized in the recent formation of the Special Committee to Promote International Collaboration).
- As the Task Force on Training for Theological Librarianship (of which I am a member) begins its discussions this summer, perspectives from ABTAPL members, especially concerning the historical development of the practice of Theological Librarianship, and the training needs for theology librarians, will be invaluable. I would be very pleased to hear from ABTAPL members who have an interest in these subjects.
- It has been my experience that literature on the history and practice of Theological Librarianship is sparse and fragmented. Though it is not yet well-indexed, and though the best material is usually buried within a lot of staff of less sustained interest, I would commend to those who share this interest the ATLA's Summary of Annual Conference Proceedings, 1947 -. It may well be one of the best (while least-known) resources available. Up to now it has been exceedingly difficult to get access to this series, but plans are underway to include this soon in the list of titles to be made available through the ATLAS project (see above.)

Working within the ATLA community, one feels a part of a tradition characterized by vision, collegiality, and resourcefulness. It is very encouraging to see that these qualities are still very much in evidence as the association looks toward the future.

Further Reading

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The ATLA website can be found at **http://www.atla.com**
David Stewart is interested in writing concerning the history of theological libraries and librarianship and has set up a list of links to scanned texts on at http://www.ptsem.edu/grow/library/nyatla/historical-sources.htm