

# Library ministry

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Last month, the University of Chicago Library, where I work, sent me to Minneapolis for a meeting of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation. The title of the conference was "Getting into the Flow" and it dealt with how libraries might facilitate the "flow" of information to students. Readers not acquainted with the behind-the-scenes action of libraries might wonder how such concerns fit into *Sightings*. But I think "information literacy" has serious implications for the study -- and perhaps even the experience -- of religion. As a librarian of faith (I'm a Christian) I approach these issues through what I think of as "library ministry."

Like librarians elsewhere, we at the University of Chicago face a sobering reality: entering undergraduates often do not know how to use our collections effectively. For instance, a recent discussion with the Library's student advisory group found that many students are unaware that the catalog allows for browsing books by call number. Other studies have revealed that our students often experience difficulty searching for multiple authors, or distinguishing between our reference collections and the main book stacks. And most librarians (and professors) can tell stories of students who committed basic research errors, such as treating *Newsweek* and the *Journal of Religion* as if they presented the same type of information.

Acquiring information literacy -- the skills of locating information, evaluating it for currency and accuracy, using it properly, and citing it appropriately -- is crucial to good modern scholarship. Until recently, this happened as a matter of course: Since information was centralized in a library collection, faculty could assume that students would become information-literate simply through use of a library, while librarians could assume students would seek them out in order to complete their assignments.

Today, however, the library is just another website among

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thousands that students have at their disposal. There is thus a growing recognition that instructing students in information literacy requires more than simply sending them to the library. And this does not apply only to undergraduates; many seminaries, for instance, now offer courses on information literacy to equip emerging ministers with the skills for sound research.

Student scholars destined for the ministry present another dimension of the need for information literacy, for such people of faith often have a vested interest in ensuring that their evangelical work -- whether in the form of scholarship or other reflections grounded in that scholarship -- is readily "heard" (or in today's context, findable on the Web).

Viewing information literacy through a theological lens makes salient further issues that might otherwise be overlooked. For instance, libraries have traditionally been collection-centric. Ranked and compared on the basis of the richness and size of their collections, librarians have focused on acquiring materials and compiling bibliographies -- leaving direct interaction with patrons a distant third priority. In this respect, some of us have not gone much beyond the days of monastic reading rooms, with books chained to the desks.

In contrast, theological librarians (after eliminating the book chains) have viewed their job as a kind of ministry to library users. Although collection-building remains important, the true business of a theological library is the people who walk through the doors. As the requirements of information literacy have grown, emphasis on the librarian as minister has provided a useful paradigm for testing the quality of service. How do librarians best serve students who will enter the pastorate or missions rather than remaining in the academy? And if students intend to minister in places without expansive

theological and seminary libraries, is it in their best interest to teach them to rely on expensive primary and secondary sources that may be inaccessible after graduation? Facilitating the use of other viable resources is, I believe, one task of library ministry.

A further aspect of library ministry would be the advocacy of deep and careful perusal of texts -- part of what philosopher of religion Paul J. Griffiths terms "religious reading." It is true that, when even very specific Google queries return thousands of hits, quick scanning and browsing are necessary to expedite scholarship. Nonetheless, this kind of approach, made necessary by the very conditions of online research, threatens to instill bad reading habits in library users.

But religion scholars and librarians alike know that texts, if approached with care, can change lives. Perhaps part of the ministry of the librarian -- and not only the theological librarian -- is to teach users a kind of information literacy that includes making the time and space for genuine textual encounters, whether in print or online.

## References

"Information Navigation 101," by Andrea L. Foster, appears in the March 9, 2007, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and may be read at: <http://chronicle.com/free/v53/i27/27a03801.htm>.

Paul J. Griffiths discusses the importance of careful reading of religious texts in *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion*.

Raymond P. Morris's article "Theological Librarianship as a Ministry" appears in the *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings 7* (1953). A downloadable pdf of this article can be accessed at: <ftp://ftp.atla.com/public/sources/morris.pdf>.