Theological librarianship: is it a ministry role?

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This article comes out of research undertaken for the subject Readings in Information Studies as part of my Masters degree studies at Charles Sturt University. The presentation made at the ANZTLA Annual Conference was a condensed version of the following paper. I have copies of all the papers in the reference list and I am happy to share if you wish to read further.

Abstract

Theological librarianship fulfills the areas of ministry described in the Bible - administration, education, service, stewardship, teaching, counselling and hospitality - making it a valid and worthwhile ministry role at a theological institution. A brief comparison of the Islamic viewpoint of theological librarianship is also undertaken, with a surprising lack of discussion about the specific role of the theological librarian in the obtainable literature. Theological librarianship, it is argued, is a valid and important ministry role within the Christian arena, a view shared by the overwhelming majority of available literature.

Introduction

Despite being in contact with almost every student who passes through a theological college at one stage or another, the ministry role of theological librarians is still not recognized by many, including other faculty members. The inspiration for this literature review has arisen from the author's participation in a librarianship role within a theological institution. Christians believe they have been called by God to perform a specific role/s that will further His Kingdom; this role is called a ministry. Is librarianship within a theological institution considered a ministry role?

Although the literature on theological librarianship covers many areas, this review will focus on the ministry aspects of the role which emerge throughout the literature reviewed. These areas are administration, education, service, stewardship, teaching, counselling, and hospitality. The aim of this literature review is to provide ample evidence that theological librarianship is indeed a ministry calling. A brief definition of what is meant by the terms 'theological librarianship' and 'ministry' will be provided before continuing on to discuss the available literature's viewpoints in this area. It is the purpose of this literature review to make known

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the belief that theological librarianship is a ministry role, and one of great importance.

The benefit to theological librarians will be one of validation that what they are doing is a real ministry role and should be regarded by others as such. It is hoped that this review will be used to demonstrate the positive effects theological librarians have on the lives of students, staff and visitors to the library and the influence they impart over multiple future ministries. Investigation into whether or not the viewpoint of theological librarianship from an Islamic perspective differs to that of the traditional Christian viewpoint will also be undertaken to compare the religions' viewpoints of the librarians' role within a theological institution, enabling an exchange of ideas and mutual understanding.

Background of Theological Librarianship in Discussion

Some of the literature gathered for this review looks at the role of theological librarianship from the beginning, when academic professors were placed in charge of library collections and professional librarians were not employed at theological institutions. Libraries in theological institutions began to be run by academics as a 'side-line' until the importance of the library was realized, when professional librarians, or at least people with library training, were employed (Jordahl 1990, p.Ê155). Teaching staff in theological institutions have long held the view that their role is a ministry one because teaching is one of the gifts specifically mentioned in the Bible (Rom 12:7). What about the role of the theological librarian?

The fact that theological librarianship as a ministry role is still being discussed in the literature today indicates that it has not received the perception of a ministry by those with whom theological librarians work and share that ministry. Theological librarians still feel the need to validate their positions as ones of ministry to others. The date given for the professional origin of the theological librarian is 1947 (Collier 1963, p.121), and since that time theological librarians have been discussing their ministry role in the literature.

What is Theological Librarianship?

A theological librarian is one who works in a library connected to a theological institution, or as a theological departmental librarian in a larger library covering a number of subject areas. Theological librarians have been described as "unique providers of religious and theological information" in schools "that have as their purpose the training and educating of people for ministry" (Keck 1996, p. 172). This view is supported by Dunkly (1991, p. 230) who comments that "no template exists for the job of theological librarian...but there is one comprehensive set of tasks and relations for theological librarianship wherever it is practiced."
Theological librarianship has been examined by Jordahl "to determine whether it has features distinguishing it from academic librarianship in general" (1990, p. 153). He discusses theological librarians as having more of a role in the education of the students at their institution than those students at other academic institutions. That the theological librarian should be portrayed as a teaching colleague for the part they play within the student's growth - academically, personally and spiritually - is a view held by Saboy (1978, p. 68), while Wilcox (1988, p. 31) suggests that it is the librarian's calling to shape and carry out the mission of the educational institution and the church as a whole.

Dunkly points out that theological librarianship is a "worthy primary vocational option" (1991, p. 229), while Blackman recognizes theological librarianship as a profession that plays an important part "stimulating the intellectual life of the academic community; ...support[ing]

instructional programs and research; provid[ing] scholarly information services; teach[ing] formally and informally in the classroom and individually one-on-one; stimulat[ing] and facilitat[ing] use; conduct[ing] research and publish[ing] [and] participat[ing] actively in the life of the academic community" (1986, p. 31).

Discussion about the training of librarians in order for them to become theological librarians is valid. Penner (2006, p.7) asks do theological librarians have professional library training or theological training in order to work with theological materials? Being "gatekeepers of knowledge" (Penner 2006, p. 8) means that librarians must be selected for, hired in, or pursue for themselves, the role of theological librarian. Is it any different to a Christian performing in any other role within a theological institution? Penner (2006, p. 8), Jordahl (1990, p. 165), Collier (1963, p. 115) and Dunkly (1991, p. 4) all think it is.

The theological librarian influences and supports multiple other ministries in a way that a Christian in another role at a theological institution is not able to (Penner 2006, p. 8). Students who go out after graduation to fulfill their own ministry callings will have been in some way shaped and guided by their theological librarian in their quest for a better understanding of God and His purpose for them. The theological librarian is often the one who is contacted for help and information when the student is in the field, more so than the college administrator, for example.

A profession requires "specialized knowledge and long academic preparation in not only skills and methods but also in the scientific, historical and scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods" (Collier 1963, p. 116). Theological librarianship, in particular, is a profession requiring a sense of theology, of the church, of the community of scholarship, and a care for people to be effective (Dunkly 1991, p. 230). Several authors speak of

the professionalism required by theological librarians to perform in their position (Collier 1963; Dunkly 1991).

What is a Ministry?

A ministry, vocation or calling in the Christian sense is one's own God-given purpose for being. Peterson describes all ministry as "some sort of service" (2001, p. 236), while the traditional biblical calling pictures a person who has a special gift to perform a special purpose (Marty 2002, pp.3-4). Edwards discusses that the "power of divine calling is not in how one is called but that one is called in the first place" (1988, p. 61). "A calling is a task set by God with a sense of obligation to work for purposes other than one's own" (Christopherson 1994, p. 219), or "at its most basic level, is the expression of a higher purpose" (Maxwell 2005, p. 76). Proof of a calling to a particular ministry role comes out of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It can't be quantified or proven literally but is based on one's faith and belief.

A ministry calling is not always one to the priesthood (Stevens 2006). "Work …is a calling from God, a sharing in divine creativity which is directed toward the common good as well as the transcendent horizon, the Kingdom of God" (Wilcox 1988, p. 34). Librarianship "suffers from a stereotype in the minds of the public" (Morris 1953, p. 32) and is not generally thought of as a ministry possibility. The calling to theological librarianship is one for enthusiasts, and is not just a job; a view shared by Collier (1963, p. 121), Norlin (2006, p. 351) and Davis (2002, p. 41). As the notion of a 'calling' into ministry tends to be a personal one, it is difficult for non-Christian researchers to define whether or not theological librarianship is indeed a ministry.

The calling to ministry in the field of theological librarianship is a personal one between the librarian and God, thereby making it difficult, if not impossible, to quantify or explain how it fits without an

understanding of the Christian faith and of a ministry calling. Many of the articles discussing theological librarianship as a ministry role come from the personal viewpoints of the authors (Lewis 1988; Morris 1953; Smith 2002a).

There is also some discussion in the literature about the qualities and attributes of a Christian who works as a librarian in a 'secular' library/institution. The ministry attributes discussed below should be practiced by any Christian, regardless of where they find themselves employed. Although this review is discussing theological librarianship specifically, every Christian should try to attain the ministry features in their position to make it worthwhile and valuable to themselves.

How does Theological Librarianship fit into this definition of Ministry?

Christian traditions such as the Roman Catholic and Evangelical traditions seem to view theological librarianship as a ministry calling. The "librarian is called to be an active participant shaping and carrying out the mission" (Wilcox 1988, p. 31) of the church and their own theological institution.

An early defining paper for theological librarians comes from Raymond Morris in 1953. Much of the subsequent literature refers back to this masterpiece of defining theological librarianship as a ministry (Kortendick 1965, p. 107; Smith 2002a, p. 14; Smith 2002b, p. 70; Trotti 1982, p.158). In it, Morris (1953) describes theological librarianship as a personal ministry of the librarian to his/her students, a sentiment that is echoed throughout most of the literature regarding theological librarianship as a ministry.

Not only do most theological librarians view their role as a ministry one, it is also conceived as "an aid in multiple future ministries" (Trotti 1982, p. 157) as the theological librarian supports "those training

to serve their faith" (Womack 2006, p. 6). By positively affecting the lives of current students, the theological librarian can make an impact on the lives of a multitude of others when each student pursues their own ministry calling in the world. This promotes the idea of boundless ministry opportunities in theological library service (Gamble 1962, p. 47) whilst "equipping God's people" (England 2001, p. 133).

The Bible, as a basis for Christians in any profession, defines ministry as a calling to prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing, leadership and showing mercy in Romans 12:3-8; and apostleship, evangelism, pastoring and teaching in Ephesians 4:11-12 (Barker 1995); while in 1 Corinthians 12:28-31 it is seen as a calling to apostleship, prophesying, teaching, miracle working and administration (Barker 1995). In the following sections, how theological librarianship fits into these areas of ministry will be discussed.

Administration

Administration abilities in the theological library, indeed any library, especially when there are restricted numbers of staff, is an important quality for the librarian. The need of the librarian to be practiced in the art of administration is mentioned by both Morris (1953) and Nicole (1982) as a necessary trait to be successful in their role. "Orderliness is of the very essence of librarianship" (Nicole 1982, p. 109), and without it, the library cannot perform as it is meant to.

Education

Teaching is one of the ministry roles mentioned by the apostle Paul in the Bible [Rom 12:3-8; Eph 4:11-12; 1 Cor 12: 28-31] (Barker 1995). In an extensive survey, Keck (1996, p. 173) indicates that a number of theological librarians view themselves as being part of the teaching ministry of their educational institution, enhancing and adding to that education, thereby also

participating in it. Both the faculty and the theological librarian must realize that they "both have a stake in the teaching program of the school" (Gamble 1962, p. 46).

The educational aspect of theological librarianship is often mentioned in the literature by such authors as Dunkly (1991, p 229), Elliott (2006), Gamble (1962), Jordahl (1990, pp. 157-8), Keck (1996, p. 172), Lincoln (2004, p. 5), Lloyd (2006, p. 125), Morris (1953), Saboy (1978) and Stewart (2001, p. 18). Crow (2006), Pacala (2006), Scrimgeour (2006) and Uhrich (2006) also discuss the role that the theological librarian plays in the education of the students at their institution.

It is important to remember that most theological institutions exist for the purpose of educating students for a ministry role, whether it be priesthood, lay ministry or general Christian ministry. The role of the theological librarian plays a large part in the success of these students in their particular ministry as they "are equipping the people of God [i.e. the students] for their work and mission, not only in the church but also in the world" (England 2001, p. 139) by "fostering and satisfying curiosity" (Stewart 2001, p. 18). The process of fostering religious development in others, whilst at the same time performing an educational role, is an important task of the theological librarian, a view shared by Keck (1996, p. 172) and Gruzka (1978, p. 35).

Servanthood

"All ministry is some form of service" (Peterson 2001, p. 236). The librarian's personal viewpoint of their role within both the educational institution and religious denomination they serve is of the utmost importance as it is vital to the way they approach their position. The position of theological librarian should be supported as much as that of the teaching staff in promoting the value of the theological librarian (Penner 2006, p. 8).

If the theological librarian "feels a sense of commitment to the overall cause and purpose of the institution" in which they are serving, job satisfaction is increased as tasks can be fulfilled on both a professional and ministry level (Keck 1996, p. 180). "There is a theological and spiritual focus to their work that adds to their satisfaction and contentment in that they are engaging in both the ministry of their institution and the ministry of service possible through theological librarianship" (Keck 1996, p.181). Endeavoring to serve future generations by ministering faithfully to the current generation is a prevailing theme throughout much of the literature (Kortendick 1965; Morris 1953; Nicole 1982; Terhune 2002).

Theological librarians are called to serve, bringing our "moral and religious convictions and a commitment to help others" (Blackman 1986, p. 30). The personalized service provided by theological librarians to the library's patrons is discussed as important to the role of the librarian by Wilcox (1988, p. 34) and Lyons (1986, p. 34) who agree that the purpose of the theological librarian is to assist library users with such a service.

Much of the available literature mentions the serving aspect of theological librarianship as another important part of the librarian's ministry role (Blackman 1986; Lewis 1988; Lyons 1986; Wilcox 1988). To serve users could be as basic as simply being of assistance to them (Wilcox 1988, p. 34). Combining the professional traditions of librarianship, education and ministry, all of which are identified with serving, are discussed by Lewis (1988, p. 157) and Nicole (1982) as being "an avenue of singular blessing open to the efforts of the librarian" (Nicole 1982, p. 108). Nicole goes on to specifically identify it as one of the 'spiritual dimensions' of theological librarianship (1982, p. 106).

Stewardship

The biblical view of stewardship is one of performing entrusted tasks faithfully (Peterson 2001, p. 234). "Without the collections contained in theological libraries and the systems of access provided by theological librarians, no one in the body of Christ would have access to the record of salvation history" (Peterson 2001, p. 235). Peterson comments that part of the calling to theological librarianship involves a "sense of receiving a commission from a higher authority, of receiving a stewardship to be theological librarians. It is our task to collect the record of salvation history and preserve it for the future while using the resources given to us in a way that furthers God's plan for salvation" (Peterson 2001, p. 235).

Preserving materials and providing the best possible means of access to the materials within the library's collection is an important part of the librarian's role, whatever institution they are representing. Several writers mention the importance of the theological librarian's stewardship role within the library and within the institution of which the library is an important part (Coalter 2006, p. 39; Peterson 2001; Womack 2006, p. 5).

Teacher

The theological librarian provides the "tools to cultivate the intellectual life of the students, to teach students to think critically; [and] to educate the whole person" (Blackman 1986, p. 30). The theological librarian's task is to help "students develop life-long learning habits [and] to enlarge and illuminate the life of the mind requiring commitment and devotion to our profession and the institution's mission" (Blackman 1986, p. 31).

Teaching students to have a lifelong commitment to access research and information, to use theological materials well and for their intended purpose, and to bring others into the Body of Christ is a role for the theological librarian. Saboy (1978, p. 68) and Dunkly (1991, p. 221) share the view that faculty members must view the librarian as a teaching colleague or partner.

Counselling

Counselling comes out of the desire to care for people (Dunkly 1991, p. 223), which is the ability to put the student/user before the material contained in the library. Penner (2006, p. 8), Kortendick (1965, p. 110) and Davis (2002, p. 43) also identify this as an important facet of theological librarianship. "Rarely has the counseling role of the librarian been exploited fully" (Jay 1969, p. 11), but it is a role that Jay (1969,Êp. 11) says theological librarians continually face. Shaping the "promptings of conscience and ethical and moral perception" (Morris 1953, p. 36) is a role not often attributed to the theological librarian. Kortendick (1965, p. 110) contributes that the theological librarian's awareness of students' personalities, talents, potential, prejudices, desires, interests and sensitivities are opportunities for those librarians to counsel the student not only in the use of the library, but in life in general.

> "What greater cause can we be involved in and committed to than to dedicate ourselves, our training and whatever skills we have, to the preparation of religious leaders, to have a part in training those who are to devote their lives to preaching the Word of God by word and example?" (Kortendick 1965, p. 107).

Hospitality

Penner (2006), Peterson (2001) and Davis (2002) raise hospitality, or special consideration, as a feature of theological librarianship. By welcoming students into

the library to share in the wealth of knowledge contained therein, and assisting them to use it to its fullest potential, the theological librarian is ministering to their academic needs, but also their spiritual needs as they will grow with what they learn.

Opportunities for "boundless ministry" (Gamble 1962, p. 47) exist for the theological librarian. "Theological librarians identify with the mission of their institution of theological education and feel that they participate in that ministry" (Keck 1996, p. 174). The way a theological librarian interacts with visitors and users of the library indicates their own views of their position. Peterson describes hospitality as the "single most direct way that theological librarians help to build the Kingdom of God on earth, and the building of this Kingdom is a function of ministry" (2001, p. 237), and describes the librarians as ministers of the theological library, thereby agreeing that they are functioning in a ministry role (Peterson 2001, p. 238).

Islamic Theological Librarians

There is a large amount of literature detailing theological librarianship that has been discussed in previous sections of this review from the Christian tradition of theology. But what about other religions, and the librarians in their theological institutions? Is theological librarianship viewed in the same light when the religious philosophy is different? The amount of readily accessible literature on the topic is very limited but the subject is one worthy of further investigation because if theological librarians view their positions in the same way, no matter what their religious viewpoint is, it will enable an easy communication to occur and education of students in other philosophies to promote religious tolerance and acceptance.

The common thread of the literature from an Islamic viewpoint is that theological libraries are valuable resources, but the

role of the theological librarian, in particular, is not discussed specifically (Ali 2004, Al-Suwyyan 2004, Khan 1988, Taher 2006). The role of the theological librarian within Islamic theological education is seldom discussed in the limited amount of literature available. Hanif (1990, p. ii) envisages librarians in the future being more specialized in terms of the subject matter they deal with but there is no mention of theological libraries or their future roles. The importance of various kinds of libraries is recognized by Ameen-e-Mudassar (2005) with religious libraries being one of many types listed. Yuksel also discusses this area as many Islamic libraries have great cultural and heritage value (1989, p. 678). There is, however, no mention of any kind of ministry role which may be partaken by the librarian of such a library. The closest Islamic concept of a ministry calling is known as Da'wah, which means "missionary work for Islam" (Farlex 2006) or the invitation to invite others to join Islam (Wikipedia 2006). Theological librarianship is not mentioned in any of the literature as a vehicle for Da'wah work but it could certainly fulfill this avenue for Muslims because librarians are gatekeepers to the vast amount of knowledge both Muslims and non-Muslims may need to access.

Papers from such conferences as the Conference of Islamic Librarians and Information Scientists (later Conference of Muslim Librarians and Information Scientists, COMLIS) provide a viewpoint of Muslim librarians' own perceptions of their roles within society as being one of service to society, "uphold[ing] the highest levels of expertise for the benefit of society" (Agha 1988, p. 15). Followers of Islam believe in the importance of self improvement through the gaining of knowledge, meaning libraries are a valued resource within the Islamic community, but the literature does not discuss the value or importance of the librarian in charge of these libraries (Al-Suwyyan 2004; Ali 2004).

The language of Islam is Arabic, so by limiting this review to English language material, important viewpoints may have been overlooked. This area would benefit from further research so as to provide a greater understanding among theological librarians of differing religions and their viewpoints about their positions.

Conclusion

As Lyons comments, at "last, but never least, the staff of the library must be considered as minsters to the college, and to each other" (Lyons 1986, p. 34). This literature review has defined the meanings of 'theological librarianship' as librarians working in institutions with libraries consisting either wholly, or partly, of a theological nature and 'ministry' as a God-given purpose for one's life. The ensuing discussion on whether or not theological librarianship is in fact a ministry reveals that, overall, the literature confirms that it is.

No matter what the position a Christian finds for employment, if it is their calling or purpose to be there, they should fulfil the ministry aspects of the position to the utmost of their ability to perform well in the position and be satisfied that they have done their best. Theological librarians in the majority believe they are called to their positions to perform a ministry role that is special and valuable to the students of the institution, the faculty, and the public. By displaying a commitment to administration, education, servanthood, stewardship, teaching, counselling and hospitality, the theological librarian can impart a positive Christian lifestyle and have an impact on people now and into the future. The lack of evidence from the Islamic viewpoint of theological librarianship is an area worthy of further in-depth analysis as religious standpoints on a large number of areas are constantly under discussion. Whilst there is limited research discussing Islamic theological librarians, further investigation is required for an understanding of the Islamic viewpoint of theological librarianship and the role librarians play within that religion. This is an important area for the exchange of ideas, discussion and mutual understanding between beliefs.

The belief that theological librarianship is a ministry demonstrates the importance of theological librarianship for the librarians in these roles to feel validated and important as they minister to the needs of students, faculty and other users of their libraries. The implications of this view of theological librarianship are that librarians should feel confident that they are helping to minister to thousands of people, albeit indirectly, an impact that many other 'ministers' would envy. Ample evidence has been provided to enforce the consensus that theological librarianship is indeed a ministry role, and one to be proud of at that!

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