

PROFESSIONALISM IN THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIANSHIP

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Sociologists, in defining professionalism, have usually included elements such as formal training validated by an association, the development of specialized skills based on theoretical knowledge and a sphere of service in which such training and skills can be applied responsibly. During the last decades, however, we have begun to witness the 'deprofessionalization' of traditional authorities and, at the same time, the 'professionalization' of practically everybody else. Definitions are in a state of flux. The Library Association of Australia is just one organization which is currently examining its policies on professional membership and determining, in a changing information environment, the meaning of professional understanding and competence.

Among those who direct theological libraries in Australia and New Zealand, few have received formal training in librarianship. Some are clergy professionals. Others, having worked beside clergy for a time, have become subject specialists by some sort of osmosis. Still others are well regarded for their education, abilities and performances. We acknowledge numerous modes of professional development and also that theological librarians are indeed a mixed breed. So what claim can we make as members of this heterogenous group which has now formed itself into a Theological Library Association? Most of us administer or work in special academic libraries, usually in theological settings but, given the size of our staffs and collections, this hardly constitutes a claim for status. At a practical level, in the course of the day, most of us are likely to function as caretakers, technicians, baby sitters, confessors; you name it. A Ph.D. at my establishment is seen to stand for 'director of photocopying'. So much for elitist claims.

We do claim, however, something of the meaning of the ancient word **professio**, a declaration, an intention to serve, a vow to put our knowledge and associated skills at the disposal of the information needs of a community. This is what we are about and, following that **professio**, it means commitment, integrity and responsibility. Quite delightfully it also means collegiality, the sharing of these understandings. It means dependence upon our association with each other, such as our consultations and their continuing friendships, as a major source for ideas and of judgments on our work.

We can consider professionalism, albeit loosely defined but seriously intended, in relation to several areas of responsibility. Firstly with regard to the library profession itself and then to our institutions, faculties and students, to our collections and their development and to modes of rationalization and resource sharing.

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I.

In appointing future supervisory staff to their theological libraries institutions will have several options. They may appoint persons who have received no training in librarianship or theology. Alternatively, persons with some form of library training or theological education. They may also appoint someone who is trained both in librarianship and in theological disciplines. The Peterson *Report on theological libraries for the twenty-first century* indicates that our American colleagues are convinced that a degree in librarianship rather than a degree in theology is of first importance for theological librarianship.¹ In view of the history of the mismanagement of many libraries in Australia I, for one, find their verdict persuasive.

Much harm has been done to libraries and to the cause of librarianship by goodwilled people who were once appointed as solutions to the institution's bookkeeping problems of one sort or another. The list of penalties paid, and being paid, is a long one. It includes inadequate reference and bibliographic services, poor cataloguing and sometimes the absence of subject cataloguing, inaccurate or incomplete orders placed with suppliers who warn us that such incompetence helps keep prices up. And, most seriously, the penalties of isolation from centres of advice and co-operation.

The normal route to professional status in librarianship is through courses, undergraduate or graduate, library technician or librarian, offered by library schools around the country and monitored by the Library Association. Although there is always some irrelevance and wastage in such programmes my advice to those who have time, in terms of hours and years, is to take such a course and to seek membership in the Library Association. One would hope that administrators will encourage and help facilitate this because the long term goal of theological institutions should be to require their librarians to be professionally trained or, at least, to see that their libraries are directed by an appropriately equipped professional librarian. In certain situations, where there is a cluster of libraries, it could make sense to jointly appoint such a person as mobile supervisor of the several libraries and of their non-professional staffs. This salary cost saving would bring the benefits of professional leadership, the rationalization of work loads and of the collections and would develop co-operative services within the cluster of libraries.

On the matter of our relationship with the library profession, a word is in order about institutional membership. Without equivocation, I would insist that all theological libraries become institutional members of the Library Association. There is a limited membership which enables the purchase and redemption of inter-library loan vouchers but full membership with subscriptions to the Association's newsletter and journal is much more to the point. I commend also membership of AACOBS, the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services, for which the fee for small libraries is modest indeed. It is sometimes said, oversimply perhaps, that the Library Association is for librarians while AACOBS is for libraries. The point is that affiliation with both organizations will help keep us aware of developments in library services, of co-operative structures such as inter-library loan issues and of such matters as the most recent copyright legislation. Most importantly these memberships will provide access to a critical network of advice, review and continuing education. Professionalism means sharing, participating in these forms of association.

II.

We turn now to professionalism in relation to our institutions and our administrations. Few of us would have inherited a ponderous organizational structure, but there can be other problems and worse fates. Some librarians live constantly with the shadows of managerial philistinism while others are expected to function in the absence of guidelines. Some are responsible to people who have neither the time nor the specialized knowledge to provide leadership or direction in library matters. Whatever the situation the librarian had better be an accomplished mediator.

¹ Peterson, Stephen L. "Theological libraries for the twenty-first century: Project 2000 final report." *Theological education* 20 no. 3, Supplement (1984), 60.

The library committee, however called, needs to be made aware that the conception of a theological library as merely a collection of materials and the role of the librarian as a passive organizer and dispenser is altogether outdated. Of course we shall continue to collect, store and retrieve items as we always have but, increasingly, librarians are required to take the initiative in collection building, in bibliographic work and in user education. In other words, librarians must be seen to have responsibility for determining the shaping and future of the library.

Professionalism in this context means the formalising of relationships between the institution, its library committee and its library staff. It means, for example, the formulation of staff role statements which clarify reporting responsibilities and functions. It means the choice and acceptance of an appropriate and an identifiable salary structure with related conditions of service. The Library Association regularly publishes the salary scales adopted by various types of libraries; those of universities and colleges, I suggest, are appropriate to most of our situations.

Professionalism also means the preparation of an annual budget for the library in plenty of time for the coming year. This should be prepared by the librarian, possibly using worksheets for discussion purposes and including, as applicable, salaries and salary costs, administration expenses, building costs and acquisition amounts, with the latter being divided, at least notionally, between monographs, serials, standing orders, audiovisual items and whatever else you may collect, and binding costs. There should be neither procrastination nor guesswork in this budget formulation. The librarian and the library committee together should be developing budgetary and fiscal experience. They should understand overseas and local price differences, inflation factors and the fortunes of the dollar and, to repeat, the librarian should be the central advisory person in this financial planning. The librarian is seeking funding for the sole purpose of increasing the quality of education in a particular institution. For the sake of that high purpose it is wise to be tolerant but it is foolish to be innocent.

One addendum. Professionalism also means the prompt payment of accounts. As some libraries are, administratively, part of a larger whole, so their invoices may be passed down the line to the institution's accounts department, there to remain until some judgment day. This can mean delays in payment and, unless the librarian resorts to a duplication of clerical effort, she or he may lose touch with the status of accounts and realize problems only when there are less than patient requests for payment. It is essential that goodwill prevail between the librarian and the library suppliers, even if this means that the librarian does the library accounts and prepares cheques for payment. Attention to such matters of administration is critical; the patterns of administration adopted by our institutions in the next few years will be of major consequence in determining the status and future of theological librarianship in this country.

III.

If librarians have any pretensions to making a name for themselves it will probably not be in areas of administration but in the public sector, in their day to day responses to requests for information. Here they are called to demonstrate their role in the teaching-learning process. Professionalism, in relation to user services, has to do with the way a librarian relates to a particular academic community.

How do faculty members view the library in the scheme of things? Faculty perception of the librarian may be simply that of a warm custodial body or suffering servant who could make little impact upon their work. After all, these teachers have ordered their own books, subscribed to serials, organized them on shelves in some sort of fashion and subjected them to serendipity for many years. What is special about the role of a librarian? Then there is the faculty member who is still bogged down in traditional views about the autonomy of academics and their self-justifying research and who will tolerate no intrusion, no advice. Sadly you may find that an instructor of this persuasion has been entrusted with the selection of library materials. That, in cases I have known, amounts to putting Dracula in charge of the blood bank.

Members of faculty may also regard the librarian as an academic partner. For the truth is that instructional staff are not necessarily proficient in the knowledge and management of information resources. Given the changing character and formats of these tools they will usually need to be

briefed and tutored by an experienced librarian. Indeed some will feel threatened by new indexing systems, whether manual or automated; resources which call into question the adequacy of their serendipity. It is not unusual to find that their students know more about exploiting the new data banks than they do. This, of course, is not to judge but simply to describe. It does call, however, for sensitivity on the part of the librarian and for a sensible collaboration between the instructional and library staffs. With respect to courses being offered, co-operation should begin at the point of course preparation. That is, the librarians should be involved when the faculty are planning new courses and they should be raising the right questions. Are there appropriate and adequate resources to support a new course? Is there additional funding for new thrusts in the library's collection? What are the faculty expectations about the nature of the help librarians should offer students taking particular courses? Assistance may well vary from one course to another.

Such collaboration between the teaching faculty and the librarian is important to the institution. It usually follows that the greater the teacher's understanding and critical use of library resources the more informed will be the use of the library by students. The librarian may spend little time in actual teaching but her or his proper role is integrally related to that of instruction. The point is that proficient use of the library, bibliographic competence, the ordered use of information resources are all valid educational objectives for which theological librarians must accept responsibility. In the past, and in some places today, a student's perception of library use is that of a patchwork of assignments with little connective bibliographic tissue. The old text book - reading list syndrome has always discouraged anything like an adequate and systematic use of library materials. Such spoon feeding seldom impels students to explore and to exploit strategies for independent learning. Our response, as librarians, is to establish an effective learning environment, to orient students to the library's systems, resources and services and so to help them develop a methodology for research. The benefits of training students in information retrieval are immediate with respect to their course work. But they are also long-range in that such skills develop a capacity for independent study and for personal and professional growth. Where the resources of a particular library are not extensive then the student should be introduced to larger library systems and have the experience of working with reference collections. Our professional role here means that we will take initiatives to ensure that students know the purpose and use of information resources. Any hopes we have for their life-long learning depend upon it.

IV.

The important matters of collection development and the formulation of appropriate policies have been dealt with in several of our conference workshops. Rather than repeat the issues discussed there let me underline the close planning relationship between collection development and resource sharing.

It should be the responsibility of the librarian to match collections to academic and/or professional and ministerial requirements, both actual and potential. Financially, as we well know, all is not possible. It is critically important, therefore, that the library's administration, including of course the librarian, be clear about the nature and purpose of the library it is creating.

It may be helpful to distinguish four types of theological libraries.

1. **A Core Collection** library holds materials which relate directly and depart little from the undergraduate curriculum being taught. This collection will meet the immediate needs of the students of the institution; it will not meet faculty requirements. It is essentially a current, working collection.
2. **A Special Collection** library holds and collects in discreet subject areas, for example, denominational material or that related to the history of a religious order or mission. Certain university colleges have this kind of responsibility - Queen's College, within the University of Melbourne, is the recognized depository for Methodist historical materials.
3. **A combination of a Core Collection and a Special Collection** with the attendant difficulties of holding and servicing curriculum-related materials on the one hand and specialized material, possibly of research dimensions, on the other.

4. **A Research Collection** library intends to supply materials, in certain well-defined subject areas, through to post-graduate levels. These collections are designed to meet faculty needs, the requirements of students taking advanced degrees and others involved in research projects. In such a library the staff must stay in touch with recent research in given areas, anticipate future trends and translate these into selection policies and reference capabilities.

Now there are overlaps and we should certainly want to refine this typology by assigning more precise collection levels. The point being stressed, however, is the importance of defining the nature and extent of a particular library system. That is the prior question before any discussion of library standards and the adequacy of our collections.

The formulation of standards for collection building acted as a spur both to sub-standard libraries and to burgeoning ones aiming at self-sufficiency. Today, however, the economy is not as flush as in the halcyon days of standard making and we have had to learn other lessons. Positively we have had some experience with union listing and networking. There is a much improved inter-library loan system. We are more aware, one would hope, of the distinction between qualitative and quantitative standards. So, in all, we should think of sets of standards, not whimsically as noble aspirations but, once again, as adhering to a rational master plan for a particular library.

While recognizing that some theological libraries exist in consortia, my own view is that there are too many in this country which are bent, some very bent indeed, on developing parallel collections. They acquire materials without any reference to what neighbouring libraries are holding or collecting systematically. Church related libraries and archives are duplicating each other's intentions and continuing to confuse library and archival deposits and functions. Why, in spite of complaints about lack of funding, are we still witnessing an immediate and long-range waste of resources? In the report mentioned earlier, Stephen Peterson reflects on theological library co-operation in the United States. He makes the point that co-operation is hindered by "a strong institutional sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency which obtains in almost every school". Then he goes on, "Almost paradoxically, these same institutional proclivities have not produced a high degree of local self-confidence about library development".² That comes at the end of a particularly important report; surely there is a message there for us all.

Could we begin to move more nearly toward a co-ordinated system in which libraries work within well-defined and published parameters with respect to their core collections and their special collections? And to a system which assumes a minimal number of research level libraries, with the thought that these libraries would also need to rationalize their collection policies? Can we engender enough interest and support in our newly formed Association for this level of co-operation and interdependence? In this context then, professionalism has to do with sensible rationalization, the avoidance of unnecessary duplication of services and resources, human and material. As with everything else we do, collection development should be informed not only by the intentions of our institutions but, of necessity, by the collegiality and experience of the library profession at large.

² Ibid., 93.