

A NATIONAL COLLECTION IN RELIGION

Robert Barnes

The purpose of this article is to stimulate thinking about a possible national library collection, or collections, in religion in Australia. It is provoked by the National Library of Australia's *Strategic Plan 1993-98*, which has now been widely discussed around the country. One element in the NLA's strategy which this Plan reveals is to promote in Australia the concept of the Distributed National Collection. Presumably the DNC will eventually include a designation of certain libraries as between them holding the national collection in religion.

My first observation is that the National Library itself will include only part of that collection. The NLA *Collection Development Policy*, 1990, pp. 85f., outlines the NLA's existing collection in religion (if anything rather understating its size and importance). However the *Policy* goes on to signal a fairly drastic cut-back in its collecting intentions for religion. The only areas which will continue to be favoured are:

"...the social and historical aspects of religious life, which will be collected at a level capable of supporting sustained independent study of the countries and regions which are accorded the highest geographical priority. Where sociopolitical impact is very high as, for example, in the case of the history of missionary activity in the East Asia/Pacific region, or Islamic feelings in Indonesia, collecting will continue to be supported at the research level. General material supporting the understanding of the development of the churches in Australia will also be sought on the

research level."

I should note that, in the NLA's assignment of geographical priorities, all Middle Eastern countries receive Level 1, or the lowest priority. I should also note that the NLA's serials collection in religion has now been substantially pruned, though perhaps not yet as far as its statement of intentions might imply.

Let me also say something also about the Australian National University Library. Religious Studies as such is only a minor part of ANU's undergraduate and graduate studies. However for some areas of religion the Library's holdings are quite strong. These areas include: philosophy of religion; Biblical studies; patristic studies; to some extent medieval and Reformation theology; and certain areas of church history which are also important for general history. The Library's holdings on some areas of "primitive" religion are strong (e.g. the religions of Australia and Melanesia); its general holdings on Islam are fairly strong, and for Southeast Asian Islam very strong; and its holdings on Hinduism and Buddhism very strong. On the other hand holdings are more limited for: post-Biblical Judaism; modern Christian theology and pastoral theology; many areas of church history (e.g. North American); most areas of Christian missions other than the Pacific; and some areas of "primitive" religion (e.g. African).

The ANU Library is well developed in many areas of general relevance to religion, e.g. the history of philosophy; ancient, medieval and modern European history; anthropology; art history; Greek and Latin language and literature; English literature; and so on.

I should say that the ANU Library, like all libraries in Australia and most in the world, is today having to define its objectives more precisely than in the past. In general religion is not seen as an area of academic strength at ANU. Some of the library holdings in religion that I have mentioned will no doubt be kept up to strength, because they concern areas which *are* important for ANU; others may not.

I now return to the question of a national collection in religion. At present plans are under discussion for a National Asian Information Centre (tentative name), based on the joint holdings of the National Library and the ANU Library, but accessible via AARNet to the rest of Australia. Such a centre would of course include much on Asian religions, and might in fact form the designated national collection on those religions.

This would leave the question to be decided of a national collection on religion in general and on Christianity in particular. At this point let me refer to Coralie Jenkin's invaluable *Collections of Religion and Theology in Australia and New Zealand* (Auslib Press, Adelaide, 1992). The figures for various libraries' holdings of books and serials in religion in this work should probably not be compared too closely with each other. I suspect that the figures for the large public and university libraries rather understate the holdings in religion (as giving only holdings within particular Dewey, LC, or whatever, classifications), whereas the figures for theological libraries rather overstate the holdings (as giving the size of the whole library). Nevertheless, the figures give at least three general impressions.

Firstly, there is a certain homogeneity of size among the dozen or so larger collections - say between 25,000 and 125,000 books. Secondly, no Australian libraries even approximate the holdings of the largest theological libraries overseas, e.g. the Harvard Divinity School or Union Theological School libraries (our largest, such as the Joint Theological Library at Ormond College, Melbourne, or Moore Theological College Library, Sydney, might, at a rough estimate, reach one quarter of those holdings). Thirdly, the public and university library holdings are considerably smaller than those of the largest theological libraries (e.g., again at a rough estimate, Sydney University holdings might be half those of Moore Theological College; they might of course also be holdings in rather different areas of religion).

If these impressions are correct, then it will be not be easy to designate the national collection libraries in religion and Christianity. The NLA *Strategic Plan* defines the Distributed National Collection as "the aggregation of all collections in Australia which are recorded in generally accessible databases and are accessible, either in person or via interlibrary document supply, to users with bona fide reasons for access". Such collections could of course include public and university libraries, but presumably not many, or perhaps any, of the "private" theological libraries. I do not see any easy answer to this problem, and it is of course related to the rather fragmented way in which theology has traditionally been studied in Australia. I do however think the question of a national collection in religion is a vital one, to which the Theological Library Association should turn its collective attention, and on which it should advise the National Library.

I should finally say something about the "electronic library" in relation to religion collections. Many readers of this Newsletter will by now know of databases such as "UnCover", which allow searches, by author, title, keywords, etc., of various current journals. It is also possible to request copies of articles, which are sent by fax and charged to a credit card. There is no doubt that such services greatly increase the range of journals accessible to researchers in religion, as in other areas (though they at present include only English-language journals, and it is often the foreign-language ones which are hardest to find in Australian libraries). However there are certain problems as well. One is the cost to the library of the subscription to the database. Another is the cost to the reader of articles sent - typically \$20 or so per article. Further, the databases do not at present include much in the way of abstracts, so that the real content of the articles is often not clear. Finally, databases do not allow browsing of the kind which lets a reader "keep up" with a field of study.

The relevance of the electronic library to monographs is less certain. There are of course many specific projects underway to transfer large bodies of text to databases, e.g. the Chadwyck-Healey *Patrologia Latina* on CD-ROM (which costs about \$65,000). However there is not at present any general electronic substitute for current printed monographs, in religion or most other fields. There seem to be formidable copyright and other problems to be overcome before this situation will change.

In short, I see the electronic library as extending the possibilities for libraries in religion, but for the present at least not replacing too much of their holdings of either journals or monographs. Given the steady escalation of journal subscriptions and book prices, and the continuing weakness of the SA, this is not altogether good news.

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In ABN News no. 72, one of the shortcomings of automation was noted: Incoming BNB records with the subject heading **Madonna** (the pop star) were automatically changed to **Mary, Blessed Virgin, Saint** by the ABN program. ABN staff have amended the heading to **Madonna, 1959-**. We hope not too many earnest theology students were misled!
