

THE THEOLOGY OF A THEOLOGICAL LIBRARY

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Thank you for the kind invitation to be a part of this the 10th annual conference of theological librarians from around this country, from New Zealand and beyond. I am honoured to be a part, however briefly, of the work you undertake on behalf of the church. Perhaps it would be more theologically and pastorally—to say nothing of diplomatically—correct to say, the work you undertake on behalf of the kingdom of God. After all, in the final analysis, it is the purposes of God you are about. As with all Christian ministries, though we may serve the church in the first instance, it is the kingdom of God and God's justice which we hope is the final context of our endeavours. But more of that in a moment.

I need at the outset to make one thing clear. I am neither a librarian nor the son of a librarian. Indeed, I feel a bit overwhelmed in this company of experts. It is a familiar, if somewhat sinking, feeling. I remember when, by some sort of accident—I must have been standing in the wrong place at the wrong time—I found myself unceremoniously thrust into the role of representative of St Mark's on the Sydney College of Divinity central library committee. It was a nightmare, like a tiddlywinks player who suddenly finds himself standing in as Loose Head Prop in a line up of the Wallabies facing the All Blacks. They spoke, these librarians, a language as foreign to me as Sanskrit. Most of it seemed to be acronymic. And it came at me with the speed of summer lightning: URICA, DYNEX, ATLA, AULOTS, OASIS, ALED 3, US MARC TAG, AUS MARC TAG, NZ MARC TAG—BULL MARC TAG. It was terrifying. I said nothing for months on end, hoping desperately that silence would be taken for both consent—to whatever it was they were talking about—and profundity. I used to pour the tea at half time. And was glad to do it.

So I have no illusions about my limitations in this company. I am a user of theological libraries, not a creator and sustainer of them as you are: I must speak from this perspective, since I have no other. Perhaps this is a good thing. It gives me a chance to discharge a debt—to say a few words of gratitude to you, the keepers of theological libraries, whose work across the years has been of such benefit in my experience. Theological libraries have been for me one of the inexhaustible sources of inspiration, of courage, of imagination—yes, and I can honestly say, also of faith and hope and love. To imagine life devoid of such resources, is to survey a prospect bleakly impoverished; indeed it is to imagine a spiritual existence quite other and quite terribly diminished from the one I have actually enjoyed. What John Keats said so famously of his awakening to the glory of the poet Homer, I have felt in my own way in the reading rooms of theological libraries in many places.

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.¹

To be without the books which our theological libraries provide would be to suffer a fatal narrowing of vision, an *anorexia nervosa* of the spirit. And so I would like this speech to be a toast of thanks to you, the librarians of the church, keepers of the springs, tenders of the flame, preservers of the words of faith. Your work is indispensable for the life of the Gospel in the world. The church could hardly exist without it. For that, thanks be to God—and to you!

Now I need to simmer down a bit! You have probably already spotted the temptation I am in danger of stumbling headlong into, and that rather unrepentantly. I mean the temptation to idealise or romanticise the positions you occupy and the institutions you serve. I know something of the limitations and frustrations which theological librarians must contend with in our part of the world. It would be nice if library budgets

¹ John Keats, 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer', *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Fifth Edition, Volume 2, M.H. Abrams, (ed), New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986, p. 796.

were even half-way adequate to the needs of our various constituencies. It would be nice if ecclesiastical administrators did not look first to what remains of our library monies as the first place to cut when economic times are tough. It would be nice if theological colleges had the resources to link up with each other on line and avoid costly duplication of books and services. It would be nice if theologians, biblical scholars and church historians would acknowledge and rejoice in the work of librarians as fully collegial with their own, and not regard it as mere 'back-up services'. It would be nice if all these and a host of other wishes were nearer to reality than they often are. But this is our reality. I don't want to overlook or minimise the frustrations which such limitations impose on your daily lives with high flown rhetorical abstractions. My real point—and that for which you have my lasting respect and gratitude—is that in the midst of these maddening limitations, you still manage to keep the libraries viable, open, growing and accessible. If I am not mistaken that is an effort heroic in its proportions and too often unsung in its achievements. And so tonight I would like to acknowledge, celebrate and pay tribute to you in your labours. Theological libraries of all sorts, large and small, general and specialist, ancient and modern, have been a gift of God in my experience. And I know this to be true of the experience of countless others as well.

What are the gifts which the theological library has to give the church? No doubt to answer this question well would generate a list of qualities almost without end. I can only hint at a few which seem especially important to me.

Many of you will have read Umberto Eco's famous book, *The Name of the Rose*. It has to be one of the most erudite, historically detailed, intellectually robust whodunits ever written. Setting the action in a medieval monastery, Eco builds up an amazing tension. The fact that, if I remember rightly, the librarian turns out to be the villain of the piece, is neither here nor there. The precipitating problem is that a young monk, Adelmo of Otranto, a master copier and illuminator, is found dead one freezing winter's morning at the foot of the cliff on which the monastery with its famous library, the Aedificium, is perched. How and why had he died? Brother William, a learned and subtle friar—who, as the text puts it, 'had great knowledge both of the human spirit and of the wiles of the Evil One'—is called in to investigate. He begins his investigation with an extended conversation with the Abbot. Necessarily, since the dead monk has fallen from the library windows, the conversation centres about the Aedificium, the library, itself. In an amazing speech about libraries and their place in European culture and in the history of the Christian faith, the Abbot sets out his views to Brother William on the meaning of books and the significance of their collection. I want to use his speech, or a part of it anyway, to help make the case I want to put.

First, and perhaps foremost, comes what we might call the poetry of libraries. Libraries are a human—and perhaps they are also a divine—mystery, the meaning of which, like all good theological realities, needs poetry rather than prose to do it justice. In extolling the monastery's collection, the Abbot lapses into Latin. I am afraid this is going to strain my diction to say nothing of your patience! But here goes:

*Monasterium sine libris, the Abbot recited, pensively, est sicut civitas sine opibus, castrum sine numeris, coquina sine suppellectili, mensa sine cibis, hortus sine herbis, pratum sine floribus, arbor sine foliis.*²

Roughly translated it comes to this: 'A monastery without books is like a city without all civic things, a castle without a garrison, a kitchen without utensils, a table without food, a meadow without flowers, a tree without leaves.' In other words, the library is the soul of the community of faith—its thought, its defence, its source and means of nourishment, its beauty, its shade and its protection.

Martin Luther King once delivered a famous sermon on the parable of the hungry friend recorded in Luke 11. You remember the story. A family has tucked itself up in bed when suddenly, late at night, a friend of the chap next door turns up unexpectedly. The neighbour is embarrassed because he's run out of food—like mother Hubbard the cupboard is bare. So he does what any self-respecting neighbour would do in the circumstances, he goes next door and bangs on the shutters. At first his neighbour can't be bothered to rouse himself. But the racket goes on and on. At last he relents and gets up and gives the fellow the bread he needs for his hungry friend. King called his sermon 'a knock at midnight'. The central point of the exposition is

² See, Alan Taylor (ed), *Long Overdue: A Library Reader*, London: Library Association Publishing, 1993, p. 32.

directed to the church. The church, said King, is like that sleeping family—warm, comfortable, tucked up in bed, often oblivious of the world outside. And yet, if it is to be the church, at least a church worthy of its Lord, it must be ready for the unexpected knock, the insistent question, when it comes. The refrain that King ran through his sermon was: 'keep the bread fresh'. You never know when the call will come, or from whom. But when it does, as surely it will, the church, must have the nourishment ready at hand, or be shown up as bankrupt. 'Keep the bread fresh.'

There could hardly be a more fitting description of your task than that. The libraries of the church are the granaries of faith. There a store of spiritual sustenance is held that can be drawn upon when the call comes. Available to all and to sundry. At whatever age or stage. Facing whatever great or not so great issue of life. There, in the library, is the bread that can feed the hungry. Of course it must be kept fresh—accessible, tended, up to date. That is your task. At times I could imagine it seems somewhat thankless—a struggle against the odds and not much appreciation to go with it. But then the knock comes—perhaps when least expected, the knock at midnight—and the work is justified. For there is something there to answer with. A needy world finds food and shelter. The librarian is keeper of holy things.

The Abbot continues his discussion with Bother William. It is clear that he feels embattled. The world is hostile to the faith which his monastery stands for. But he is determined to defend the tradition, the tradition that goes back to Jesus and to Moses.

But until the millennium occurs definitively, _ it is up to us to defend the treasure of the Christian world, and the very word of God as he dictated it to the prophets and to the apostles, as the fathers repeated it without changing a syllable, as the schools have tried to gloss it, even if today in the schools themselves the serpent of pride, envy, folly is nesting. In this sunset we are still torches and light, high on the horizon. And as long as these walls stand, we shall be custodians of the divine Word.

No doubt we would want to express all this very differently today. The language of dictation in relation to the Word of God is unconvincing to most of us in a postmodern world. But the underlying point retains its force. The library is a vital part of the living memory of the church. It is the deposit of the inner experience and journey of the people of God. Without it our community memory shrinks and we suffer from a creeping 'collective amnesia,' a loss of self-identity as a people.

In the creed we affirm that we believe in the 'apostolic church'. This phrase points to the Christian community as it maintains identity across time with its foundation in the witness of the apostles and, finally, with Jesus Christ himself. The theological library preserves for us, as no other resource can possibly do, the richness and diversity of those historical links. Within the pages of the books that line its shelves we have direct access to the great moments and movements of the Spirit that have shaped our past. The saints and guides of the church—John, Mary, Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Julian, Luther, Hildegard, Hooker, Schleiermacher, Barth, Dorothy Day, Rosemary Radford Reuther, and so on. They are there, each one, as close as the shelf in front of our eyes. They speak to us directly of the substance of their faith, the outcome of their struggles, the shape of their vision of the future.

And it is not only the 'greats' of the past. Our libraries also house records of the life and thought of thousands of more ordinary believers who have thought, worked, prayed and worshipped, and who have left for us a deposit of the wisdom and insight of their journey. Many of the books in our collections are gifts from those who have gone before us in our own local church situation. Their names are written there on the covers or facing pages of the volumes they have given. Thus the library preserves an immediate link with the communion of saints of which we are a part.

The church which tries to live in the present without a serious and continuous encounter with the best of its history and theology is a church that risks shallowness of spirit and paucity of imagination. It loses touch with its own memory and hence blurs the contours of its own identity. It is through the dedicated work of those who understood the foundational importance of this historical connectedness, and gave their energy and talent to nurture it, that we have inherited these wonderful resources. But vigilance is needed. History does not stand still. The future of our libraries is not automatically assured. If we are to pass them on intact to our children,

as we have received them from our parents, we must contribute to their maintenance in our generation. This necessary truth I encourage you to keep before the powers that be in the church and in the seminary, in season and out of season. Or the church will risk, quite literally, going out of its mind. The librarian is keeper of the church's story, that living memory which is its inmost identity.

The conversation in the Abbot's cell goes on.

'You see, Brother William,' the abbot said, 'to achieve the immense and holy task that enriches those walls'—and he nodded towards the bulk of the Aedificium, which could be glimpsed from the cell's windows, towering above the abbatial church itself—'devout men have toiled for centuries, observing iron rules. Only the librarian has the right to move through the labyrinth of the books, he alone is responsible for their safekeeping. The other monks work in the scriptorium and many know the list of the volumes that the library houses. But a list of titles tells very little; only the librarian knows, from the collocation of the volume, from its degree of inaccessibility, what secrets, what truths or falsehoods, the volume contains. Only he decides how, when, and whether to give it to the monk who requests it.

We might envy the power of the medieval librarian! Or perhaps we have met with modern day counterparts of such unassailable authority lurking in the stacks of our own collections! But the point is this. A library remains largely locked away, inaccessible, or at least very much under utilised, unless someone has a synoptic vision, a sort of over-all grasp of its structure and contents. As the Abbot says, a mere catalogue of titles is not enough. A library is not just a random collection of books, at least a theological library is not. The library has a logic to its being. It is a unity as well as a diversity; a single collection as well as a pile of volumes.

The librarian is custodian of the that unity. She/he knows not only the list of books but the relationship that exists between them. Theological libraries have to reflect the one-ness of the tradition; the coherence of the community of faith. And ultimately, of course, that coherence is a reflection of the unity of God. Somebody needs to oversee the formation of the library as a unity. Somebody must see that the biblical, historical, theological, ethical, philosophical, linguistic, liturgical, pastoral, and devotional sections—in short, all the elements which belong to a holistic vision of what it means to be a christian—somebody must see that these essential elements are all represented and all equally cared for. Somebody must determine that the collection policy of the library reflects the deep unity of the faith, conscious that this unity is necessarily expressed in many diverse aspects. Without that continual oversight, year in and year out, the monks in the scriptorium—read students in the reading room—will have the treasure of their legitimate heritage taken from them by stealth. And they will never know what has happened to them. Of all places in the church, the library must pay attention to the whole picture, not merely some part of it. Individual readers come looking for this or for that. Individual specialists or lecturers will order this and that. But the library itself must reflect the wider picture. It must apprehend the faith whole. Without that the church becomes sectarian or heretical. And the somebody who sees to all this is the librarian. The librarian is keeper of the synoptic vision.

Brother William is no fool. He picks up immediately on what the Abbot has said in passing—the piece about 'the truths and falsehoods' which the various books may contain. 'So in the library there are also books containing falsehoods,' he asks disingenuously. To which the Abbot replies:

Monsters exist because they are part of the divine plan, and in the horrible features of those same monsters the power of the Creator is revealed. And by divine plan, too, there exist also books by wizards, the cabalas of the Jews, the fables of pagan poets, the lies of the infidels. It was the firm and holy conviction of those who founded the abbey and sustained it over the centuries that even in books of falsehood, to the eyes of the sage reader, a pale reflection of the divine wisdom can shine. And therefore the library is a vessel of these, too.

Again the Abbot speaks from another age; an age convinced that it held simple and absolute access to divine truth and goodness; an age that believed it could, without fear of error or risk of mistake, distinguish the authentic revelation of God from every pale or lying deception. Our times are less confident of such infallible human apprehension. We have learned, sometimes through bitter experience, to be more modest about the limitations of our own grasp of the truth, and more respectful of the insights and virtues possessed by

traditions other than our own. The Christian chauvinism of the Abbot is something we have no wish to perpetuate.

But, again, the underlying drift of the argument holds good. Whatever individual believers, or even whole denominations, may feel about the centrality and importance of their particular vision of God's truth, the library cannot and will not be captive to sectarian prejudice. Of all places in the life of the church, the library stands for and defends a broad and uncompromising ecumenicity. The church claims to be inclusive. The church claims to be open to all who genuinely seek God in faith and hope. But it often fails miserably to live up to its own rhetoric. The genuine theological library stubbornly refuses to abandon that commitment to an ecumenical truth. The genuine theological library is built on the assumption that the Word of God is not bound; that the Spirit blows where it wills; that the Christ is not confined to any human picture of the Christ. And therefore the librarian will not be confined, nor let the library be confined, to one tradition, perspective, theological party or denominational line.

I know that as librarians living within particular sections of the church, you all have to specialise in the tradition you exist to serve. That is right and proper. But even in small collections it is vital to keep the windows open on a wider world. And together, as a community of librarians, I know you are determined to express the ecumenical orientation of the church as a whole. There, sitting on our shelves, is ecumenical openness concretely expressed. Bultmann next to Schillibeeckx; Luther next to Aquinas; Mary Daly nearby to Cardinal Ratzinger; Nicolas Berdyaev alongside George Beasley-Murray; Julian of Norwich in sight of Harvey Cox. And this is not to mention the Bible alongside the Koran. The rule of St Benedict a shelf or two from the Bhagavad-Gita. And mixed in with all this stuff, other names will be found. Marx and Freud, Feuerbach and Durkheim, Aristotle and William James, Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer. And so on and on.

The divine wisdom, as the Abbot says, can shine through in the most unexpected places. What seems to us an unlikely source of truth today may yet, in some future time, or to some other eyes, flame out with a divine brilliance we never dreamed of. And so we build our libraries in the faith and hope that, in the providence of God, truth will find its way in the world. We gather what we can, as widely as we can, in the belief that the Word and the Spirit are broader and more mysterious than any one age, much less any one individual or denomination, can encompass. Libraries are the cutting edge of ecumenical theology. They are also the cutting edge of interfaith dialogue. And they are the best hope we have of maintaining a conversation with a world which does not believe in God at all. The librarian is the keeper of openness.

Well, enough. I have argued that theological libraries are both expressions of and defenders of the truth of Christian faith in its many diverse aspects. The four main points I have made about the library reflect—not by accident—the four classic qualifiers of the nature of the church as set out in the creed. According to the creed, the church—meaning the church at its best, the church as it should be, not the church as it so often is—according to the creed, the church in the world is to be *one, holy, catholic and apostolic*. And these precisely are the marks of the good theological library.

(i) 'Keep the bread fresh' There is the quality of holiness. The truth of God kept holy, intact, tended in the midst of the world, waiting the moment when it is needed. (ii) The library as time machine, maintaining living links with the tradition that runs back to Jesus and Moses. There is the quality of apostolicity. The identity of the church throughout history. (iii) The synoptic vision of the library, its determination to give expression, not to one part of the truth of faith, but to that truth in its manifold diversity. There is the quality of unity. The one-ness of the church. (iv) And finally the open-endedness of the library. The willingness, indeed the deliberate intention, to preserve all manner of human testimony, even where it seems to run counter to the tradition we happen to hold dear personally or institutionally. There is the quality of catholicity or universality. The ecumenical inclusiveness of faith in God.

We are in a period of history when the church is struggling. At times it seems that we do not feel at all confident of our place in a rapidly changing and pluralistic world. Looking at us as believers it is hard at times not to feel we have only a tenuous grip on our sense of identity, of what it really means to be Christians in a postmodern culture. In such circumstance, even more so than in Brother William's day, our theological libraries are absolutely crucial. Where our sense of confidence rises and falls, the library stands, as it always

has, for the articulation of a deep and abiding identity of faith in God. The library is a concrete testimony, more so than any great Cathedral, to the presence of the living Word of God in the world. A theological library reflects in its very existence—and also, I venture to think, in the life of those who create and defend it—the reality of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.
God bless you in your work.

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NEW ACCESS SERVICES FROM THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

Averill M B Edwards

Thank you for the invitation to give the keynote address to this conference - I very much appreciate your confidence and your generosity in extending this invitation. I hope that I will provide the appropriate stimulus and challenge to you that keynote speakers are required to do.

1. INTRODUCTION

Your conference theme, *Maximising our resources* is a timely one. All libraries are having now to do so - I have recently attended two conferences, the Australian Library and Information Association Specials in Sydney and the ALIA Reference and Information Services conference in Adelaide and recurring themes in both was the emphasis on doing better with limited resources, a situation that we all recognise will not be temporary; on resource sharing in a much more serious way than in the past with a recognition that it is the new information and communications technologies which will allow us to do so.

I am conscious that I am from the National Library of Australia, the largest library in Australia - and I hope that what I say will not be regarded as irrelevant for you, many of whom come from one person libraries in a sector of our profession which has rarely been generously funded. I believe that our situations are very similar and that the Library's experience has relevance for you as well. I have endeavoured to identify from our current and planned services, those which will be of most relevance to theological libraries and of course, those which are most significant for the library community as a whole and for us as a library.

The paper will cover the following:

1. **The role and function of the National Library of Australia**
2. **The environment in which libraries are now operating**
3. **The National Library of Australia's Strategic Plan - its redirections and new directions**
4. **New access services**
5. **Issues arising from these policies and services**
6. **Conclusion**

2. THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

The National Library of Australia is a statutory authority - that is, a separate body, established by Parliament and with its own Commonwealth Act, *The National Library of Australia Act*. This gives the Library more independence than if it was attached to a Government department. In Australia there is only one national library, though in other countries there may be more, such as the USA where there are three Agriculture, Medicine and, de facto, the Library of Congress. Although it is publicly funded the Library has a different role and is closest in function to that of State libraries. The Library's Act outlines the functions to: