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# The Strengths of this Volume . . .

## The Librarian as Book Reviewer

*Andrew C. Stout, Covenant Theological Seminary*

**ABSTRACT** This presentation advocates for theological librarians to engage in the practice of writing and publishing book reviews. Reviewing books for academic and popular publications is one avenue through which librarians are uniquely situated to contribute to scholarly conversations and engage our communities. Reviewing can be a manageable way for busy librarians to publish, it contributes to professional development, it can promote diversity in our collections and institutions, and it can sharpen reference skills. In addition to discussing the value of reviewing (both for librarians and for the academic communities they serve), I will offer some practical suggestions for how librarians who have little or no experience reviewing books can begin to do so.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Writing book reviews is one way that theological librarians can contribute to scholarly conversations, continue their professional development, and creatively engage their communities. Writing book reviews and review essays has been an important part of my own development as a librarian, and it continues to be an area of professional service in which I am invested. I have written reviews for numerous academic journals, popular publications, websites, and library publications. Through this experience, I have come to be convinced both that librarians are uniquely qualified to contribute to the broader academic community through book reviewing and that reviewing carries significant benefit for library work. I suggest that librarians have unique qualifications to serve as book reviewers and that book reviewing can support the mission of the library, and I offer practical suggestions for how librarians can begin to review.

## UNIQUE QUALIFICATIONS OF THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIANS

Reviewing books for scholarly publications is an important area of professional service. Scholars rely on one another to critically engage new literature in their various fields and write reviews that evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of new volumes. In this sense, reviewing represents more than simply an entry on a CV. However, some scholars minimize the importance of this kind of service. Sarah Rollens, the book review editor for the journal *Studies in Religion* tweeted anecdotal evidence of this attitude: “A junior scholar once told me that he didn’t write book reviews because they ‘aren’t worth anything.’ When we start talking like that, the neoliberal university has won” (@SarahRollens, November 28, 2019). As librarians, we should certainly be invested in combating this attitude and promoting an ethos of professional service.

Scholarly reviews are typically written by established and emerging scholars with knowledge of a very narrow set of literature in their field. They know the relevant literature in their specific discipline or subdiscipline and they employ that expertise to critically assess new titles in their discipline. Of course, some librarians bring this kind of discipline-specific expertise to the task of reviewing. I want to suggest, however, that it is the librarian’s status as a generalist that provides our unique qualifications in this area.

In an editorial essay for *Theological Librarianship*, Richard Manly Adams, Jr. characterizes the librarian’s unique role in contemporary academia:

I am struck by how important it is for librarians to maintain our broad focus, particularly given the move toward specialization in the academy. Whereas most academic fields offer rewards for the researcher who can uncover the new territory in the narrowest of information realms, ours is one of the few that continues to praise the generalist, the one who can maintain not expertise, but familiarity, with a range of topics. (Adams 2019, iii)

In the realm of theological studies, theological librarians must maintain a broad familiarity in a range of subdisciplines, including Hebrew Bible, New Testament, biblical theology, systematics and doctrinal theology, church history, pastoral theology, liturgics, ecclesiology, etc. Beyond these categories, we also need to be familiar with religious studies, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and any number of other fields. This breadth of knowledge is important for

maintaining balanced collections, conducting reference interactions, and providing information literacy instruction in these various fields.

## **SUPPORTING THE MISSION OF THE LIBRARY**

### *Faculty Status for Librarians*

As we engage in this important area of professional service and development, there are some specific ways that publishing book reviews can support the mission of the library. First, writing book reviews can provide support for librarians who are seeking faculty status at their institutions. According to the “ACRL Standards for Faculty Status for Academic Librarians,” academic librarians provide “unique contributions to the academic community,” including “developing collections, providing bibliographic access to all library materials, and interpreting these materials to members of the college and university community” (ACRL 2011). In addition to these contributions, it is important for librarians to demonstrate scholarly engagement through teaching roles and publication efforts.

While our teaching efforts are most clearly demonstrated through information literacy instruction, many librarians have difficulty finding time (not to mention institutional support) amid our many other daily responsibilities to write for publication. Book reviews are an achievable form of publication for busy librarians. They demand less time to research and write than journal articles and monographs, they contribute directly to our collection development responsibilities, and they demonstrate relevant knowledge in our subject specialties.

### *Collection Development*

Second, book reviewing promotes deep and thoughtful engagement with the literature that we collect. Much of our collection development efforts involve surveying catalogs, journals, and websites to remain current on the new titles and relevant literature. Casting with a wider net in this way is, of course, necessary. However, the deep reading that comes with reviewing can bring perspective and knowledge of a topic that can be earned in no other way. Reviewing creates a reciprocal relationship in which 1) the effort we put into critically assessing and reviewing a book contributes to our knowledge of specific subject areas and therefore informs our collection

development choices, and 2) the knowledge and perspective we have earned through collection development efforts informs our ability to critically engage new titles.

Librarians often bring the kind of knowledge to reviewing that is most relevant for the collection development choices of other librarians. This is particularly true of reviews that cover reference materials, databases, and other tools that are particular to the library environment. In this respect, reviewing is an important area of professional service not only for the academy at large but for other librarians in particular. Library publications like ACRL's *Choice* and Atla's *Theological Librarianship* are particularly important venues for reviews written by librarians.

### *Promoting Library Values*

Third, reviewing provides librarians an opportunity to promote library values in our institutions. One of those core values is diversity of perspective, defined by the Library Bill of Rights: "Libraries should provide material and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval" (ALA 2006). Academic libraries occupy a position at the intersection of library values and the particular values of the institutions in which we exist. There can be some tension in this dynamic, and that tension can be more pronounced for theological libraries that operate within specific confessional traditions.

Strategies for promoting library values, like diversity of perspective, will differ according to the particular institutional context. My own context involves working in a library at a denominational seminary. Covenant Theological Seminary is the denominational seminary of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The PCA is the second-largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States. Ideologically, it is theologically conservative, adhering to the doctrinal standards in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Demographically, it is predominantly White (80% White, 6% Black, 3% Asian, 6% Latino, 5% other/mixed; Pew Research Forum 2014). These demographics are reflected in Covenant Seminary's faculty as well, which is predominantly White and male. In this homogeneous context, it is particularly important to be intentional about finding ways to promote cultural, racial, gender, and other forms of diversity.

I have tried to promote diversity at Covenant Seminary through reviewing ideologically and demographically diverse titles in the seminary's journal, *Presbyterion: A Covenant Seminary Review*. The journal features the scholarship of Covenant's faculty and other evangelical scholars. Full-text access is available through the Atla Religion Database, and many Covenant alumni, PCA pastors, and laypeople subscribe directly. In a recent issue, I wrote a review essay that dealt with titles on liberation theologies and Black theology (Stout 2019a):

Barger, Lilian Called. 2018. *The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cone, James H. 2018. *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

In the same issue, I reviewed a memoir from Serene Jones, a feminist theologian and the president of Union Theological Seminary (Stout 2019b):

Jones, Serene. 2019. *Call it Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World*. New York: Viking.

I have tried to highlight authors and subjects that are often overlooked in our corner of the theological world. Part of my goal in reviewing these titles is to help generate conversations in the denomination and the seminary community about issues surrounding racial inequality, gender roles, and movements in the broader theological world.

### *Sharpening Reference Skills*

Fourth, writing book reviews can contribute to our daily work in the library, including sharpening our reference skills. Once again, a specific example comes from *Presbyterion*. Covenant Seminary's recently retired library director, James Pakala, has written a long running series of short articles in *Presbyterion* entitled "A Librarian's Comments on Commentaries." This continuing series, which began in 1995, surveys biblical commentaries on particular books of the Bible. Its purpose is to "recommend Bible commentaries and

offer brief assessments to guide *Presbyterion* readers in their selection and use,” and “concerns of homiletics and pastoral theology . . . merit attention along with linguistic, historical, and other scholarly exegetical matters” (Pakala 1995, 121).

In addition to demonstrating the knowledge garnered by the individual librarian as they engage in the process of reviewing, “A Librarian’s Comments on Commentaries,” offers an example of how that activity can generate reference tools for wider use. In the seminary library setting, biblical commentaries are frequently the most important resources for a patron’s research. When a student comes to the front desk of the library looking for commentaries on a particular biblical book, I will often refer to these articles to supplement the library’s basic study guides on biblical commentaries. The study and reflection that has gone into this series has produced an invaluable reference tool for biblical studies.

#### *Promoting Patron Engagement*

Finally, writing and publishing reviews can promote engagement with our patrons. This is more intangible than some of the other benefits discussed, but I have found it to be important. While we have our own pressures and deadlines associated with our work in libraries, these pressures are different from the stress and pressure experienced by students as they study for exams, do research for papers, and meet deadlines for classes. Reflecting deeply on the titles we are reading, writing reviews, and meeting the deadlines associated with them can keep us a little bit closer to the experience of our students. This is particularly important for those of us who work in public services and engage with students’ day-to-day needs, often at points of high stress. The more we can empathize with the kind of work they are doing, the better we will be able to serve them.

I have also found that published reviews can be the starting point for a dialogue regarding library resources and services. As students have seen my reviews, particularly in *Presbyterion*, it has sparked conversation. While that conversation might start as a discussion of the book under review, it sometimes leads to further discussion of similar resources available at the library. Seeing librarians engage in the kind of writing and publishing activities that students associate with their professors can help to foster awareness of and confidence in the services that we offer.

## PRACTICAL WAYS TO START REVIEWING

### *Directly Engaging Editors*

While larger journals might primarily seek out established scholars to review titles, it is also the case that many book review editors may not have the time or the resources to go out and recruit all the reviewers they might like. Many journal editors are very open to potential reviewers proposing titles for review. Identify a journal in your area of subject specialty and reach out to the book review editor at that journal. Some publications, like *Choice* for example, have an application process for potential reviewers.

### *Journals that Post Books for Review*

Increasingly, smaller journals are posting titles available for review online in various formats. Responding to these calls for reviewers can be a great entry point for librarians who would like to begin reviewing.

- *Theological Librarianship* ([serials.atla.com/theolib/reviews](http://serials.atla.com/theolib/reviews))

This is Atla's open access, peer-reviewed journal. With an intended audience of library subject specialists, books available for review include those at the intersection of libraries and theology/religious studies and reference works dealing with religion. Titles available for review are listed on the journal's website. Reviews are submitted and processed through Open Journal Systems, an open source journal management software.

- *Studies in Religion* ([srreviews.ca](http://srreviews.ca); Twitter @SRReviews)

This is a bilingual (English/French), peer-reviewed, quarterly journal of theological and religious studies. It is intended to be accessible to a more general academic audience. This multidisciplinary focus makes it a particularly appropriate venue for theological librarians with broad subject knowledge. Books are made available for review through a dedicated website that includes summary information about each title in a blog format. Requests

for titles are made through the site. A dedicated Twitter account also provides notifications about new titles for review.

- *Biblical Theology Bulletin* ([docs.google.com/document/d/1-Lw5EVFKJOFy54ET7TIUsWcGmVtWq\\_-CSvZdKSCIOUS/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-Lw5EVFKJOFy54ET7TIUsWcGmVtWq_-CSvZdKSCIOUS/edit))

A peer-reviewed quarterly publication, this journal brings biblical and theological studies into dialogue with the social sciences. Books are made available for review through a Google document, and requests for titles are made through a dedicated email account.

- *The Christian Librarian* ([www.acl.org/index.cfm/publications/the-christian-librarian/book-reviews](http://www.acl.org/index.cfm/publications/the-christian-librarian/book-reviews))

The official publication of the Association of Christian Librarians, this open access journal is a forum for articles, essays, and reviews from librarians on issues related to Christianity and library science. In addition to titles in theology and religious studies, this journal also makes fiction titles available for review. Titles are made available through a Google document and reviews are arranged through direct communication with the journal's book review editor.

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