
Exploring Theological Librarianship

Insights from the Next Generation

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ABSTRACT: This panel featured four individuals who, despite being relatively young, each have meaningful experiences in the field of theological education and libraries. The panelists reflected on their diverse pathways to theological librarianship and delved into the field's current landscape, including emerging trends, technological advancements, and changing user expectations. Towards the end of the session, panelists turned their attention to professional associations, such as Atla, and discussed their role in our development and growth.

INTRODUCTION

This session was inspired after seeing what appeared to be attendance at Atla Annual trending younger in recent years. We organized this panel to give a voice to younger members of the profession and provide an opportunity for the larger Atla membership to get to know our generation, our collective views on the field, and our hopes for the future. Organized as a series of questions and answers, this session allowed each panelist to reflect on their pathway into the profession, current trends in the field, and our hopes for the future of the field and the association.

CAN YOU SHARE YOUR PERSONAL PATHWAY INTO THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIANSHIP? WHAT/WHO INSPIRED YOU TO PURSUE THIS CAREER PATH?

Andy Lofthus

I was inspired to become a theological librarian through meeting with my undergrad reference librarian, herself a member of Atla, and hearing her describe her work. I love being a sounding board for other people's ideas—especially related to philosophy and theology—and getting to combine that with collecting resources and equipping people to navigate resources made theological librarianship an ideal career.

Jessica Boyer

My journey into theological librarianship is a unique one. It began at Mount St. Mary's University, where I currently work. Initially, my dream was to be a National Park Service ranger. However, an internship at a park led me to their library and archives, a role I found deeply fulfilling. I continued to work part-time in the university archives during my junior and senior years, graduating with a double major in history and German. Upon graduation, I was hired in the library full-time in a paraprofessional role and completed my MLS degree online through Clarion University. As I finished my MLS, our then-director retired, and I was asked to serve as interim director before being offered the permanent position. Since 2017, I have been serving as the Director of the Library at Mount St. Mary's University. I have also completed my PhD in Higher Education Leadership from Concordia University Chicago. My journey into theological librarianship was not a direct pursuit but a natural progression as I have worked to support my campus's seminary and theological degree programs.

Elizabeth Miller

I originally came into theological education pursuing a Master of Divinity degree and thinking I would seek ordination as a Deacon in the United Methodist Church with the goal of serving in non-traditional ministry settings like camping ministry or a faith-based nonprofit. Once I got to school, however, I landed a job in the archives

as a manuscript processing assistant. After a semester of school and work, I realized I was enjoying the work I was doing in the library more than my experiential coursework and applied to switch into the Master of Theological Studies program. In that program, I could still gain subject matter expertise in theology, but be able to finish a year earlier and begin my library degree and the path to professional librarianship. After completing my theology degree and starting my library program, I worked in archival acquisitions while seeking work in a theological library. In 2019, I joined Pitts Theology Library as the Reserves and Circulation Specialist and in 2022 became the inaugural Coordinator of Digital Initiatives. Through the last five years, I have found that librarianship, particularly in a theological education setting, is its own form of ministry that brings me much joy and satisfaction. Ultimately, I am realizing that I've come full circle on my initial goals from entering theology school and have found my ministry niche in theological librarianship.

Emily Peterson

I am a relative newcomer to theological librarianship, with just one year spent in the field so far, but I have been in the world of theological education for approximately a decade. After graduating from Columbia Theological Seminary in 2016 with my Master of Divinity, I felt a pull toward working in higher education and had the opportunity to answer that pull in an administrative position at Columbia, followed by three and a half years directing the seminary's Center for Academic Literacy (CAL). This work in academic literacy particularly aligned with my interests and values, particularly the delightful process of thinking collaboratively with our students in one-on-one coaching sessions. Eventually, however, I realized that the elements of the CAL director position that most energized me—such as clarifying and focusing questions and ideas, making connections, and bringing additional voices into the conversation—were actually quintessential elements of librarianship, especially in reference functions, and that pursuing librarianship would give me the chance to sink even deeper and more skillfully into those elements I so valued. In 2022, I graduated from the University of South Carolina's iSchool with a Master of Library and Information Science, and in 2023 had the unexpected opportunity to return to Columbia as the Director of Public Services in the library. The decision to pursue librarianship has been repeatedly validated for me, and I find great joy and

fulfillment in accompanying our patron communities (especially our students) as they learn and discern, helping them develop the skills and connect them with the resources that will enrich their journeys.

WHAT ARE THE EMERGING TRENDS YOUR LIBRARY IS WORKING ON?

Andy Lofthus

As a small library, we have a limited capacity to pursue or set new trends. However, because we are small, we often must think critically and creatively about how to be more effective in our service. One emerging trend we have explored and found beneficial is controlled digital lending.

Jessica Boyer

Recently, I have been focused on how to scale library services while staffing levels remain flat. Demand for library services at my institution is at an all-time high, with the number of students receiving library instruction up 47% over the last academic year and 257% over the last seven years. How do we meet demand in a manageable way for our team? Some answers we have been looking to include (1) being intentional about what we say “yes” to and what we say “no” to, (2) reconfiguring practices and streamlining workflows, and (3) embracing new technologies to help us be more efficient.

Elizabeth Miller

At Pitts, we are fortunate to have an abundance of resources and staff to take on new projects and explore emerging trends. While there are others, I want to emphasize our focus on leveraging “the digital” to broaden access to our collections and staff expertise. In 2019, the library hired a Digital Scholarship Librarian and a Project Digital Asset Librarian to develop a digital repository, which culminated in the Pitts Digital Collections website (digital.pitts.emory.edu). The site houses the library’s digital special collections materials, digital exhibitions, virtual versions of gallery exhibitions, and digital assets from past library workshops. Additionally, having this platform enabled us to host large digital collections like the Howard Thurman audio archive and the Day1 sermon recording archive. Beyond digital collections, a team of three Pitts staff redesigned

and deployed a new library website built from scratch. Outside the library, Pitts has partnered with the Candler Foundry, Candler's center for public theological education, and the Association for Hispanic Theological Education (AETH) to provide the infrastructure to share digital theological resources with students of the Foundry and AETH institutions.

Emily Peterson

Over the past year that I've been at Columbia, a major emerging trend that has featured in my work has been artificial intelligence. The public release of ChatGPT in particular raised concern among faculty, administration, and students about how to respond in defense of scholarly integrity. So, I and a team of colleagues were tasked with the development of the seminary's first-ever policy governing student academic use of AI. While this work and the resulting policy did not ultimately determine our *library's* response to AI in our daily practices, the library did demonstrate leadership in helping the institution navigate these early days of generative AI and its impact on theological education, and it led us to start considering a larger slate of recommendations for the seminary related to AI literacy, pedagogical pivots, and additional policies.

WHAT ARE THE CHANGES YOU ARE SEEING IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AT YOUR INSTITUTION AND HOW IS THE LIBRARY RESPONDING TO THOSE CHANGES?

Andy Lofthus

One of the biggest changes I've seen is the shift toward the majority of students being remote, often never stepping foot on campus, let alone the library. With a limited budget and to serve all students well, we changed our collection development policy to purchase ebook over print books, all things being equal.

Jessica Boyer

As a Catholic university, our faith has always been foundational to our educational experience and curriculum. I am seeing an increase in the prioritization of faith-based approaches and interdisciplinary work at the intersection of faith. This interdisciplinary work is an

opportunity for the library to lead. When we see these conversations happening on campus, we should seek opportunities to join them, noting that we have resources to support this work and can help.

Elizabeth Miller

At Candler, we recently began offering hybrid Masters-level programs, adding to the existing hybrid Doctor of Ministry program. As part of that process, librarians worked to create course material acquisitions policies to meet the research and access needs of remote students. A coworker and I presented on this process during the COVID-19 pandemic at the 2022 Atla Annual conference in Baltimore, and you can find more specifics about those policies in our proceedings. To summarize, though, we tailored our course material acquisitions policy to match the course format (e.g., the library will purchase unlimited access ebooks, if they are available, for courses being taught in a fully online or hybrid format but will purchase physical books for courses being held in-person). Because of this policy, our ebook acquisitions generally duplicate the physical collections of the library. Unless there is not a physical copy available, the library will not purchase a resource as an ebook only. Since the introduction of hybrid programs, librarians have had to do many reviews of collecting policies to meet our community's needs.

Emily Peterson

Columbia has experienced a rapid and remarkable diversification in its student body in recent years, especially (but not only) in terms of denominational and international representation. One of the trends that this reflects is the falling numbers among American mainline Protestants, including Presbyterians, especially among younger Americans. The John Bulow Campbell Library at Columbia has always tried to include diverse perspectives in our collection, but the library has welcomed further development of diverse voices in the collection to match these more recent changes, especially as this diversification has helped the seminary evolve its curriculum. To this end, our Bibliographic Access Services department has established, and is in current pursuit of, relationships with global partners, including Langham Publishing and several Nigerian bookstores to help us add more African voices to the collection, as well as potential agreements with Korean sister institutions. We are also engaged in

concerted efforts to make our space and staff more interculturally welcoming, such as through programs, outreach, staff development, and even the artwork that adorns our spaces.

HOW DO WE OBSERVE THE DYNAMICS OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION PLAYING OUT IN OUR VARIOUS INSTITUTIONS, PARTICULARLY IN THE LIBRARY'S RESPONSE AND PARTICIPATION IN INITIATIVES?

Andy Lofthus

One particular instance of this at my seminary is the growing number of students pursuing ministry as a second career. While the majority of students at our seminary already have a background in ministry or theological studies, students pursuing ministry as a second career often lack a frame of reference, unsure of the world they're stepping into with its theologians, denominations, commentaries, etc. When meeting with these students I try to provide that frame of reference (e.g., explaining the different categories of commentaries) and suggest works that can familiarize them with this world (e.g., commentary surveys).

Jessica Boyer

The university is seeing a significant increase in the diversity of our student body. In looking specifically at our theological degree programs, the Seminary's ESL program was recently accredited by the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation. Additionally, our undergraduate theology programs have been working to update their curriculum to include traditionally underrepresented voices. In the library, we have focused on DEI specifically in the areas of collection development and hiring.

Elizabeth Miller

At Pitts, we have undertaken several projects to be more inclusive and remove harmful language from our resource descriptions. The Cataloging and Metadata Librarian and Collection Management Coordinator worked together to remove racist Library of Congress classification cutters from parts of our collection. For example, the project replaced the .N4 cutter with .A35 or .B5, and the .O7 cutter

with .A82. These reclassifications were not always possible, due to items not fitting into the new cutter options, but the team reclassified as many as they could while still being accurate. Pitts staff have also taken leadership in implementing the Homosaurus, a linked vocabulary of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) terms, across all Emory libraries.

Emily Peterson

One of the most ambitious and impactful DEI initiatives at Columbia recently has been our Repairing the Breach initiative, which was launched in June 2020. This initiative grew out of a recognition that Columbia has historical ties to slavery and that, in repentance of that history and in a good faith effort to be more just and faithful moving forward, the seminary needs to take tangible steps to directly address the harm that slavery and its aftermath have done to Black people and communities. One of the major components of this initiative is a scholarship that offers tuition-free education for Black students admitted to Columbia's master's-level degree programs.

A great gift of this initiative has been a student body that has grown more diverse not only internationally, as previously noted, but also racially and denominationally. Now that the library supports more students of color in their studies than ever before in our history, we have a responsibility to develop a collection that speaks richly to the histories, theologies, worship resources, and more that reflect the experiences of these students. We have been intentionally seeking these types of resources in our acquisitions processes, but we also ask our students and faculty to be generous with their purchase requests as they encounter resources outside the library that they think we ought to have, and we say yes to as much of that as we possibly can. This is one way we work with our community to become a dynamic and supportive educational partner for our students and faculty as part of this larger initiative.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE ROLE OF THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIANS EVOLVING IN THE NEXT DECADE, CONSIDERING TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS, AND CHANGING USER EXPECTATIONS?

Andy Lofthus

While not necessarily new roles, I think there will be an increasing need (in light of ever-increasing information and misinformation) for librarians to be curators of resources for their communities and instructors in information literacy.

Jessica Boyer

Perhaps more short-term than the next decade, we should look to deeper collaborations and support of discipline faculty. Faculty have just recovered from the pandemic and its long-term impacts on our students and now they are navigating AI. How can the library collaborate to help pick up some of that burden and continue to demonstrate our value and relevance on a campuswide scale? How can the library lead in areas such as AI, open educational resources (OERs), and open in general?

Elizabeth Miller

Over the past few years, we have seen increasing numbers of students needing help navigating the “hidden curriculum” of graduate theological education and higher education more broadly. Students arriving in our programs come from various backgrounds and bring a wealth of knowledge from different fields and experiences, but many do not arrive with the specific theological background their faculty may expect or assume. To offer students some of this foundational information, Pitts staff created zines to hand out during the in-person orientation attended by all students, regardless of their hybrid/in-person status. The zines include some basic theological terms, like *exegesis* and *critical*, a research primer and graphic, tips and tricks from other Candler students, and guides on how to make the best use of the library and its resources. We received positive feedback about the zines and plan to do them again in the years ahead.

Emily Peterson

Despite the constant anxiety that libraries will become defunct in light of rapid technological development, I believe our role as librarians becomes ever more important when it comes to info literacy in a saturated and overcomplicated info landscape. In the library at Columbia, we have had students come to us and say, “I know how to find stuff—I just don’t know how to tell if it’s *good*.” While the designation of “good” may require some more critical reflection, the underlying challenge remains that there’s so much out there to be found, and it is a mixed bag. Helping to develop the tools of information literacy that allow students (and, frankly, all our patrons, including faculty) to navigate their search for information with more skill and confidence is something that we offer that has only become more essential over time.

HOW CAN THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIES ADAPT TO MEET THE NEEDS OF A MORE DIGITALLY CONNECTED AND GLOBALIZED USER BASE?

Andy Lofthus

As most of the students I work with are remote, I’ve tried to find ways to make my interactions with them more personal. One of the ways I’ve done that is through making short (one to two minutes) screencasts in response to their emails. This has made my communication clearer and more personal, and student feedback has been positive.

Jessica Boyer

We need to find additional ways to collaborate and share resources. Many institutions and libraries are struggling with unsustainable financial models. This challenge looks different in various institutions around the globe, but it is a common struggle. We must be intentional about thinking through ways to support each other.

Elizabeth Miller

At Pitts, we have had many discussions about the resources available to remote students versus in-person students. Through those discussions, we concluded that remote students have a fundamentally different library than on-campus students, partly because of

the availability of ebooks and electronic resources versus physical items, and partly because of the way we interact with electronic interfaces. I think one of the most important things we can do as librarians and educators is to be straightforward and realistic, when working with our patrons or enrolling them in hybrid programs, about the disparity in resources. By acknowledging our limitations, we offer patrons accurate information and set realistic expectations for when they begin using online library resources.

Emily Peterson

The broadening of the user base can pressure our libraries to be everything to everyone, a daunting prospect especially for theological libraries, which trend smaller and more focused. To adapt to these realities, it is important to leverage our strengths and acknowledge our limits, to continuously learn from one another, and to be intentional about assessing patron needs, preferences, and patterns of usage and access to make sure that we are putting our resources and energy toward the resources and services that best match our users.

WHAT STRATEGIES DO YOU EMPLOY TO STAY CURRENT WITH THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS IN OUR FIELD?

Andy Lofthus

To stay current, I use a combination of listservs, catalogs, conferences and their proceedings, and talking with other librarians.

Jessica Boyer

I follow library Twitter, browse listservs, and follow updates from professional associations.

Elizabeth Miller

I mostly stay current by chatting with coworkers about their professional activities and associations, as well as monitoring listservs for information (and drama). I also enjoy following social media accounts of professional organizations, like library Twitter. I want to specifically give a shoutout to ALA's *American Libraries* print

magazine; I love reading the physical magazine and paging through for fun and creative ideas!

Emily Peterson

I try to take advantage of listservs (through professional associations and otherwise), particularly those that offer learning opportunities like webinars. I also draw on collegial connections and conversations, and where a deep dive is needed, I sometimes dive into a book.

WE HAVE A LOT OF OPTIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL LIBRARY ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS—ACADEMIC AND FAITH-BASED ONES. SO, WHY ATLA? WHAT IS IT ABOUT ATLA THAT KEEPS US ENGAGED?

Andy Lofthus

I love Atla because while the schools and seminaries we come from can be very different (e.g., a small evangelical seminary versus a large mainline seminary), the work we do as theological librarians is very similar. That combination of similarities and differences makes for consistently fruitful conversations.

Jessica Boyer

I became involved in Atla after meeting Atla's Director of Membership & Engagement, Gillian Harrison Cain, in the exhibit hall at ACRL 2017. I started volunteering with Atla in 2020 when I joined the Conference Committee. Atla's outstanding community of members keeps me engaged. I have found a welcoming community within the association and a generosity of spirit within the membership. Everyone has always been happy to lend some advice and often introduces me to additional members to help. Atla also does an excellent job of keeping up with the latest trends and innovations. Atla has been a leader in AI and libraries among professional library associations. These innovations keep me engaged and returning to Atla for my professional development and learning.

Elizabeth Miller

I value Atla because it has always been a place I've felt welcome and part of the community. I appreciate that Atla is small enough that we can get to know others, while also being known in return. As many of us know, library school does not prepare you for the specifics of working in a library and the variety of issues we encounter. Through the years, I've been able to reach out to colleagues I've met at Atla to help think through issues that are unique to theological libraries and come up with creative solutions together. Those kinds of relationships are what keep me coming back to Atla each year.

Emily Peterson

Atla's specificity is powerful. The uniqueness of theological librarianship makes it incredibly valuable to know, learn from, and collaborate with colleagues who live in our subfield as well. Yet the breadth of our theological library contexts also allows us to learn from institutions that are different in scale, model, and theology than our own. That balance of similarity and difference creates a really rich community of mutual support and learning.

HOW DO PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS, SUCH AS ATLA, SUPPORT YOUR DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH AS A THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIAN? CAN YOU SHARE ANY VALUABLE EXPERIENCES OR RESOURCES PROVIDED BY THESE ASSOCIATIONS?

Andy Lofthus

Two ways that I've felt most supported by Atla are the personal/professional connections it's allowed me to make and the opportunities it's provided me to participate (e.g., presenting at conferences, being a member of a committee, etc.). This is the most welcoming and supportive professional association I know.

Jessica Boyer

I am the only panelist without a degree in theology. I also work at a comprehensive university. When I first started attending Atla Annual, I did not think of myself as a theological librarian any more than I was a business or a science librarian. However, Atla has helped me gain confidence in my work in supporting our theological degree

programs. Attending Atla Annual and reading Atla publications, especially past *Summary of Proceedings*, have been valuable resources and given me confidence and proficiencies in completing collection development and reference for our theological degree programs.

Elizabeth Miller

Atla has been incredible for me to grow professionally and try out new things. Since joining a few years ago, I have had the opportunity to present at several Atla annual conferences, write a book review for *Theological Librarianship*, and contribute to an edited volume with Atla Open Press. I am so grateful that Atla has been a safe space for me to try things, learn from peers, and receive constructive feedback in order to grow professionally and make connections with colleagues around the world.

Emily Peterson

I attended Atla in my first month as a theological librarian, and it was an immensely valuable experience in terms of building a community of colleagues, learning more about the field, and gathering ideas and information to implement as I hit the ground running.

WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF ATLA IN FOSTERING COLLABORATION, INNOVATION, AND EXCELLENCE IN THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIANSHIP?

Andy Lofthus

There are many things Atla can and should do, but my hope is that the organization always remembers its core strength: the members of its community and their relationships with one another. In my mind, investing in ways to foster community among its members is an investment in all that Atla does.

Jessica Boyer

Atla's suite of research tools are outstanding resources that continue to evolve and expand. I also appreciate members' opportunities to get to know the metadata team in recent years through presentations at Atla Annual, blog posts, and webinars. This relationship with

librarians and product creators is unique to Atla and is one of the ways I see Atla as a leader in the library vendor space.

Elizabeth Miller

I keep joking about starting a Discord for Atla folks to stay in touch throughout the year in a more informal way, but I think I might actually start one this year! I always have such a great time getting to know folks at Atla Annual but lose touch until the following summer. As I mentioned before, one of my favorite things about Atla is the relatively small size and sense of community, so keeping those communication channels going outside the conference would be a huge benefit for me.

Emily Peterson

I would love to see how we can foster relationship-building year-round so that we can keep the flow of mutual learning and support running outside of Atla Annual. I deeply appreciate remote or self-led learning opportunities like webinars and articles, but I especially value real-time conversation as a means of learning. Fostering that through perhaps the formation of short-term cohorts or small discussion groups could be a huge asset to Atla participants.

