

*Theological Librarianship: An Unapologetic Apology*¹

by Melody Layton McMahon

ABSTRACT: This essay (a revised version of an address given to the Fellowship of Christian Librarians and Information Scientists at the 2009 ALA conference in July 2009) engages a number of questions: What does it mean to be a Christian librarian? Do Christian librarians have a particular vocation, and, if so, what would be the implications for one's work? It also explores potential means of welcoming interested librarians into this discussion: What various associations and groups would need to have a voice? The author sheds light on these questions and issues from her own past and present vocational experience.

How does one begin to talk about what it means to have a vocation to theological librarianship if it is not by way of a confession? When I was looking for a couple of quotes from what I sometimes think of as the “Epistle to the Theological Librarians of St. Raymond Morris,” I found that in his essay he began what was really his presidential address to the eighth Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association in 1953 with these words, “It is difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to talk about ‘Librarianship as a Ministry’ in any other terms than a confession.”² If he spoke of his speech as a confession, then I feel it is certainly meet and right for me to do so as well.

I want to discuss broadening conversations about the contours or shape of “Christian Librarianship.” I want to talk about the concept of broadening the conversation about what it means to be a Christian librarian. Do Christian librarians have a particular vocation? What librarians might be interested in this conversation? How would it affect one's work? Is there a need for a broad conversation on this topic among Christian librarians, and, if so, how could such a conversation be convened? What vocational associations and groups would have a stake? How have such questions influenced my own life and work?

Even though I knew I was going to library school during my second year of college, it's rather odd to me that I didn't consider a library career even earlier. As a young teen, I worked in our church library which loaned books after church on Wednesday and Sunday nights, and until I was old enough to drive the only place I harassed my mom to take me to was our local public library where I had read voraciously since first grade. However, there was a period where I thought I was going to be a professional bassoonist, before I went off to college and realized if there was anything in the world I hated more than sitting in a practice room alone all day trying to refine my playing, I had not yet discovered it. So I dropped out for a time, and my parents, being old-fashioned, thought that graduating from high school was sufficient, and that I ought to go out and get a job. After a rough start, I went down to the Tulsa Public Library and put in an application. To my surprise, just a couple of weeks later, they called—they had a

¹ This essay is revised from an address given to the Fellowship of Christian Librarians and Information Scientists (FOCLIS) at the 2009 ALA conference (July 13, 2009). Two of the reasons I gave for agreeing to speak to the group were a) that I feel so blessed to have been put in the position I have at CTU as director of the library that—in the spirit of the parable of the talents—“from those to whom God entrusts much, much shall be expected”; b) when I was reading the FOCLIS website, I felt a sense that I needed to “proclaim the good news, the word of God,” and that I must take that seriously.

² Raymond P. Morris, “Theological Librarianship as a Ministry,” in *A Broadening Conversation: Classic Readings in Theological Librarianship*, ed. Melody Layton McMahon and David R. Stewart (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2006), 7-17.

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paraprofessional position open in the Media Department and were looking for someone with knowledge of music. To this day, I have no earthly idea, other than the hand of God, of how I got that job. It required a bachelor's degree and I had only one and a half years of undergraduate education. But I thank God continually because after only a few days, I "knew" that I was meant to be a librarian and, with the library's blessing, I only worked there for six months because I was so excited to get back to college and on my way to library school. As I was finishing my undergraduate degree, I started looking at library schools and decided to go to Columbia—at the time it was the most prestigious school (if such a thing can really be measured) and I wanted to live in New York City. I didn't have enough money to apply to more than one school, so I sent in my application and trusted that somehow I knew that was God's plan and it would work out. And it did. After graduating I was blessed to get a job at the Juilliard School and I worked there for one year, then married and moved to Cleveland. The job market was somewhat dire at the time, but I got a job as a public librarian. I liked it a lot—it was a really vibrant library—but it didn't totally satisfy me, and I wasn't quite sure why. After a few years there, the directorship of the Cleveland Institute of Music Library came open, and it seemed like the absolutely perfect position for me. I got the job and I enjoyed it a lot as well, but I still did not find it to be completely satisfying. I don't mean to imply that I thought I was in the wrong occupation—that was not it at all—simply the wrong setting or venue somehow.

When I was at Columbia studying library service, I had started reading theology on my own and I decided to become a convert to Catholicism. I joined a confirmation class and read more theology, and I kept on reading theology all along. So at some point when I was working at the Institute of Music, I decided to do some classes at the Jesuit university near our home. That led me to decide that I might as well go ahead and do a second master's degree in theology. I decided for a number of reasons to do that at the diocesan seminary of the Catholic Church in Cleveland, rather than stay at John Carroll University, the Jesuit school where I had been taking classes earlier.

This course of studies unfolded in a way that I never expected, that had a certain fortuitous, or should I say providential quality. While at the seminary, people would constantly ask me, "Why are you studying here?" As a Roman Catholic woman, it was clear I was not studying to become a priest. So, I had to start articulating why I was there. At first, I just said, "Well, sometime if I ever want to work as an academic librarian, I will need a subject master's." Most people didn't understand this, but weren't perplexed enough to probe further. I was the one who cared, so I began to reflect on what I was doing with my life. And as I studied more theology, I realized that I had a "vocation." When I use the term vocation, I mean it not in the ordinary sense of an occupation, but that one is "called" or "summoned." My vocation was to be a librarian. It wasn't simply a job, and it wasn't even that I thought God had given me the skills and attitude and personality to make a good librarian. No, it meant that God had "called" me to be a librarian. In every sense the same way that God calls people to religious life and the clergy, I felt called to be a librarian. And as time went by, I felt that God wanted me to become a theological librarian. After all, he had led me to this more intense theological study and it seemed like the right thing. My children were young and geographic mobility was limited, so I really felt blessed when I got a job at John Carroll, which at least was a Catholic school, and was a place where I could try to live out my vocation as best I could. I became the liaison to the Religious Studies Department, and that was the most satisfying aspect of my job.

In 1998, I attended my first American Theological Library Association conference. Though I had been a member for much longer, on attending I knew I had found a spiritual home. Here I found that there were other folks who shared that same sense of vocation, that they were called by God to the work they were doing, and people in the organization were even writing and speaking about having it.

I began to reflect (off and on) about what it meant to have a “vocation” as a librarian, and specifically as a theological librarian, though I believe you can just as easily have a vocation to be a librarian of any variety. Indeed, I believe that argument can be made for a vocation for any occupation whose ends are good: plumbing, landscaping, or computer programming. Clearly, not everyone feels this, but for those who do, it is bound to enrich the work of those who do, even while perhaps “raising the stakes”! In this connection there is a wonderful quote from Frederick Buechner: “The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done . . . The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”³

I really hadn’t thought about the lectionary readings for the week when I was preparing these thoughts, because I certainly wasn’t thinking of my remarks as a sermon or homily. Thus I was surprised on opening the week’s online scripture reflection provided by my school and read from my colleague Dianne Bergant the words, “Today’s readings insist that God has indeed called all of us to prophesy to his people. This might startle us. Us, prophets? After all, we are just simple people, engaged in ordinary occupations.”⁴

Even though the readings did refer to specific people and settings—Amos, the Ephesians, and the apostles—who are called to extraordinary ministry, they also touch upon how all of us are called, no matter what our occupations, to live out our baptismal promises and bring the reign of God. Dianne goes on to say, “Christians today are mechanics and clerks, teachers and engineers, doctors and housekeepers, politicians and train conductors. Few of them are asked to leave their ordinary trades or professions, for it is precisely within those trades or professions that they fulfill their calling. It is there that they touch minds and hearts and souls with the tenderness of God; and it is there that they heal the people whom they touch. It is there that they instruct and comfort people in need; and it is in that way that they help to drive out the demons that seem to have a strangle hold on those people. In very ordinary ways, these unassuming faithful people participate in the extraordinary establishment of the reign of God.”⁵

I want briefly to cover the organizations that I think might enter into a conversation about the vocational aspects of librarianship as a Christian. One reason I am adumbrating these varied organizations is that doing so can help us see the contours that Christian librarianship can take. It might also help us to see some ways in which these different organizations can have common conversations. As an unabashed supporter of ecumenical work, I lean toward organizations that are open to membership to those who have common goals, and do not exclude those who might have something to contribute to the life of the organization—in general, people of good will.

Here are some of the organizations I have identified who might qualify for discussion: Fellowship of Christian Librarians and Information Scientists, Association of Christian Librarians, Church and Synagogue Library Association, National Church Library Association, Evangelical Church Library Association, Catholic Library Association, and the American Theological Library Association.

- “FOCLIS is a nondenominational organization of people involved in the library and information profession who are committed to the Christian faith and seek to reflect its principles in their personal and professional life.”⁶

³ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 119.

⁴ Dianne Bergant, e-mail to Reflections from Catholic Theological Union mailing list, July 12, 2009.

⁵ Bergant.

⁶ Fellowship of Christian Librarians and Information Specialists, <http://www.foclis.org/>.

Its purposes are to promote fellowship among Christians in library and information-science-related professions; to provide a forum for the discussion of ethical and practical issues related to librarianship in the light of Christian faith; to foster development and communication of thought regarding theoretical and applied relationships between Christianity and librarianship; to encourage witness and expressions of views and values regarding Christianity and information-related issues to the community at large. There is no mention of the word vocation, but room for discussion fits quite easily into its goals. The goals of the British counterpart of FOCLIS, The Librarians' Christian Fellowship,⁷ are much the same.

- ACL, the Association of Christian Librarians. The website for that organization articulates its mission as follows: “The mission of the Association of Christian Librarians is to empower evangelical librarians through professional development, scholarship, and spiritual encouragement for service in higher education. A caring Christian community that integrates faith and academic librarianship, emphasizing ministry and service.”⁸ Though the ACL does not use the word “vocation,” it clearly hints at it.
- Church and Synagogue Library Association, National Church Library Association, and Evangelical Church Library Association (these three are somewhat similar).
 - Church and Synagogue Library Association⁹—somewhat different in scope, but some members may clearly be doing their work based on having a vocation, though the website is lacking any sort of language that would indicate why folks might pursue such work. This may be because of its ecumenical structure, but it is unclear from the website whether vocation is considered.
 - National Church Library Association—originally Lutheran church librarians, now ecumenical. Its mission is “to further the Gospel through Church Libraries.” To do this it helps by: offering support in setting up new libraries, providing direction for organizing and maintaining libraries, assisting with trends in resources and technology, helping support a Christian ethic in the church library.¹⁰
 - Evangelical Church Library Association—described as a “Fellowship of Christian churches, schools, and individuals which strives to promote church libraries to encourage Christian growth, and offers spiritual encouragement and professional assistance to librarians.”¹¹

As membership in the three organizations I've just mentioned does not require professional librarian status, it is slightly more difficult to discuss this concept of vocation for those who are in voluntary positions.

- Catholic Library Association and the American Theological Library Association.
 - The Catholic Library Association “coordinates the exchange of ideas, provides a source of inspirational support and guidance in ethical issues related to librarianship, and offers fellowship for those who seek, serve, preserve, and share the word in all its forms.” One does not have to be a Catholic to join, just to have some interest in the aims of the organization.¹²

⁷ Librarians' Christian Fellowship, <http://www.librarianscf.org.uk/>.

⁸ The Association of Christian Librarians, <http://www.acl.org/about.cfm>.

⁹ Church and Synagogue Library Association, <http://cslainfo.org/>.

¹⁰ National Church Library Association, <http://www.churchlibraries.org/>.

¹¹ Evangelical Church Library Association, <http://www.eclalibraries.org/>.

¹² Catholic Library Association, <http://cathla.org/about.php>.

- American Theological Library Association—The mission of ATLA is to foster the study of theology and religion by enhancing the development of theological and religious libraries and librarianship. In pursuit of this mission, the Association undertakes to foster the professional growth of its members, and to enhance their ability to serve their constituencies as administrators and librarians; to advance the profession of theological librarianship, and to assist theological librarians in defining and interpreting the proper role and function of libraries in theological education; to promote quality library and information services in support of teaching, learning, and research in theology, religion, and related disciplines and to create such tools and aids (including publications) as may be helpful in accomplishing this; to stimulate purposeful collaboration among librarians of theological libraries and religious studies collections; and to develop programmatic solutions to information-related problems common to those librarians and collections.¹³

Individual membership in ATLA is open to anyone engaged in professional library or bibliographic work in theological and religious studies, or who has an interest in the literature of religion, theological librarianship, and the purposes and work of the Association. What started as a group of Christian seminary librarians (with only a nod to Catholics) has now become open to non-Christian librarians as well, though it still retains a Christian outlook. There are many librarians within ATLA who are interested in living out their Christian vocation, though there are others who would not use this language at all. There are even some who have even established a discussion list on this topic, though it seems to me that many of these people are also ordained in their various denominations and are trying to articulate to their governing bodies why being a theological librarian is a ministry. Through ATLA I know there are other organizations internationally that have the same types of goals and interests.

Clearly these are diverse organizations, and some might be a natural fit for our broadened conversation. They cover the gamut from church libraries, staffed by volunteers who are not professional librarians, to the most scholarly theological libraries at universities and graduate seminaries. School librarians, those who work in special and public libraries, university librarians who cover all possible disciplines—all are catered to in one or another of these organizations. It would be helpful to have more discussion among these groups that would enable Christians to understand and live their vocations as baptized Christians through their work.

Why do I feel this way? Well, no doubt because after considerable reflection and introspection, I have discovered for myself that by living out our baptismal vocation we must be changed, and this involves working to bring the reign of God. A concept I became interested in during my theological study is “theosis.” A very important theological concept in Orthodox Christianity, it is also found in Catholicism and the Protestant faith. Also called “divinization” or “deification,” it asserts that we are made in the image of God and are called as worshipers to a process where we are to become more and more like God in this life, culminating in the resurrection. All of life is, to this way of seeing things, caught up in making choices to become more and more like God. “Being like God” is such a rich idea that it leaves room for all kinds of Christians to find ways and means for using their special talents and gifts to mirror the image of God—creativity, gaining knowledge and intelligence, healing, showing love. It is interesting how the press release announcing this presentation (at FOCLIS) has the phrase “anchored in a firm

¹³ American Theological Library Association, http://atla.com/about.html#mission_and_ends.

relationship with our creator.”¹⁴ I find it easier to understand my relationship with the creator if I think about mirroring him in the things I do.

Some Orthodox theologians speculate that if somehow the world were converted and working together to bring the reign of God, the kingdom of God on earth would come to exist. I happen to like this idea because I’m also enamored of the idea that heaven is the transformation of earth to the glory of God—I like the bits in Narnia where C. S. Lewis says that “every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. . . . The reason why we loved the old Narnia was because it sometimes looked a little like this.”¹⁵ Later, he says, finding a really compelling way to talk about the Old and New Earth, “You are now looking at the England within England, the real England just as this is the real Narnia. And in that inner England nothing good is destroyed.”¹⁶ My mom, being a bit old-fashioned, thinks the idea of sitting around playing a harp in the clouds is a thrilling idea, but as for me, I don’t think I could find happiness without books and patrons and electronic resources around me! In the novels of Angela Thirkell, a sort of middle-brow British writer during the Wars and post War periods, the gentry, who have spent their lives in service to the country and the people who have depended on them, will not find a heaven unless it is one where they can continue to work unceasingly for others. I don’t think either this idea or my own are far-fetched; Evelyn Waugh wrote satirically, though with a ring of truth, “The human mind is inspired enough when it comes to inventing horrors; it is when it tries to invent a Heaven that it shows itself cloddish.”¹⁷ So, I’m hoping to go on working for my patrons once I get there.

How are these concepts, ideals, or this theology manifest in my own life? Well, now that I am working where “my deep gladness meets the world’s great hunger” I feel great satisfaction. And the world is at my institution. Catholic Theological Union is an incredibly diverse setting where students from all over the world study. We have thirty-two male religious orders who send their students to become priests at our school and many women religious and lay people from various parts of the world; as these orders are involved in all parts of the globe, so then are our students, currently serving in sixty-five countries. So first, I am doing my best to use my call to this vocation to its very best service. Raymond Morris says that if we are doing our jobs, then we are engaged in “the drive of a community which is at work and which is throbbing with vitality.”¹⁸ He sums up very neatly how we can become a co-creator with God and how important that is.

All of this is to say, as I see it, that our jobs are carried on in the context of life, in the context of living things, primarily with persons, not inanimate objects. We are dealing with people in a very vital way. We are dealing with growth in understanding, with the shaping of points of view, with developing and living philosophies, with the stuff which shall shape the promptings of conscience and ethical and moral perception. We are dealing with situations which will fortify the will, which will shape character, and which will ultimately participate in the destiny of men. It does not take a gifted imagination to gauge the scope and importance of our work.”¹⁹

¹⁴ The press release for the FOCLIS meeting at ALA stated, “Please join us for an informative and uplifting view of our profession and see how a theological perspective anchored in firm relationship with our creator can help all of us meet many of the most salient issues in the practice of librarianship today.”

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier Books, 1956), 171.

¹⁶ Lewis, 181.

¹⁷ Evelyn Waugh, *Put Out More Flags* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948), 71.

¹⁸ Morris, 10.

¹⁹ Morris, 12-13.

What more could one want?

Because I feel so satisfied with this intersection of joy in my work, working is always fulfilling. I want to do my best for the students and faculty I serve. I recently found a quote from Winston Churchill that describes me: “Working hours are never long enough. Each day is a holiday, and ordinary holidays are grudgingly accepted as enforced interruptions in an absorbing vocation.”²⁰ I’m not saying the job is never without annoyance—anyone who ever has to do statistical reports for accreditation or who has a patron who will whine about paying fines will know that! But to work with our faculty and students as they work toward bringing the reign of God is an amazing opportunity.

Further, this theology of theosis and conception of heaven inform my thoughts about the future of knowledge and information and my perspectives on library issues of all sorts. For example, I am an energetic proponent of open access—if our mission is to bring the word of God to the world (whether that word is theological or about librarianship), then don’t we want it to be heard by as many people as possible? I’m not saying that I am against the marketplace of publishing, but I am against the exploitation of libraries to pay for outrageously expensive reference works and journals. To that end, ATLA has made its journal, *Theological Librarianship*, open access. I am also currently working on a project to update a reference work, McCabe’s *Critical Guide to Catholic Reference Books*, on a wiki, so that it will be available to anyone in the world who wants to use it. I would like to see many more projects like this. Librarians should be at the forefront of collaborating with scholars to create resources that are needed and to produce them in an open access system that makes them available anywhere in the world.

For me, this idea of vocation and ministry is why I do what I would call my own service and scholarship. I know a few librarians, some of them theological librarians, who view their work as simply that—work. I want people to understand the work that I know as my vocation. Service—well, I believe in putting in time to serve the organizations that help us with our work. I take seriously the opportunity to mentor young librarians and have no doubt indoctrinated (and I hope it took) several young students doing practicums with me!

I pursue the scholarship that I think contributes to these goals. Here is a venue where I think all the organizations discussed have a place to do some common work. Several of these organizations have publications where writing about our purpose and ministry could be shared. We could facilitate the sharing of how we can live our vocation and find ways to increase our effectiveness by writing and presenting about it.

Of my own work, I’d call your attention to a couple of items to give you a frame of reference to think about for yourself. I don’t think that my writing and presenting has to be specifically about vocation, it only needs to manifest ways that I can do my work better or show that I take it seriously as a means of fulfilling my baptismal vocation and bringing the reign of God. So my own research and writing have covered topics from Catholicism and music to collection development of CDs; from how to collaborate with faculty colleagues to how to get publishers to work with librarians to produce reference works we can believe in. My edited book with my colleague David Stewart, *A Broadening Conversation* was a wonderful project, full of writing by librarians who believed their work helped to bring the reign of God. We took what we thought were the best of presentations from sixty years of ATLA conferences that stood to make the strongest contribution to the understanding of our vocation, covering both theoretical and practical aspects of librarianship.

I’d like to close with one more quote from Raymond Morris, which sums up my perspective on all of this:

²⁰ Winston Churchill, “Painting as a Pastime,” in *Sir Winston Churchill: His Life and Painting*, by David Coombs and Minnie Churchill (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2004), 94.

As this is a confession, I can now ask myself if I have ever been sorry that I am a librarian. I am sure of the answer: “No, not for one moment.” I am in the job that I want to be in. I cast no envious eyes at greener pastures. I do not want to teach, I do not want to preach, I do not want to crack rock in a quarry. I just want to be left where I am and I hope that I have the gumption to make the most of what can be done. It is all very challenging and worthwhile.²¹



²¹ Morris, 15.