Telling the Library's Story: A Personal Reflection

by Paul F. Stuehrenberg

ABSTRACT: The author reflects on the circumstances in which he determined that it would be prudent to write a history (published in 1992 as *A Library Worthy of the School…*) of the collections of the Yale Divinity Library, where he has served for many years as Divinity Librarian. These experiences serve as a framework for other librarians to consider whether, or how, they might write histories of the libraries in which they serve. He concludes by identifying what he learned from the exercise.

INTRODUCTION

A few months ago, one of the editors of the present publication sent a query to the ATLANTIS listserv, asking for information on histories of specific theological libraries. I replied (along with others), telling the editor of the history of the Yale Divinity Library collections I had written in 1992: *A Library Worthy of the School: a History of the Yale Divinity School Library Collections.*[1] In response, the editor asked if I would be willing to write an essay that addressed the issue of writing such histories, with the thought that such an essay might encourage others to do likewise. I was quite willing to undertake this task.

There are many different reasons for writing such a history. One could do so for the enlightenment of faculty and students who use the library, letting them know how what is came to be. Friends of the Library, and alumni, are other potential audiences, with the history potentially serving as a fund-raising instrument.

In sharp contrast to these motivations, the history I wrote came about from a sense of *desperation*.

Soon after Stephen Peterson left Yale Divinity Library in 1991 to become the Librarian at Trinity College in Hartford, the Divinity Library faced a major crisis. The Yale University Library was going through one of its periodic budget reductions, and the powers that be in the University Library mandated that the Divinity Library make draconian reductions in its budget, reductions that, in my opinion, would have eviscerated the Divinity Library staff and rendered it unable to fulfill its longstanding mission of supporting the teaching and research of the Divinity School faculty.

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[1] A slightly revised edition was issued in 1994. The title is taken from the report of the committee appointed by the Yale Corporation to devise a plan for the development and unified administration of the libraries of the Divinity School, February 8, 1932: "An unusual opportunity is offered to build up a library worthy of the traditions of the School, and symbolizing the unity of knowledge and of the educational endeavors of the School." In writing my history, I benefited greatly from the work of Stephen Peterson, and his example in authoring several brief histories: *Yale Divinity School Library: a Decade in Retrospect, Prospects for the Future.* (New Haven: The Library), 1982; *Of Old and New Wine: Five-Year Report of the Divinity Librarian, 1982-1987*. (New Haven: Yale Divinity School, 1987); and, "A 'steady aim toward completeness': the Day Mission Library Centennial Lecture." *Yale University Library Gazette*, 67 (April 1993): 138-150. I subsequently wrote two ten-year reports in conjunction with the ATS accreditation visits: *Bulldozers on the Quad: Yale Divinity School Library Ten-Year Report* (New Haven: The Library, 2001); and, *The Other Side of the Jordan: Yale Divinity Library Ten-Year Report* (New Haven: Yale Divinity Library, 2012).

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John Bollier, who had been appointed Interim Librarian, decided, for a variety of reasons (including his disinclination to carry out the budget reductions) to take early retirement. It was with some reluctance that I accepted appointment as Interim Divinity Librarian in his place. At the same time, I, along with other members of the senior staff, began looking at other possibilities for our professional futures. All of which meant that the Divinity Library's institutional memory was in serious danger of being lost. Faced with this uncertainty, I thought it prudent to begin to compile some of the history of the Divinity Library and how its collections had been developed, for the benefit of those who might come after us.

As it happened, the administrator who had been calling for the deep cuts to the Divinity Library budget left Yale for greener pastures. The University Library administration reconsidered its earlier requests, and indicated a willingness to moderate the Divinity Library's budget reduction. At this time I applied for the position of Yale Divinity Librarian, was offered the position, and was able to negotiate adjustments to the budget reduction that, I thought, would still enable us to continue to fulfill our traditional mission. Even with this threat having been removed, I continued to write the history I had begun, if only to acquaint myself with all that had gone on before I joined the staff in 1982.

I would emphasize that what I wrote was a history of the Divinity Library *collections*, not of the Library itself. The history does include people and events important to the life of the Library, but only to the degree that those people and events influenced decisions that were made regarding the collections. The focus on the collections was important, in part, because the Yale Divinity Library is a part of the larger Yale University Library, and the evolution of the Divinity Library collections took place in that larger context. And "evolution" is indeed the operative term.

When the Yale Divinity School moved to its current location in 1932, there was no transfer of material from the central library. Instead, apart from three small collections that had been housed at the Divinity School, the new Library started pretty much from scratch. Over the next twenty years Raymond Morris, the first Divinity Librarian (serving from 1932 to 1972), began to build what has become one of the most important theological collections anywhere in the world. He did so fairly independently, with a focus on supporting the teaching and research of the Divinity School faculty. At the same time, the religion collections at the university's central library were essentially allowed to atrophy, as most of the faculty and students using them were more closely connected with the Divinity School. Coincidentally, for those first twenty years, the Divinity Library reported to, and received its funding from, the Divinity School rather than from central administration. Then in 1952 the Divinity Library, along with most other libraries at Yale, began to report to the University Library.

Once that administrative transition had occurred, there was an increased expectation that the Divinity Library collections would be coordinated more closely with those being developed elsewhere in the University Library system. Accordingly, over the next decades there were a series of agreements that articulated who should collect what. For example, the Divinity Library collects the documentation of denominations in the Trinitarian tradition, while the University Library documents Unitarianism, Shakers, Mormons, and the like, along with non-Christian religions (though the Divinity Library documents the relationship of Christianity and other religions). The Divinity Library collects materials related to Judaism up to 70 C.E., and the university's Judaica Collection is responsible for Judaism after that date. The Music Library collects church music, except for hymnals, which are collected by the Divinity Library. And these are but a few examples. The main focus of my history was to document what the Divinity Library was expected to collect, so that whoever succeeded me as Divinity Librarian would have some understanding of the rationale for what constituted the Divinity Library collections.

The first thing I did when I was appointed the Interim Divinity Librarian was to read my predecessors' annual reports. I found this to be an invaluable exercise. First of all, it filled in my understanding of how the Divinity Library got to be where it was at the time. Secondly, it immediately placed me in the position of knowing more about the Divinity Library than anyone else on campus. Additionally, the annual reports supplied the framework for reading other documents about the Divinity Library and its history. Thus, when I began to review the Divinity Library archives (both the formal archives housed at the Yale University Manuscripts and Archives and the more informal documentation that had been collected at the Divinity Library over the years), the annual report provided a chronological structure within which to understand those documents. Moreover, the annual reports often referred to other documents that I was then able to locate in the archives. The narrative of the annual report often provided a context for understanding these documents, and the annual reports also often told the story of what happened to the documents afterwards: whether they became the basis for some action being taken, or whether they produced no significant outcome. I then supplemented these primary sources with published materials about the Divinity Library and its collections. Along the way, I began a bibliography of works about the Divinity Library that I appended to the history itself.

Some things I learned while writing my history:

1. As mentioned above, in the process of writing the history, I became "the" expert on the history of the Divinity Library and its collections.

2. I found that, whenever there was a change in leadership either in the University Library or the Divinity School, Raymond Morris would provide the new leader(s) with an extended essay on the role of the library in theological education. From this I learned that one of the most important roles for the Divinity Librarian, if not the most important, was to be able to interpret the Divinity Library to those who made the administrative decisions that shaped its future.

3. Along those same lines, I came to appreciate how fragile institutions can be, even one that appears to be as substantial and durable as the Yale Divinity Library—not to mention the Yale Divinity School itself. In a series of Morris' annual reports, for example, he compared the Yale Divinity Library's rate of expenditures for acquisitions to that of several other institutions. It was striking that during nearly every year there were several libraries that spent more than Yale did, but that those who spent more varied from year to year. Yale embodied the Connecticut ideal of "steady habits," prevailing over time through consistent levels of support. But sustaining those levels of support over time is by no means a "given."

4. I learned to include as appendices to my annual reports those documents produced during the year that reflected the Library's work. That way my successors (and any other interested party) would have all the documentation before them, rather than having to search for documents that may or may not have survived.

5. I continued to add to the bibliography of publications about the Divinity Library and its work. Early on in my tenure my colleagues and I decided not to try to publish our own newsletter, but rather to write articles for the publications of the Divinity School, the University Library, and the University itself. We also wrote articles for the *ATLA Newsletter* and gave papers at the ATLA Annual Conference that were included in the *Proceedings*. In this way we were able to add to the documentation of the Divinity Library's history. Adding them to the ongoing bibliography makes it easier for anyone interested in the history and work of the Divinity Library to identify the sources.

In conclusion, I acknowledge freely that, to my knowledge, no "audience" has benefited more from these history-writing endeavors than I have myself. And, should you decide to undertake a similar project, whoever the intended audience may be, I am confident that you, too, will be a primary beneficiary of your efforts.