

## PROFILES: *John Albert Bollier (1927-2010)*

By *Suzanne M. Estelle-Holmer*

“The Literature of Theology. That’s a rather presumptuous title for a course. Who can possibly be learned enough to deal with all the literature of theology – the classical texts, the Bible, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, as well as the contemporary theologians, who write in monographs and hundreds of journals, reports and proceedings?”<sup>1</sup>

With this humble question John Bollier would introduce the course in theological bibliography that he taught for eighteen years at the Yale Divinity School. As the author of *The Literature of Theology: A Guide for Students and Pastors* (1979), there was no one better suited to the task of bringing the world of theological bibliography to students, pastors, and laypersons. Indeed, one of the recurrent themes in Bollier’s writing was the desire “for students and pastors to become independent in finding the books, the journal articles, or the information needed in the pursuit of either academic study or professional ministry.”<sup>2</sup> John was an avid advocate of information literacy and the need for life-long learning.

John Bollier was born in 1927 in North Tonawanda, New York. His family owned a business in the area and so developed good organizational skills and learned how to manage resources. In 1944 he went off to study at the University of Michigan where he received a degree in history. There he joined a Christian group where he met his wife, Trudy (Gertrude Lothian). A young Brevard Childs, later to become a prominent biblical scholar, was also a member, and John admired him for his scholarly interests. Although the two pursued quite different careers, their paths continued to intersect at Princeton Seminary and again later, at Yale.

After college John went on to study at Princeton Theological Seminary. A strong sense of Christian commitment and a love of scholarship and languages drew him to seminary. While at Princeton he published two scholarly articles in the journal *Interpretation*.<sup>3</sup> After completing the Master of Divinity degree in 1952, he was ordained to Presbyterian ministry and embarked on a career as a pastor, serving two churches in Pennsylvania. Still drawn to the study of Bible and theology, he went on to complete a Master of Theology degree at Princeton, and in 1957-58, he was granted a leave of absence from the parish to study at the Graduate School of Ecumenical Studies, affiliated with the World Council of Churches and the University of Geneva in Bossey, Switzerland. This was a formative period in John’s intellectual life that offered him the opportunity to pursue theological study in a lively European context.

When John returned home he resumed his pastoral career. After having served two churches in Pennsylvania, he and his family made a big move to California in 1963, where he became the pastor of Saint Stephen Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles. Those years were marked by John’s discipline of preaching: Monday was supposed to be a vacation day, but John would often start scribbling notes and jotting down ideas for the next sermon; Tuesday was

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<sup>1</sup> John Bollier’s unpublished lecture notes from the course “The Literature of Theology,” undated.

<sup>2</sup> John Bollier, *The Literature of Theology: A Guide for Students and Pastors* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 17.

<sup>3</sup> John Bollier, “Judgment in the Apocalypse,” *Interpretation* 7 (1953): 14-25 and “The Righteousness of God: A Word Study,” *Interpretation* 8 (1954): 404-413.

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devoted to exegetical study; Wednesday the first draft; and Saturday the rehearsal when John would do a trial run culminating in the delivery on Sunday morning.

In 1971 John earned a degree in library science from the University of California at Los Angeles. He regarded this as a way of returning to the world of books and scholarship, but also of redirecting his experience and training toward a new mode of service. He worked for a year at California State University at Northridge as Reference Librarian and Bibliographer for Philosophy and Religion. While on a short family trip to the East Coast, he was informed of an opening for a librarian at the Yale Divinity Library. He contacted the newly appointed Divinity Librarian, Stephen Peterson, who set him up with an impromptu interview. Needless to say, John got the job, and from 1973 to 1991, served as Public Services Librarian at the Divinity Library.

This was an important time of change and growth for the Library, but John's most ambitious and beloved project was his course in theological bibliography. Although the first Divinity Librarian, Raymond Morris, had conducted bibliographical instruction in an informal way through consultations and occasional lectures, John was successful in introducing library instruction as part of the official Yale Divinity School curriculum in the form of a semester-long, credit-bearing course. It first appears in the YDS Bulletin in 1975 under the title "Tools for Continuing Self-Education" and has continued to be taught at YDS up to the present.<sup>4</sup> The care and deliberation John took in creating and revising the course is evident from a thick, three-ring binder that contains John's handwritten lecture notes and typed bibliographies. One of the features of the course was the use of challenging weekly question sets, designed to give students practice using reference tools. As the final project for the course, students were required to compile a bibliography of the best sources on a topic of their own choosing. The emphasis was on the "type-of-literature" approach to research, in which the student learns basic types of sources (concordances, encyclopedias and dictionaries, indexes, etc.), in which one may reliably be expected to find certain kinds of information, regardless of the subject matter.<sup>5</sup> There was little emphasis on monographs, as these came and went according to trends and new developments in scholarship.

John's teaching laid the groundwork for the book *The Literature of Theology*. The work of compiling and editing was supported by a grant from the Association of Theological Schools in the U.S. and Canada. The guide quickly became a standard manual, listing resources for research and reading in biblical studies, systematic theology, historical studies, and practical theology. In 1997 David Stewart and John met at a conference to discuss the possibility of working together to revise *The Literature of Theology*. John was excited at the prospect of a revision, but came to realize that he was very much an "old school" librarian and had little incentive to learn the new electronic tools. As Stewart notes in the introduction to the revised edition, "John quite reasonably decided that he had postponed his retirement for too long already and politely withdrew from the project."<sup>6</sup> Stewart's book is quite different from John's, acknowledging changes in information technology and new areas of theological inquiry.

No profile of John would be complete without mention of his work on behalf of ATLA. As a board member, he played a key role in the reorganization discussions that led to the merger in 1992 of all ATLA-related boards into a single board of directors. In 1991 when John retired from Yale to embark on what could be considered a third

<sup>4</sup> The content and title of the course has changed over the years. In 1979 it became "The Literature of Theology." Its current title is "Resources for the Study of Religion."

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Mann, *Library Research Models* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 57-58.

<sup>6</sup> David R. Stewart, *The Literature of Theology: A Guide for Students and Pastors*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 5.

career, he set up an office at home and worked as the first Director of Development. Drawing on his business acumen, he enhanced the ATLA Endowment Fund and distinguished it from the Annual Giving Fund. He also wrote successful grant proposals to support microfilm preservation and traveled extensively in Europe and Latin America to establish relationships and cooperative programs with theological schools, universities, libraries, and institutes. John retired from this position at ATLA in 1997.

John Bollier's life synthesized the best of the pastor and the librarian. He believed that the practice of ministry should not be separate from the pursuit of knowledge and that students require training in the tools to access the expertise they will need throughout their professional lives.

