

## PROFILES: *Aspiring Vision and Attention to Detail: Kenneth Sperber Gapp (1905-1966)*

by Kenneth W. Henke and Virginia E. Dearborn



Kenneth Sperber Gapp was born in Nazareth, PA, on July 27, 1905, to Rev. Samuel H. and Rosina Gapp. After completing Moravian Preparatory School in Bethlehem, PA, and a B.A. at Muhlenberg College (1926), in Allentown, PA, Gapp moved to Princeton, NJ, to attend Princeton Theological Seminary and Princeton University, earning his Bachelor of Divinity and M.A. (Classics) from these institutions in 1929. Apart from teaching at Gettysburg College (1929-1931) and completing a B.S. in Library Science at Columbia University (1937), Gapp spent most of his life and all of his professional life in Princeton. He received a Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1934, writing his doctoral thesis, *Famine in the Roman World*.

In the late 1930s Gapp was involved in the Religious Books Round Table within the American Library Association, and he felt there should be a “section for Theological Librarians within the general framework of the Association of College and Reference Librarians.”<sup>1</sup> When the American Association of Theological Schools (AATS) initiated a study of theological libraries in the late 1940s, Gapp served on the executive committee, which was “authorized...to call a conference

on theological library work.”<sup>2</sup> In 1947, he attended the first conference (held at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary) of what would become the American Theological Library Association.

That first meeting of theological librarians in Louisville was “composed exclusively of administrative librarians,” and Gapp felt strongly that this set a “bad precedent.” Broader participation among library staff “would strengthen the new association in size and...would help to develop administrative librarians from the ranks.”<sup>3</sup> As a librarian with faculty status, Gapp recognized the importance of hiring and developing a well-trained staff, and he “insisted [the faculty and trustees should also recognize] that the library was only as good as its services.”<sup>4</sup>

Gapp was appointed as assistant librarian at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1934, and he became head librarian in 1937, a post which he held until his death in 1966. In recommending Gapp to the post, outgoing seminary librarian William B. Shedd noted that as a student of both the classics and theology, Gapp would orient theological training “in its relationship to the whole field of the intellectual life” and would balance the study of theology with “a grasp of the problems of philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> Drawing on his linguistic and theological training, as well as his professional librarian’s

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Sperber Gapp Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth S. Gapp, 1960. “The American Theological Library Association,” *Library Trends* 9 no. 2 (1960): 194-200, accessed August 21, 2015 from Illinois Digital Environment for Access to Learning and Scholarship, <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/5934>.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Sperber Gapp Collection.

<sup>4</sup> Kerr, Hugh Thomson and Bruce M. Metzger, “Kenneth Sperber Gapp 1905-1966,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 60, no.1 (1966): 69-71, accessed August 21, 2015, <http://journals.ptsem.edu/id/PSB1966601/dmd017>.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Gapp file, John A. Mackay Collection, Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

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training at Columbia, Gapp did much to create a theological library suited to the needs of the seminary in the twentieth century. He began by working on the antiquated cataloging system, slowly reclassifying the non-theological books into Library of Congress classification schedules, and adding a subject card catalog to the existing author and title files. He worked at recruiting and training a more adequate professional staff, urging the seminary at the same time to improve working conditions, including a five-day work week for library employees, a pension plan, and fair pay. He oversaw the accession of a major collection of some 9,000 volumes in the field of Christian hymnody, and arranged for the construction of the library's first rare book room with adequate security but also space to display some of the library's treasures. With the addition of many more female students coming to the seminary when the School of Christian Education was added in the 1940s, Gapp made sure the library facilities were modified to include a restroom for women. He encouraged students to set up the student-run Theological Book Agency, which got textbooks and other useful volumes into the hands of ministerial students and helped them develop a habit of good theological reading. Together with members of the Biblical Department, he published the *Bibliography of Bible Study for Theological Students* in 1948 to guide students to the best resources available in the field.

When he began his career at Princeton Seminary, Kenneth Gapp inherited a library that was begun in the study of its first professor in 1812, moved to two rooms in the seminary's main building when it was completed in 1816, and then received a building of its own (the first free-standing library in Princeton) as a gift of the New York philanthropist James Lenox in 1834. By the 1870s, the seminary library had outgrown its initial building and a second library was built next door (also a gift of James Lenox), completed in 1879. By the 1930s, these buildings were proving inadequate. Several architectural drawings were made to see how the buildings could be modernized and possibly joined together into one large library, though none proved feasible. Finally, in the 1950s Gapp was instrumental in the planning and eventual building of the seminary's new Robert E. Speer Library. This new facility replaced the antiquated older library buildings with a single modern fire-resistant structure that was both functional and architecturally pleasing. The new library opened in April 1957 with space for 400,000 volumes, room for 350 readers, classrooms and seminar rooms, special facilities for visiting scholars, faculty, graduate students, and Board of Trustees gatherings, an enlarged working area for the technical staff, and a well-lighted reading room with special shelving for current periodicals. An indication of the care and attention to detail Gapp gave to planning can be seen in a letter he wrote to the seminary president, urging him to include a side door with wheelchair access for persons with disabilities after he saw the architect's plans for the front and side steps. The finished Speer Library building was heralded by both the architectural press and the *New York Times*.<sup>6-8</sup>

Beyond his work at the Princeton Seminary Library, Gapp served as the chairman of ATLA's Commission on Lilly Endowment Scholarships, and he wrote the preliminary draft for a Lilly Endowment grant that spurred the professional development of a number of theological librarians. The program began in 1958 with a \$9,000 grant. According to Gapp, it was "[m]odeled somewhat after the faculty fellowships offered by A.A.T.S." and was "designed, by the awarding of scholarships for further study of library procedures or other relevant subjects, to increase the competence of library personnel, improve the services of the libraries, lead to a greater recognition of qualified library personnel and, in general, raise the level of selection and training of personnel for seminary libraries."<sup>9</sup> This project proved effective and was extended for several years beyond the original grant.

Gapp also served as president of ATLA from 1960-61. In his 1961 address, he again asserted the importance of a well-staffed and supported library. "[E]very effort must be made to admonish administrators that they cannot save money on libraries today without imperilling [sic] the future of their institutions; competence and adequate size of staff must be obtained at any cost, real standards of work must be established, and participation in or cooperation with other library organizations should be preserved unless the seminary library will never lack money to meet the rising costs of operation and of the purchase of necessary books."<sup>10</sup> One such cooperative effort among libraries was the creation of an index

<sup>6</sup> "Princeton to Dedicate New Theological Library Oct. 8," *The New York Times*, September 28, 1957.

<sup>7</sup> Keyes DeWitt Metcalf, *Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 270-271.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth S. Gapp, "The Speer Library," *Library Journal* 82 no. 21, December 1, 1957.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth S. Gapp, "The Librarian's Task in Improving Personnel," *College & Research Libraries* 1, no. 2 (1940): 132-137, accessed August 21, 2015, <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/31431>.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth S. Gapp, "Address," *American Theological Library Association Summary Of Proceedings* 15 (1961): 49-53.

which would later become the ATLA Religion Database. As Kerr and Metzger note in their 1966 remembrance, it was “[w]ith his encouragement [that] A.T.L.A. undertook the preparation of the Index to Religious Periodical Literature, the home for which was for several years [from 1959-1965] in Speer Library.”<sup>11</sup> Other issues that Gapp felt were important for ATLA to address included correlating acquisitions programs among the larger seminary libraries to better enable the comprehensive purchasing of theological materials in all existing languages, encouraging larger seminary libraries to become training grounds for new librarians who could then serve smaller seminary libraries, and developing more effective means of integrating the theological library into the total academic programs of the seminaries.<sup>12</sup>

Kenneth Gapp had a significant impact on the field of theological librarianship through other avenues of professional engagement. He served as Book Review Editor of *Theology Today* from its very beginnings in 1944. Of his work, Princeton Seminary President John Mackay said Gapp “has, by his insight and indefatigable devotion, set a new standard for book reviewing in theological journals.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to his work at Princeton Theological Seminary and his involvements with ATLA, Gapp was President of the Board of Trustees of the Princeton Public Library, and he held memberships in the New Jersey Library Association, the American Library Association, and the Bibliographical Society of America.

Following the death of Kenneth Sperber Gapp on July 5, 1966, the gathered faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary recorded their sorrow. But they also went on to express their thanks to God “for our friend’s devotion and distinguished career as Librarian of the Seminary... For more than thirty years he gave the full measure of his professional attention to the development and consolidation of one of the foremost collections of theological literature in the world.”<sup>14</sup> The broader community of theological librarians might also have reason to give thanks these many years later, for Kenneth Gapp’s devotion was not only to Princeton Seminary’s library but to the flourishing of theological librarianship as a profession. His concern for the theological librarian’s role in the promotion of theological scholarship and for the professional development of the entire theological library staff encompassed both a fine attention to detail and a rich vision of what theological librarianship can and should be.

## Recommended Reading

Hugh Thomson Kerr and Bruce M. Metzger. “Kenneth Sperber Gapp 1905-1966.” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 60, no. 1 (1966): 69-71. <http://journals.ptsem.edu/id/PSB1966601/dmd017>.

Kenneth S. Gapp. “Address.” *American Theological Library Association Summary Of Proceedings* 15 (1961): 49-53.

Kenneth S. Gapp. “The American Theological Library Association.” *Library Trends* 9, no. 2 (1960): 194-200. <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/5934>.

Kenneth S. Gapp. “The Librarian’s Task in Improving Personnel.” *College & Research Libraries* 1, no. 2 (1940): 132-137. <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/31431>.

The Kenneth Sperber Gapp Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library. Finding aid: <http://manuscripts.ptsem.edu/collection/80>.

<sup>11</sup> Kerr and Metzger, 70.

<sup>12</sup> Gapp, “Address.”

<sup>13</sup> Mackay, John Alexander, “Other Frontiers Call,” *Theology Today* 8, no.1 (April 1, 1951): 3-5. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost, accessed August 21, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Kerr and Metzger, 69.