

Finding Religion: An Analysis of Theology LibGuides

by Gerrit van Dyk

Abstract

This paper will compare various LibGuides in theology from thirty-seven different institutions. These institutions include universities granting undergraduate and graduate degrees in religion or theology as well as seminaries for professional clergy. Data on LibGuides content, such as books, e-books, journals, databases, librarian contact information, and others, will be compared and analyzed. Resources especially tailored to religious and theological studies will also be highlighted.

Introduction

Since its inception in 2007, LibGuides by Springshare has enjoyed an enormous early adoption by United States institutions. LibGuides provides a relatively easy platform for librarians to manage their own content for their subject specialties and also for course-specific guides. With arguably no working knowledge of basic HTML (let alone more complex web development languages and tools), a librarian can quickly learn how to create a functional landing page for the students and faculty in their discipline. Using a modular structure, LibGuides “boxes” can be shared between LibGuides pages, edited, and moved around to provide a moderately customizable experience for the designing librarian. For advanced Web 2.0 librarians, widgets are available to include third-party apps like instant messaging services, RSS feeds, embedded web videos, and polls to gather user feedback.

This paper will examine LibGuides in theology and religion as an online reference platform and as a collection-development tool by examining thirty-seven different guides which focus on the broad fields and sub-fields of theology. I will review the format and style of the guides first in an effort to assist theology librarians who are building their own guides. Seeing what others have done with their guides can help librarians as they design their own. I will then discuss the content of the guides. Knowing the types of resources used by one’s colleagues can help in making selection decisions. Ultimately, I found some definite similarities in design and layout between these guides, with many of the guides following a standard organizational structure. However, the resources and collections highlighted were so diverse that there were only a few resource types, databases in particular, where the data overlapped enough to be of interest to theological librarians.

Literature Review

Librarians have been publishing research-help tutorials — first in print, then later online — for decades.¹ Springshare, the developers of LibGuides, saw a market for easily customizable web space that did not require the librarian to know how to program. Released in 2007,² LibGuides has quickly become a staple in library online reference, particularly in higher education institutions.³

¹ See Jennifer Emanuel, “A Short History of Library Guides and Their Usefulness to Librarians and Patrons,” in Aaron W. Dobbs, Ryan L. Sittler, and Douglas Cook, eds. *Using LibGuides to Enhance Library Services: A LITA Guide* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2013), 3–20, for a concise review of the growth of library research guides over time, as well as a brief history of LibGuides.

² *Ibid.*, 10.

³ According to the LibGuides community page 435,987 LibGuides have been created “by 66,721 librarians at 4,799 libraries worldwide,” as of March 11, 2015.

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Many studies have been published on LibGuides and its uses.⁴ Other authors have evaluated user perceptions of LibGuides.⁵ There are also some studies on the use of LibGuides for special collections.⁶ A large number of studies focus on “best practices” for organizing guides to maximize usability.⁷ A debate on these best practices and how they apply to each of these guides is out of the scope of this article. Rather, this paper focuses on trends in layout and content among theological LibGuides, in an effort to help colleagues who are considering their own guides to have some framework within which to generate ideas.

With this ocean of LibGuides research, it is perhaps puzzling that only a handful of studies have been conducted that compare LibGuides across institutions on the same subject. Tony Stankus and Martha A. Parker opened this new line of inquiry with their analysis of fifty nursing LibGuides from institutions across the United States.⁸ This study served as a model for one of their University of Arkansas colleagues, Kate Dougherty, and her review of forty geology LibGuides and a second study of forty geography LibGuides.⁹ Most recently, Nestor L. Osorio shared his findings on forty-eight electrical engineering LibGuides.¹⁰ In each case, the authors uncovered both surprising and expected trends across the LibGuides they analyzed, providing valuable data for other librarians in their respective disciplines to evaluate their own LibGuides and collections. The present study aims at using these examples as a template from which to examine theology LibGuides to present to the theological library community for their benefit.

⁴ See Rachel McMullin and Jane Hutton, “Web Subject Guides: Virtual Connections across the University Community,” *Journal of Library Administration* 50, no. 7/8 (2010): 789–97. McMullin and Hutton share their migration from print and individual librarian websites to a cohesive online resource. See also Sara Roberts and Dwight Hunter, “New Library, New Librarian, New Student: Using LibGuides to Reach the Virtual Student,” *Journal of Library & Information Services in Distance Learning* 5, no. 1/2 (2011): 67–75, for a study on LibGuides and distance learners. Katie Elson Anderson and Julie M. Still, “Librarians’ Use of Images on LibGuides and Other Social Media Platforms,” *Journal of Web Librarianship* 7, no. 3 (2013): 272–91. Anderson and Still discuss how a selection of ARL libraries use images for their LibGuides librarian profiles. Ruth Baker, “Designing LibGuides as Instructional Tools for Critical Thinking and Effective Online Learning,” *Journal of Library & Information Services in Distance Learning* 8, no. 3/4 (2014): 107–17. Baker discusses legacy research pathfinders and how LibGuides have adopted that format, sometimes overwhelming the user. She advocates a simplified tutorial guide approach for certain tasks.

⁵ Dana Ouellette, “Subject Guides in Academic Libraries: A User-Centred Study of Uses and Perceptions,” *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 35, no. 4 (2011): 436–51. Ouellette relates the findings of interviews conducted with students about their perceptions of LibGuides. Michelle Dalton and Rosalind Pan, “Snakes or Ladders? Evaluating a LibGuides Pilot at UCD Library,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40, no. 5 (2014): 515–20. Dalton and Pan review the process of implementing LibGuides at the University College Dublin Library, including user feedback.

⁶ See, for example, Melanie Griffin and Barbara Lewis, “Transforming Special Collections Through Innovative Uses for LibGuides,” *Collection Building* 30, no. 1 (2011): 5–10, and Griffin and Lewis, “Special Collections and the New Web: Using LibGuides to Provide Meaningful Access,” *Journal of Electronic Resources Librarianship* 23, no. 1 (2011): 20–29.

⁷ See the excellent compilation, Aaron W. Dobbs, Ryan L. Sittler, Douglas Cook, eds., *Using LibGuides to Enhance Library Services: A LITA Guide*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 2013). Also, Alisa C. Gonzalez and Theresa Westbrook, “Reaching Out with LibGuides: Establishing a Working Set of Best Practices,” *Journal of Library Administration* 50, no. 5/6 (2010): 638–56. Gonzalez and Westbrook describe how they used LibGuides to connect library resources to university distance learners. Alec Sonstebly and Jennifer DeJonghe, “Usability Testing, User-Centered Design, and LibGuides Subject Guides: A Case Study,” *Journal of Web Librarianship* 7, no. 1 (2013): 83–94. Sonstebly and DeJonghe conducted two usability test series to develop recommendations on LibGuides layout, terminology, and visual appeal.

⁸ Tony Stankus and Martha A. Parker, “The Anatomy of Nursing LibGuides,” *Science and Technology Libraries* 31, no. 2 (2012): 242–55.

⁹ Kate Dougherty, “Getting to the Core of Geology LibGuides,” *Science and Technology Libraries* 32, no. 2 (2013): 145–59, and Dougherty, “The Direction of Geography LibGuides,” *Journal of Map & Geography Libraries* 9, no. 3 (2013). Susan Metcalf, “Good Stewards in Trying Times: Benchmarking Peer Collections of Sociology Reference Sources Using LibGuides,” *Reference Librarian* 54, no. 2 (2013): 134–42. Metcalf uses peer LibGuides to make collections decisions for reference titles in sociology.

¹⁰ Nestor L. Osorio, “Electrical Engineering Reference Resources: a Survey from LibGuides,” *Collection Building* 34, no. 1 (2015): 6–12.

As had been mentioned, while I will review the layout and content trends across these theological libguides, the debate over what makes a good LibGuide design will not be explored as those best practices have already been well established.¹¹ This paper will look at these trends to assist individual librarians as they make decisions based on design, layout, and collections for their theological LibGuide. The designs of these libguides are quite diverse and offer some compelling questions for anyone developing their own theological libguide. As for using the trends from these guides as a collecting tool, since so many of the resources were not duplicated across guides, the guides themselves become more of a list of most popular resources in our discipline. Perhaps librarians can find content that they were not familiar with which can help them as they assess their collections and consider acquiring additional reference materials.

Methods

Part of the motivation for this study was simply to discover how many theology LibGuides exist. Springshare provides a useful community of LibGuides managers, allowing for massive sharing between institutions. Theology was chosen with the assumption that it would be of most value to *Theological Librarianship* readers, whose target disciplines are “all aspects of professional librarianship, within the context of a religious/theological library collection encompassing interactions with faculty and administrators engaged in religious/theological education.”¹² Based on ATLA’s broad umbrella of “religious/theological” focus, guides that were as general as possible were used. The initial search returned many results that were not relevant to this study, such as course-specific guides or guides designed for specific tasks (e.g., using Credo Religion Database), populations (e.g., graduate students), or centered on specific religions (e.g., Catholicism). While these are, of course, valuable resources, the present study used only theological LibGuides covering the field of theology in general, or covering the field of religion in general rather than a specific religious tradition. Therefore guides focusing on subdisciplines of theology (e.g., systematic theology, Biblical studies) and guides focusing on specific religions (Christianity, Judaism, etc.) were eliminated (see Tab Structure below). These restrictions narrowed the sample to a much more manageable thirty-seven guides. A full list of the institutions and guides examined can be found in the appendix.

Institution Analysis

The thirty-seven libraries come from twenty-one different states in the United States, as well as four libraries from Canada, Australia, and South Africa. Of the thirty-three United States institutions, twenty-four (72.7 percent) are from libraries east of the Mississippi River. An examination of ATLA institutional membership shows a high concentration of members in corresponding regions of the country.¹³ Of these institutions, thirty-four (91.9 percent) offer graduate degrees in theology or a branch of religious studies. Thirty-six (97.3 percent) offered undergraduate degrees in religious studies disciplines. Eighteen (48.6 percent) of these institutions offer professional clergy certification or ministerial degrees.

The vast majority of the institutions represented in the sample have a religious affiliation (Catholic: nineteen, 51 percent; Protestant: fourteen, 38 percent); only four of the schools (11 percent) have no religious affiliation.

Guide Analysis

Once institutions were selected and analyzed, the general theology/religion LibGuides themselves were located and evaluated using a rubric containing the following categories: home page, column structure, librarian contact information, tab structure, databases, books, journals, and websites.¹⁴

¹¹ See note 7 above

¹² See *Theological Librarianship* online, <https://journal.atla.com/ojs/index.php/theolib/about/editorialPolicies#focusAndScope>.

¹³ See ATLA Annual Report 2012–2013, <https://www.atla.com/about/pressroom/annualreport/Documents/FY13%20Annual%20Report.pdf>. Of the 203 member institutions in the continental United States, 134 (66.0%) are east of the Mississippi River.

¹⁴ Originally, audio/visual materials were also included in data gathering but there were so few that they were omitted from the results.

Home Page, Column Structure, and Librarian Information

The first aspect of the home or main landing page of the LibGuides evaluated was the presence or absence of a description of the guide. Twenty-four (72.7 percent) of the guides contained a short description of the guide. Emory University's guide serves as a prime example with its simple, "A guide to reference works, tools, and further reading in approaches to the study of religious practices and practical theology."¹⁵ A smaller number of guides (eighteen out of thirty-seven, 48.6 percent) included a stated purpose of the guide, such as, "The goal of this guide is to direct you to resources in the area of theology, including the best databases, reference tools, and online resources."¹⁶ While, admittedly, there is some overlap between descriptions and statements of purpose, a description of what the guide contains does not necessarily equate to a statement of why the guide exists (its purpose).

I then evaluated the column structure of the home page. Some LibGuides have two equally wide columns. Others have a narrow column on each side of a larger middle column. In order to quantify the variations for statistical analysis, categories were generated based on the relative widths of each column, as quantified by the LibGuides creation templates. For example, if a site had two columns of equal width, that site was assigned a value of 50/50. If, however, there were three columns of which the left and right columns were equal but the middle column was roughly twice the size of the left and right columns, then that site received a 25/50/25 value. Another system default layout is the 75/25 structure — the left column is three times the size of the right column in a two-column layout. See figure 1 for a breakdown of the column structures across all thirty-seven institutions.

A total of thirty guides (81.1 percent) used three columns, and in each of these cases the librarian followed the standard 25/50/25 structure. This is unsurprising considering that the default layout of a newly created guide uses the 25/50/25 structure.¹⁷ The next most common structure was 75/25 used by three (8.1 percent) libraries. In the Resize Columns tool, 75/25, 25/75, and 50/50 are all options. In addition, the guide creator can manually create a 33/67 or 67/33 column layout.

With respect to librarian contact information, twenty-nine (78.4 percent) of the LibGuides identified a librarian and included his or her contact information. Of the remaining eight guides (21.6 percent), four (50.0 percent) included contact information for general reference or librarian services. Four (13.8 percent) of the twenty-nine guides with an individual librarian administrator did not include an image or avatar for the librarian. While each page had some method to contact the library staff or librarian, only fourteen (37.8 percent) of the institutions had an instant messaging or chat widget.

Tab Structure

Each guide had a number of tabs beside the main landing page (typically named the home tab) focusing on some aspect of theological research. There was a total of 237 tabs (excluding the main/home page tab) across all thirty-seven LibGuides, an average of 6.4 tabs per guide. The smallest number of tabs in a single guide was three and the largest number was fifteen. See figure 2 for a breakdown of tab structure across all LibGuides surveyed. Most of the guides had from four to seven tabs.

The distribution of tabs is generally more uniform than is the distribution of column structures (compare figures 1 and 2), which might be because column structure has a default

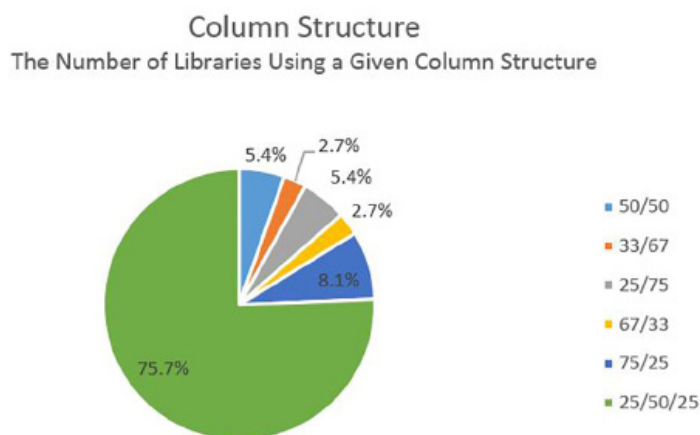


Figure 1

¹⁵ <http://guides.theology.library.emory.edu/practical>

¹⁶ <http://guides.library.yale.edu/content.php?pid=17512>

¹⁷ For an example of 25/50/25, see <http://libguides.valpo.edu/content.php?pid=47490>.

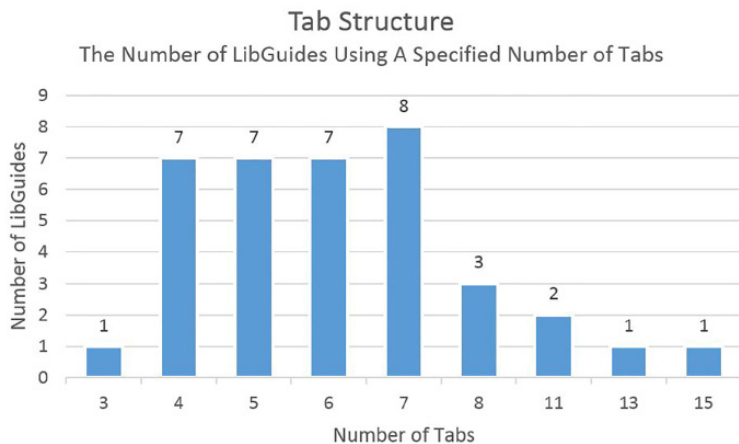


Figure 2

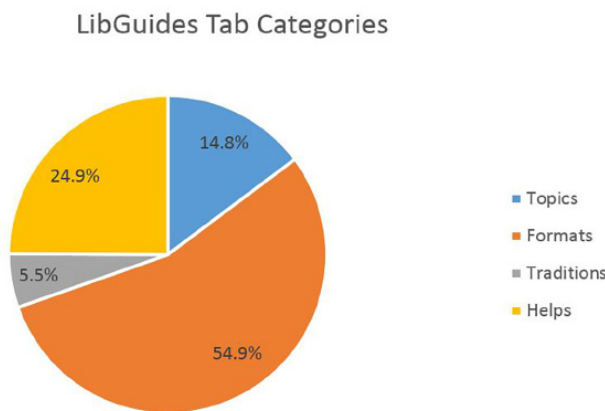


Figure 3

(25/50/25). Tabs, other than the main/home page, however, are all manually created. A large majority (thirty-three, 89.2 percent) of the libraries favored a tabular structure of eight tabs or fewer,¹⁸ eliminating the need for multiple rows of tabs in most cases, depending on the length of names or designations given to tabs.¹⁹ Some tabs had content that combined two different formats (e.g., a Books and Articles tab); rather than splitting them up, the first format or topic was used (otherwise the total number of tabs would not match the tabulated number of tabs).

A variety of names/designations was used for the tabs. While some were unique, most fell into the following categories: (1) topical tabs, (2) format tabs, (3) religious tradition tabs, and (4) help tabs (see figure 3).²⁰ I defined topical tabs as pages devoted to subfields in the umbrella field of theology. These tabs most commonly fell into three categories: Biblical Studies, Church History, and Theology. All other topical tabs were categorized under Special Topics. Some LibGuides contained multiple tabs dedicated to topics that fell under one category. For example, one library had a tab for “Early Church,” “Reformation,” and “Modern,” all of which fall under the broad Church History subcategory. Therefore, no averaging of tabular types across all thirty-seven LibGuides was conducted. Rather, the total number of LibGuides that contained at least one topical tab was fourteen (37.8 percent). Across those fourteen guides, thirty-five distinct topical tabs were found.

The largest major tabular category was the format tabs. These included pages to help find books (including e-books and dissertations), articles, journals (including e-journals), databases, background resources (including dictionaries and encyclopedias), websites, media, and primary resources. Of the thirty-seven LibGuides studied, thirty-five (94.6 percent) contained at least one format tab. These thirty-five LibGuides had an average of 3.7 format tabs on each guide, with the maximum at seven and the minimum at one, for a total of 130 format tabs. Of these 130 format tabs, thirty-three (25.4 percent) were for books. The next largest group of formats represented was background resources at twenty-six (20.0 percent) tabs.

The third category (religious traditions) included tabs designating Christianity, Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, Catholicism, Eastern Religions, and World Religions. This was the category with by far the smallest number of tabs, with only five (13.5 percent) of the thirty-seven LibGuides containing traditions tabs. This was surprising considering how many of the LibGuides were functionally combined Religious Studies/Theology guides (eleven, 29.7 percent), where information on religious traditions would be thought likely to find a place. Additionally, considering that a majority of the guides were

¹⁸ See again Valparaiso University and Emory University, above, for examples of typical tabular structure.

¹⁹ Some names were longer than others, which took up more space in the line of tabs, forcing some tabs to display in a second row despite low tab count.

²⁰ For a fine example of a diverse group of tab categories, see <http://libguides.marian.edu/c.php?g=115940>.

produced at Catholic institutions, it is perhaps surprising to see Catholicism with a relatively low showing. However, this may be due to the fact that some of these schools had a guide devoted solely to Catholicism.

Tab Subcategory Tools

Tab Category	Tab Subcategory	Total
Topics	Biblical studies	11
	Church history	7
	Theology	8
	Special topics	9
Formats	Books	33
	Articles	21
	Journals	7
	Databases	10
	Background resources	26
	Websites	24
	Media	4
	Primary resources	5
Religious Traditions	Christianity	4
	Jewish studies	2
	Islamic studies	1
	Catholicism	3
	Eastern religions	1
	World religions	2
Helps	Research basics	9
	Bibliographic tips	20
	Other resources	30

Table 1

Finally, I categorized the help tabs as Research Basics, Bibliography Tips, or Other Resources (including other campus links). The Research Basics tab, frequently called “Getting Started,” accounted for nine (15.3 percent) of the total fifty-nine help tabs. The most popular type of help tab was Other Resources with thirty (50.8 percent), followed by Bibliography Tips with twenty (33.9 percent). See table 1 for a complete listing of all tab subcategories.

Databases

Only links to specific databases were tracked. I excluded descriptive links (e.g., e-journals, e-book collections) as not specific enough to analyze. Because some LibGuides used vendor company names for databases (e.g., EBSCO, ProQuest), it was sometimes difficult to determine which database in that vendor platform was referred to. Ultimately, these ambiguous vendor links were likewise eliminated.²¹ There was a total of 305 database listings in all the guides including 143 unique databases. Forty-four (30.8 percent) of the 143 unique databases listed were included in more than one guide. For the purposes of space and time in data collection and analysis, only those databases used on four or more of the thirty-seven LibGuides were included in the analysis. This accounted for eighteen of the total 143 unique databases (12.6 percent). See figure 4 for a full list of these eighteen databases and the number of LibGuides that used them. While some pages might have the same database listed on multiple subcategory tabs in LibGuides, only the first reference was counted. Of the 305 total databases

²¹ Since each link was accessible only through authentication, these links were not verifiable.

Most Recommended Databases

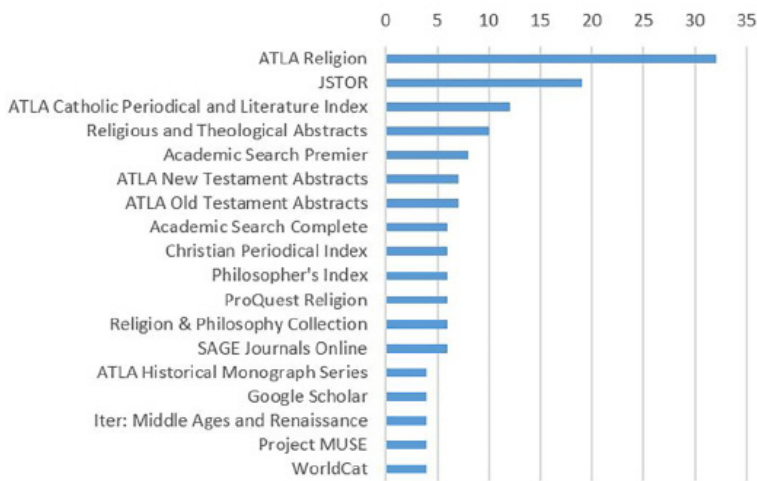


Figure 4

Top Recommended Books

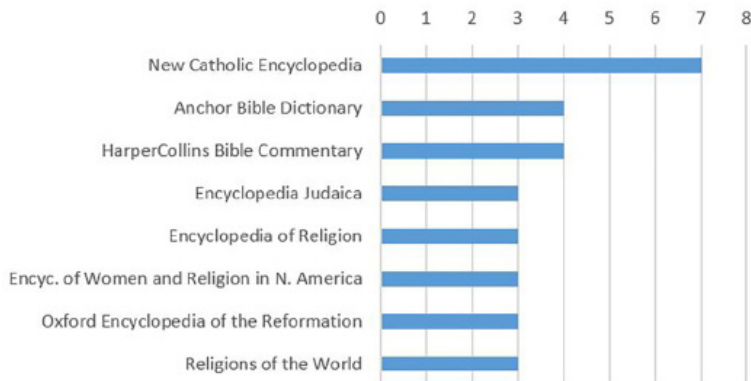


Figure 5

Top Recommended Websites

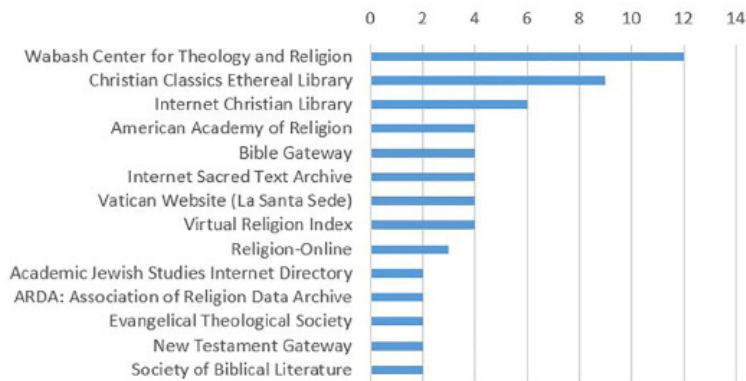


Figure 6

listings, including those duplicated across multiple LibGuides, these top eighteen databases accounted for 151 listings (49.5 percent). While sixteen of these eighteen databases were subscription based, two free databases (Google Scholar and WorldCat) were cited by four different LibGuides. These also might be considered websites rather than databases, but the nature of the work they both perform (indexing research and bibliographic data) ultimately recommended their classification as databases. Unsurprisingly, thirty-five (94.6 percent) of the thirty-seven guides included a link to the *ATLA Religion Database*[®].

Print and Electronic Books

Across all thirty-seven LibGuides, a total of 315 print or electronic reference resources were recommended to users. Of these, 268 were unique. This high percentage of unique titles makes analysis difficult and perhaps less useful. Only thirty-three titles were recommended by more than one guide, and only eight were recommended by three or more. See Figure 5 for these top recommended titles.

Again, considering the amount of Catholic institutions in the sample, it is perhaps understandable that the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* is the top reference resource cited.

Journals

Only eight of the thirty-seven LibGuides had specific journals highlighted. Across these eight LibGuides, sixty distinct journals were recommended to users, only two of which were cited more than once: University of Chicago's *Journal of Religion* (two citations) and *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* (four citations). Only sites with distinct journals were included. Most LibGuides reviewed simply had links to journal databases and indexes.

Websites

Again, all links to a database or citation index were eliminated. Only sites that were free to use and not considered a database of scholarly research (e.g., Google Scholar) were included. Twenty-eight of the thirty-seven LibGuides had recommended websites. There were 214 websites recommended among these twenty-eight LibGuides, of which 167 sites were unique. Figure 6 has a list of the top websites that were referred to by more than one guide.

Conclusion

Comparing LibGuides on related subjects across institutions can be a productive way to develop an overall layout for a new theological LibGuide. Based on the existing layouts and tab structures, librarians can ask critical questions about their own clientele and what organizational structure would make sense to them. Will more tabs on format be valuable or will topical tabs serve local patrons better? Perhaps a librarian has never considered the utility of including dedicated tabs to religious traditions. All of these possibilities can help a theological librarian craft a LibGuide layout more effectively.

Reviewing the resources appearing on LibGuides can also serve as a supplementary collection tool to see which databases, books, journals, and other resources have been regarded as the most valuable. Knowing what the top reference resources are in a discipline can help a librarian make budgetary decisions. Theological librarians can also review the top resources to see what might be most beneficial to researchers on a given topic or subtopic.

However, the current study found relatively few overlapping titles across the various theological LibGuides, particularly for journals. Only 10.5 percent of all books found were recommended by more than one guide. The database study was perhaps more productive, showing a higher rate (14.4 percent) of multiple-recommendation databases, although the top eighteen databases are likely those with which most theological librarians are familiar. It is surprising that, although these databases are relatively well known across libraries, only a few were heavily cited by librarians managing these theological LibGuides.

Appendix

Theology/Religion LibGuides examined between September 2014 and January 2015, including their guide name and religious affiliation (if any):

Institution	Guide Name ²²	Religious Affiliation
Assumption College	Theology	Catholic
Boston College	Theology	Catholic
Caldwell University	Theology	Catholic
Calvin College	Religion and Theology	Christian Reformed
Campbellsville University	Theology	Baptist
Concordia University Irvine	Theology	Lutheran
Cornerstone University	Religion and Theology	Evangelical
DeSales University	Religion and Theology	Catholic
Dominican University	Theology	Catholic
Emory University	Religion and Theology	Methodist
Georgetown College	Christian Theology	Baptist
Grand Canyon University	Theology	Interdenominational
John Carroll University	Religion and Theology	Catholic
Lenoir-Rhyne University	Christian Theology	Evangelical
Lincoln Christian University	Theology	Interdenominational
Loyola Marymount University	Theology	Catholic
Loyola University Chicago	Religion and Theology	Catholic
Marian University	Religion and Theology	Catholic
Marquette University	Religion and Theology	Catholic
North-West University	Christian Theology	None
Saint Anselm College	Theology	Catholic

²² Over the course of this study and during the publication process several guides had been deleted or renamed. The names listed here were those at the time of the original data gathering in fall 2014.

Institution	Guide Name ²²	Religious Affiliation
Saint Leo University	Religion and Theology	Catholic
Seton Hall University	Theology	Catholic
Spring Hill College	Theology	Catholic
St. Catherine University	Theology	Catholic
St. Mary's University	Theology Resources	Catholic
Thomas More College	Theology	Catholic
Tyndale University College & Seminary	Theology	Evangelical
University of Newcastle	Religion and Theology	None
University of St. Francis	Theology	Catholic
University of St. Thomas	Religion and Theology	Catholic
University of Toronto	Theology	None
Valparaiso University	Theology	Lutheran
Western Theological Seminary	Theology	Evangelical
Whitworth University	Theology	Presbyterian
William Jessup University	Bible and Theology	Interdenominational
Yale University Library	Theology	None