

# Vocational Awe and Theological Librarianship

## The Truths We Might Begin Telling Ourselves

by Karl Stutzman

**ABSTRACT** This essay applies Fobazi Ettarh's concept of "vocational awe" to theological librarianship, suggesting that theological librarians' strong sense of religious vocation may be leading to burnout, low pay, and dwindling resources for libraries. It proposes a series of truths that may apply to theological librarians, indicating ways forward for theological librarians to create a relationship with their work that is not all-consuming and self-defeating. These truths are framed in part with Christian references that modify this traditional sense of vocation. This renewed relationship with work welcomes diverse persons to the profession by understanding that not everyone has the ability or desire to totally give their lives over to their work.

Fobazi Ettarh's 2018 article, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves" (Ettarh 2018), sparked discussion in the library community regarding the connections between vocational awe, or the sense that libraries are beyond reproach and librarians are "called" to this profession, and the phenomena of low salaries and burnout for librarians. As theological librarians, many of us have a strong sense of vocation. Some of us even combine this with a sense of ministerial call. Ettarh explicitly grounds her concept of vocation in Christian history and discusses the notion of libraries as "sacred place." Theological librarians are arguably at the apex of vocational awe in Ettarh's frame of reference. While I do not completely agree with all the conclusions Ettarh draws, I believe her piece demands close attention from theological librarians. We must look at our sense of calling to theological libraries with a critical lens and address problems with this view, particularly for the inclusion of marginalized persons in our professional community. Rather than focusing on "lies" as Ettarh does, I propose a positive framing of truths we can lean into as we make theological libraries and librarianship more hospitable spaces.

The conversation in theological libraries has certainly covered the ground of naming the positive side of the calling that theological librarians feel toward their work. Early work along these lines includes a piece by Dr. Raymond P. Morris in the 1953 *ATLA Summary of Proceedings* entitled "Theological Librarianship as Ministry." Morris summarized well how many theological librarians continue to view their work close to 70 years later:

I have always felt that in some fundamental way my work as a librarian has been in a true sense a work in the ministry of the Church of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I find that I am, in matters of profession, a somewhat amphibious creature and that in my vocation I have striven to combine the profession of librarian with the profession of minister (Morris 1953, 32).

More recently, Melody Layton McMahan built on Morris's work with a 2010 essay in *Theological Librarianship* entitled "Theological Librarianship: An Unapologetic Apology." McMahan wrote,

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

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“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 (McMahon 2010, 8).

McMahon even described a feeling at an ATLA gathering of theological librarians that she had found her “spiritual home” (McMahon 2010, 8).

This is not the full extent of the literature on theological librarianship as a ministry vocation, but I think this offers some good examples of the ways theological librarians have been speaking about our work.

The broader conversation has recently taken up Ettarh’s line of thinking. A 2021 article in *Time* magazine by Elaina Dockterman summarizes a recent book by Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won’t Love You Back*, stating that Jaffe’s argument is that “the ‘love your work’ mantra is a myth of capitalism” (Dockterman n.d.). Jaffe’s writing also points to exploitation of workers as an intended consequence of the idea of feeling a sense of purpose in and love for one’s work. In a 2019 article in *The Atlantic*, Derek Thompson argues that “work has morphed into a religious identity - promising transcendence and community, but failing to deliver.” In Thompson’s writing, we again see the connection between a misconception of work and anxiety and burnout (Thompson 2019).

Even in the positive framing of theological librarianship as ministry that Morris outlines, there are hints of the possible exploitation of library workers that Ettarh, Jaffe, and others describe. Morris describes a difficult day at work and the consequences he faced. Morris again:

Now one does not go through that kind of a day without spending himself. You don’t do these things without giving of yourself. I went home tired and nervously exhausted. I spent an hour or so with my family. One should not have a family if he does not intend to honor their claims and if he does not value their claims. Then I settled down for a couple or three hours of solid reading, constructive study—something which I have found I must do if I am to pursue successfully the job which is mine. To fail in this is to court disaster. As Mark Twain once quipped: “The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can’t read them.” This is the Achilles heel in what is sometimes otherwise a commendable library career (Morris 1953, 33–34).

Morris’s mental health and his family’s well-being suffered because of his call to theological librarianship, at least on that one difficult day. After coming home “tired and nervously exhausted,” he spent his evening reading for the sake of his vocation, rather than with his family.

I suspect we have all, as theological librarians, had experiences like Morris in terms of being exhausted and overwhelmed by our work. I know I have. Since a crisis point a couple of years ago, I have been trying to pay much more attention to my work-life balance and mental health. I don’t claim to be perfect at this. I still have work-life balance issues, as evidenced by my patterns of sending emails at all hours of the day and night. But this attention to my mental health has brought me to question my sense of calling to my work as a theological librarian. Is it good for my health? Is it good for my family’s health? Is it truly part of living into the *shalom* of God’s kingdom, to use my Christian frame of reference?

If I as a straight, white, married man who is a library director (meaning I earn a more respectable salary) can experience exhaustion with this work, what is the experience like for someone who carries even more weight on their shoulders due to the inequities of our social system? How about someone who is the primary caregiver for children or disabled or elderly family members? How about someone with a marginalized racial or other identity? I could go on. Is this sense of vocation, with its attendant overwork for relatively modest pay, truly sustainable for the diverse folks many

of us would like to welcome to our profession? What about the persons of marginalized identities whom we hire in our libraries for non-professional positions?

At this point, I will propose some truths about our vocation as theological librarians that may animate our professional conversation going forward. My framing for these is partly based on my own Christian perspective; I am interested in whether these have parallels in other religious traditions.

First truth: we are created as human beings who are perfectly imperfect. Genesis indicates that God created us as “good” and narrates the story of our fall, while maintaining a strong sense that God protects and provides for us. I think this means that we should aspire to be more like God, while appreciating the limits of our humanity. We aren’t God, and we can’t do this all on our own power. Matthew 5:48 calls us to “be ye therefore perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” I’ve long struggled with this verse, but finally realized that the key phrase here is “as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” God’s perfection is not our own human estimation of perfection. God is perfect in grace. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” Can we find ways to do our job that are “good” enough, without being perfect by human standards? Can we allow God’s power to enable us, in our weakness, to be perfect according to God’s standards? This may mean taking more breaks, turning off our phones and laptops, and spending time with dear ones. This means saying “enough is enough” at the end of a workday or workweek.

Second truth: we must reset our expectations for ourselves and for each other. We need to help others at our places of work set up realistic expectations for us as well. Have we encouraged our colleagues to think we are always ready to provide immediate “service with a smile?” Have we set the expectation that we can answer emails even when we’re sick or on holiday? Have we set the expectation that we can do “more with less” continually? Magically resolve everyone’s information needs on a shoestring budget? My former pastor told me a slogan that originates with twelve-step recovery, “expectation is premeditated resentment.” The more I reflect on that, the truer it is. When we set unrealistic expectations, we also set ourselves up for failure and then resentment at ourselves and others. This is the ticket to burnout, addiction, mental health crises, and more. I know that I have set many wrong expectations for what the library can and should be in the context of our institution. While it’s energizing to have a can-do attitude and help others solve their problems, this has limits. Human limits. We need to allow ourselves sick time. Vacation time. Bad hair days. Whatever.

Third truth: we deserve better. Better pay, better budgets, and better facilities and resources. Advocating for ourselves and for our colleagues should continue to be part of our *modus operandi* as librarians; part of our calling, if you will. It’s important that we be well-resourced to meet the needs of our communities. It’s important that we be well-resourced to meet our own needs. This takes time and special gifts, and we should encourage those to be present in our libraries. It also means saying “no” at times. No, we can’t get that book because we don’t have enough budget. No, we can’t provide that course instruction because we don’t have enough library professionals. No, we can’t keep the library open at all hours. No, we can’t guarantee that you will get a response over the weekend. Saying no is really hard for me as a librarian. It seems to be a violation of my calling to service. Yet it’s fundamentally necessary for our survival.

Fourth truth: we don’t do this stuff alone. We need collaboration, collegiality, and community. Many theological librarians are solo librarians or work with very small staff sizes. So it’s paramount

that we have opportunities to network and work on each other's behalf. It is part of our work to take time for each other. We actually do a great job at this - helping each other with interlibrary loan requests, difficult reference questions, institutional political questions, and more. We also need help from God. Taking time for prayer, meditation, nature study, or whatever else connects us with the God of our understanding is crucial. This can give us new perspectives and allow us room to breathe deeply and relax.

Final truth: work is not our religion, as much as capitalism might lead us to believe that. We must worship God, not our jobs. In Matthew 6:24, Jesus encourages his followers to serve God rather than money in the ultimate anti-capitalist command. "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." Confusing our work in a capitalist economy with our service to God is a serious mistake. While everything we do should be an expression of who we are as people of faith, it's ultimately a matter of what comes first.

This list of truths is not exhaustive; it's merely what came to mind as I was writing. I am sure there are more truths out there that can help us serve God by living healthy lives with good work. I hope we as theological librarians can draw on these and other truths to improve our working conditions and work-life balance. I hope we can be advocates for truth in the midst of an economy that tries to confuse our core identity as children of God with what we do for pay. I hope we can be a profession that makes it possible for persons from all walks of life to join us without fear of overextension and burnout.

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