

Theological Libraries and Library Associations in Europe

Leo Kenis, Penelope R. Hall and Marek Rostkowski, Editors. *Theological Libraries and Library Associations in Europe: A Festschrift on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of BETH*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2022. xviii, 569pp. \$155. Hardcover. 9789004523180. Open access e-book. 9789004523197.

Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie (BETH), the European federation of theological library associations and individual libraries, needs no introduction to Atla members. Atla has collaborated with and contributed financially to BETH since at least the 1990s. A critical collaboration between the two associations, along with the Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association (ANZTLA) and Forum of Asian Theological Librarians (ForATL), is the International Theological Librarianship Education Task Force. A fruit of this task force has been *The Theological Librarian's Handbook* series of books, published by Atla Open Press. Edited by Matina Ćurić, who until recently was secretary of BETH, the series has published four of seven planned volumes covering many aspects of theological librarianship.¹

BETH is a larger and slightly younger organization than Atla, with some notable differences. BETH was founded in 1973 as Conseil International des Associations de Bibliothèques de Théologie (International Council of Associations of Theological Libraries) and renamed in 1999. At the time of the book's publication, BETH's membership was of three types: ordinary or institutional members are national theological library associations; extraordinary members are individual theological libraries; and special members were individuals "who have served the international theological library system" (491). Currently, 16 library associations are ordinary members and 15 libraries are listed as extraordinary members, coming from less than half (19) of Europe's 44 countries. BETH has two governing bodies: the general assembly (formerly "general meeting"), which makes significant decisions concerning finance and membership, gathers during the annual conference, and is composed of the institutional members; and the executive board, which is elected by the general assembly for five-year terms to manage the day-to-day work of the association. The official languages of BETH are English, French, and German. Like Atla, BETH organizes an annual conference and, since 2023, has published its open-access journal, *BETH Bulletin*.²

Much lengthier and broader in scope than Atla's 50th-anniversary volume, *Theological Libraries and Library Associations in Europe* celebrates BETH's golden jubilee (1972–2022) with aplomb.³ It is divided into three unequal parts. The first and longest section is dedicated to theological and religious libraries, past and present (1–267); the second highlights networks, instruments, media, resources, etc. (269–488); and the third is devoted to the association and its members (489–557). The first two sections are composed of 19 chapters or essays ranging in length from 12 to 47 pages with each ending in a bibliography. In terms of geographical coverage, the contributions roughly mirror the composition of BETH: five from Belgium, three each from England and Germany, two each from Italy and the Netherlands, and one each from Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine. The final chapter discusses BETH's role in founding the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Special Interest Group, Religions: Libraries and Dialogue (Relindial), and its contribution to fostering interreligious dialogue through libraries.

Theological Libraries and Library Associations in Europe begins with three chapters on England. Anna James provides an impressive survey of English theological library history in her chapter titled

“Tolerating Theology Libraries in England: The Libraries of Anglicans and ‘Others’ since the English Reformation.” James follows the usual division of the English churches into the Established, Roman Catholic, and Non-Conformist. Yet, despite the often extensive and historical collections of Catholic libraries, she devotes only a single paragraph to these. James’s other lacuna is lack of content on the Oxbridge libraries, which are partially addressed in Hannie Riley’s chapter titled “Theological Libraries in Oxford.” Riley takes a strictly historical approach to her topic, dividing it into three periods: medieval, Anglican ascendancy, and modern secular. Her writing becomes increasingly detailed as she approaches the modern era, for which she gives brief histories of each new college and library founded from the nineteenth century onward. Unfortunately, Riley’s otherwise excellent chapter is marred by poor proofreading.⁴ However, the best-written article of these three chapters is Ruth MacLean’s “World Mission to World Christianity: The Changing Identity of a Mission Library through a Century of Historical Change in Church and Society.” Perfectly focused and executed, her chapter describes the Henry Martyn Library’s journey from its founding in the 1890s as a small book collection supporting Anglican missions to its current iteration as the Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide, an academic institute fostering the study of global Christianity.

The remainder of the first section continues this trend of broad surveys of theological libraries by country (Germany, Hungary, Italy, and the Netherlands) as well as studies of individual theological libraries at the University of Würzburg, Ukrainian Catholic University, Université catholique de Louvain, and Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. While some of these surveys and studies are very satisfying, “Elements for a Sketch of the Italian Ecclesiastical Libraries,” by Stefano Malaspina, is not. Half of it chronicles insufficient, and frankly impossible, efforts to track the number of church libraries in Italy and their holdings; the other half describes various bureaucratic documents—created by the church, the state, or both—on the preservation of libraries and cultural heritage.

Among topics covered in the second section of the book are computerization or automation, special collections and archives, union catalogues and web portals, bibliography and indexing, and scholarly publishing. The most substantial chapter is Martin Fassnacht’s verbosely titled “Historical and Media-Theoretical Implications of a Modern International Bibliography: Origin, Development and Future of the *Index Theologicus* in the Context of Other Specialised Bibliographies.” While his focus is the *Index Theologicus* or *IxTheo* (originally the *Zeitschrifteninhaltsdienst Theologie* or *ZID*), Fassnacht also sheds some interesting light on Atla’s index products, which he notes had the shortest delay between the publication of an item and its appearance in the index, and were the first to go online in the mid-1980s. Moreover, Atla contacted *ZID* as early as 1990 and briefly produced its CD-ROM version for North American audiences around the turn of the millennium. By 2007, *IxTheo* had become open access (OA), supported principally by the state of Baden-Württemberg (which funds its host institution, the Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen); federal grants from the German Research Council; and some funding from the Bishops’ Conference of the Roman Catholic dioceses in Germany. The shift to OA allowed *IxTheo* to support linked data, open citations, and author uploads of full text (as with green OA). It enabled Google to crawl its metadata for inclusion in Google Scholar, increasing its reach and impact. Moreover, *IxTheo* has expanded beyond the bread and butter of books, articles, and reviews to include new media such as websites, blogs, podcasts, and research data. Although the reality is not as impressive as its presentation by Fassnacht, *IxTheo* remains a formidable research tool.

The third section of the book comprises brief descriptions (three to seven pages) of BETH and each of its 15 ordinary members at the time of publication. The ordinary members are the national library associations of Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. While most of these are ecumenical associations, Germany has both a Protestant and a Catholic one, and Italy also has a Roman one. After publication,

the newly formed Croatian Association of Theological and Church Libraries joined BETH in 2023. It should be noted that most of these associations are Western European, with little participation from Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, or Islamic libraries. There is also a brief history of extraordinary members: the Pontifical North American College in Rome, the Bibliothèque de Port-Royal in Paris, and the World Council of Churches (WCC) Archives and Library in Geneva. Last, this section includes brief biographies of the first six BETH presidents. The first five were Catholics, the sixth Protestant; three were Belgian, one Swiss, one French, and one Dutch; and only one was a woman. Stefano Malaspina is the current president.

A monumental memorial of BETH's first 50 years, *Theological Libraries and Library Associations in Europe* is a reference resource and a work of outstanding scholarship. Although the work is already too long, it would have benefited from a greater diversity of perspectives, especially from Scandinavian and non-Christian libraries. While the book includes many chapters chronicling the efforts of ordinary and extraordinary members, at the same time little content is about the cooperative work accomplished between members. These criticisms notwithstanding, this Festschrift beautifully documents the strengths and achievements of BETH. Finally, though the print book is too expensive to justify its inclusion on many theological libraries' shelves, the OA version can easily be added to library catalogs and read by interested librarians.

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NOTES

- 1 See <https://books.atla.com/atlapress/catalog/series/theolibhandbook>.
- 2 See <https://bethbulletin.eu/ojs/index.php/bethyb/index>.
- 3 Graham, M. Patrick, Valerie R. Hotchkiss, and Kenneth E. Rowe, ed. 1996. *The American Theological Library Association: Essays in Celebration of the First Fifty Years*. Chicago: The American Theological Library Association. There is some disagreement as to the date of BETH's origin. The year 1973 in the previous paragraph comes from Matina Čurić's history of BETH on page 491 of the book under review. Geert Harmanny, BETH's current president, provides a slightly different history in his Introduction on page ix. He states that the association was established in the Netherlands in 1972 and obtained Dutch royal approval the following year.
- 4 The most egregious errors are "St Thomas Bodley" (50) and "a flouring school of theology" (61).