

My perspective on being a theological librarian as a career¹

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I feel very much honoured to stand in front of you to talk about my profession, especially about the job I am currently doing and passionate about. Being a librarian was one of my childhood wishes and being a theological librarian is what I hope to do until I retire.

To make my talk more useful and informative to you, as well as sharing my personal experiences and career path I have taken, I also wanted to offer you a more objective perspective too. So I spoke to some theological librarians at a conference in April and circulated a short questionnaire to ask the UK theological librarians' opinions. Also I have read a couple of articles on this topic too. This has enlightened me with some interesting points.

Campbell and Keck (2019)² state 'The career path to theological librarianship is circuitous'. The reason for them to claim such a statement is that there is no one simple way to get into this occupation unlike other subject librarianships. Normally you gain some experiences at a library setting and obtain a degree or postgraduate qualification in librarianship. You are pretty much ready to apply for a librarian job then. However to the theological librarian profession there is a wide variety of pathways, diverse credentials and various scenarios. Some have a ministerial position but no library experience or qualification, and vice versa.

This is also partly because there is a strong sense of confusion over what theological librarians really are. There are two viewpoints on this profession according to Campbell and Keck (2019). One sees theological librarians as "people performing ministry" and the other as "people who provide linkages among theology, church, scholarship, education, diverse constituencies, and both scholarly and popular literature". This depends on which part of the job title the focus is on: 'Theological' or 'Librarian'. Theological is translated to ministry and Librarian to occupation. Depending on the emphasis, pathways to the profession shifts.

Compared to other subject librarianship, this is very unique to theology. Being a health care librarian doesn't automatically translate to the librarian being a medical doctor or health care worker. A business librarian as a business man, an architecture librarian as an architect or a mathematic librarian as a mathematician.

It is because the subject itself has strong religious dimension and often personal faith is involved. Many are hired to work for organisations, institutes or seminaries which have affiliation to a particular denomination or religious group. These factors tend to draw librarians who appreciate a faith perspective or religious commitment. In this case, librarians are likely to believe their role as a personal calling into ministry by God. Many small theological colleges or seminaries tend to see the librarian's role in this way.

The other end of the spectrum puts more weight on the title "librarian" rather than "theological". This viewpoint sees the theological librarian as an occupation like any other

¹ This talk was given as part of a summer school to theology postgraduate students from America.

² Campbell, K and Keck, A. (2019), 'Theological librarianship as career path', chapter 4, [to be published]

subject librarianship. This focuses on academic support, research provision and service excellence. This view tends to be taken by big universities and academic libraries.

These two different views are easily and mistakenly understood as being somehow in conflict and tension, on the opposite sides of a scale. However, both are, in fact, add-on enhancements to conduct the librarian job effectively. These two elements actually boost the role at a holistic level, giving greater fulfilment and job satisfaction to the librarian.

Having religious faith actually increases interest in the subject field you are working in. This makes the librarian become more enthusiastic in their library provision and service. If you believe that you are called to serve by God, the dedication and commitment to their roles and involvement with their organisation are often remarkable. Some even make financial sacrifice, being content with less salary and poor career progress as many theological librarians are working for rather small seminaries, often as a lone worker.

This brings me to why the librarian qualification is so important. Often working alone with a tight budget where you cannot rely on other co-workers' skills and strengths, or your further training opportunities, it is key that you have acquired an appropriate qualification and skills prior to the job.

Librarianship, in this current digital world, is no longer limited to the inside of the library's physical provision. Librarians have to develop new IT skills and continue to update them in order to provide quality and legitimate information to the library users and support them to also attain study skills and carry out their learning and research in a digital environment.

Therefore many librarians said that the ideal credentials for a theological librarian would be both a degree in theology followed by a postgraduate degree in library/information studies.

Having said that I personally have not taken this perfect route. I've got an MSc in Library Science. As I said earlier there are many various way to land the theological librarian's job. I even met someone who has not got any librarian experience, qualification or background but full of enthusiasm to serve in their organisation and doing a great job.

Is the librarian profession's future bright?

It really depends on how willing you are to adapt to this ever changing digital world. With rapid IT development, traditional librarianship has already changed its title to many different forms such as knowledge specialist, learning resources coordinator or information professionals.

Even within the profession, the importance of subject knowledge is far less appreciated. A new trend in many big institutes and Higher Education is changing library staffing structures due to budget constraints. They have much less or no subject specific librarians, or have a librarian who covers multiple subjects. Theology tends to be a less popular discipline in big academic universities so the need of theological librarianship is likely minimal.

In its place, many new technical librarian roles have been created so a new breed of librarian has emerged to meet this trend such as reference librarian, reader services librarian, copyright librarian, data research librarian and so on.

So, is the theological librarians' future bright?

Theological libraries' existence goes hand and hand with the fate of theology seminaries, ministerial training colleges or faith organisations. For example, the decline of Christian faith in the Western world has a critical impact on these religious places. The number is simply dwindling so less job opportunities exist in this sector.

However, if we open our eyes to the whole world, and see where the boom of Christianity is in the rest of the world, all is not lost. Many new seminaries have started off in parts of world. Following where God is moving leads to new opportunities.

Before I wrap up my talk, I would like to finish off with some positive points on being a theological librarian.

Firstly, most disciplines do not tend to have their own school or seminaries. This is limited to only a few subjects which enjoy their own specialist librarians. These are business schools, medical schools, law schools and theological seminaries. Relatively speaking, there are more opportunities in these libraries than other disciplines.

Secondly, many librarians from my survey mentioned their job fulfilment. As most theological librarians work in a small college or seminary, they are often on their own, and some are even part-time. That is also my case. They tend to work with a small budget and have to be able to do a bit of everything.

In spite of these limitations, many responded noting high job satisfaction, expressing they felt they landed a dream job. I believe there are two reason for this. One is that they are in the job where their faith is placed. The other is they talked about the vast, wide-ranging role and characteristic of the jobs they carry out.

They talked about the freedom. One librarian even said "extraordinary" freedom. Freedom to plan and lead exciting projects, such as dealing with legacy materials, historical archives and special collections. Also one librarian from a particular denomination shared her experience of a project which required her to travel the third world to set up their denominational libraries and their world- wide library system. Some visits were paid by their seminary but some were covered by the librarian herself.

Next, opportunities. Meeting various interesting individuals is exciting, for example, '100 students one day and the Bishop the next'.

There is involvement in exciting services. One librarian said that she was cooking dinner for 40 one evening. I am sure that this wasn't in her job description.

Lastly community. One respondent claimed 'there is more of a sense of community in the organisations you work.' One added: 'I've worked in 3 non-theological libraries before this role and in my experience the readers here tend to be much nicer and not write in the books so much.' I agree. This is very important to the librarians.

Please let me conclude with my own experience.

After a year of working in this role, I have tried to meet students' needs in conventional ways but also less traditional ones too. I have recently purchased many books covering various equality issues and updated the book display by the foyer with them. This has been intentional as I believe the library should broaden the students' perspective to the current issues as well as challenging their scholarly critical thinking. It was also to support a student-

led meeting to discuss feminism and other inclusion topics at their conference in May. Not surprisingly I have had some backlash from a few but also support from many. I want to diversify our collections and, whichever side you take, learn from each other's perspectives to some degree. I prayed this simple silent display would also bring healing to some. Thankfully a couple of students said that they were even in tears when they saw the display.

Thank God for this little input I can make by doing the job I love.