

In Praise of the Generalist: Reflecting on the Theological Librarian's Challenge

by Richard Manly Adams, Jr.

“So, you’re a librarian. What exactly do you do?”

This is the most common question I receive in those awkward “What do you do for a living?” conversations. Like most, I do not have a very good response for this. I tell myself, though, that the problem is not with me; the problem is with the profession of librarianship. We all know that identifying oneself as a “librarian” does not do much for identifying the specific tasks one might take on in any given day within a library. In the digital age, even the “book” has now been removed as the one thing that binds us together as librarians.

This issue of *TL* makes quite well this point about the disparate set of domains that define “librarianship.” As I reflect over the content of these essays and articles, I am struck by the many things that properly fall within the world of “theological librarianship.” Sean Smith’s essay reinforces the importance of librarians as maximizers of space. Shawn Virgil Goodwin and Gerrit van Dyk show how broad is the set of literature we must provide guidance toward. Our book reviewers note how important conversations in our culture about diversity and inclusion need to be integrated into our collection development policies. Our special forum on an exhibition of African archives highlights the challenges of preserving and providing access to materials that originally belonged to others. Each year, the answer to the question “What exactly do you do?” likely changes, and for those of us who share the title “librarian,” the answer might be completely different.

And yet, as I re-read these articles (again!), I am struck by how important it is for librarians to maintain our broad focus, particularly given the move toward specialization in the academy. Whereas most academic fields offer rewards for the researcher who can uncover new territory in the narrowest of information realms, ours is one of the few that continues to praise the generalist, the one who can maintain not expertise, but familiarity, with a range of topics. And I hope that’s something we continue to value. For if these essays and reviews remind me of anything, it’s that this field, and the domains of knowledge we are responsible for collecting, preserving, and providing access to, is growing quickly, but this growth is a good thing. These essays also make me appreciate the spirit of sharing that is inherent to our discipline, as they provide the guidance I need to continue to expand my work as a librarian. Already I have improved my library’s collections in response to the bibliographies of Goodwin, van Dyk, Aycock, Mombo, and others. Already I have started to reimagine physical space at the prompting of Smith. I have started to consider how I can make more accessible my library’s archival collections that only the privileged few can travel to see, at the invitation of Aycock and Jones. The perpetual growth of what we do as librarians is daunting, but the guidance in these pages reassures me that together we can handle it.

One final thing that occurs to me as I review this issue is that I am struggling with the editorial work that has for the past several years been handled with seemingly little effort by Jennifer Woodruff Tait. Unfortunately for us all, Jennifer has stepped down from the *TL* editorial board, leaving an enormous hole that we will work to fill. Jennifer has been a masterful recruiter, editor, and writer for this journal, but more importantly she has been a wonderful colleague. I know you will join me in offering heartfelt thanks for all the work she has done for this journal and our field of theological librarianship and wishing her well in her future endeavors.