Information Behaviour of Theologians: A Literature Review

by Katharina Penner

Information needs of various groups of users and their respective information search behaviours have received much attention throughout the last decades. Studies with theologians and their needs and behaviours are, however, rare. This seems odd because theological libraries, like any other library, need to intimately know how faculty and students conduct theological research, what problems they encounter in the process, and what methods their users employ to find needed sources. Verified evidence, and not only anecdotal hearsay knowledge, can provide the basis for tailoring library services to current users, designing meaningful collection development policies, justifying library budgets, and planning library space.

In preparation for a study of research behaviours of theology students at my own institution, the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, Czech Republic, I conducted a literature survey in order to analyse whether and what kind of research has been conducted on the information behaviour of academicians in the area of theology and religious studies and what gaps can be identified that would require future attention. The purpose of this bibliographic essay is to describe findings of the literature search. The review will proceed in concentric circles from the immediate question of enquiry to include research on information-seeking of humanities scholars and, finally, research on information behaviour in general. This approach seems to be necessary because only a few studies were found that concern themselves with theologians, and literature in this area is quite scarce. On the other side, theology is usually perceived to be part of the humanities, and certain parallels in research approaches and behaviours are evident and can illumine the area of study.

Before proceeding to describing the studies themselves, a few words about the method employed in this study are in order. The literature on the information behaviour of humanists and theologians was retrieved from various databases (LISA, LISTA, OCLCFirstSearch, JSTOR, ATLA RDB and ATLAS, NetLibrary, WorldCat Dissertations and Theses, ISI Web of Knowledge, ABI/Inform, IngentaConnect, Emerald Search, EbscoHost) as well as online catalogues (Voyager of the U of Wales, WorldCat, Online Library catalogue of the University of Illinois at Urbana, Union catalogue of the National Library of Czech Republic, British Library Catalogue) for the publication years 1980–early 2008. Web applications such as Google Scholar, Google Books, Intute: Arts and Humanities, reviews (annual or covering longer periods), and Lavonne Jahnke’s annotated bibliography of ATLA all proved to be helpful in the evaluation of sources. The retrieved titles and abstracts were screened for applicability to the topic and preference was given to peer-reviewed materials that explicitly relate to the academic study of religion and theology, as opposed to studies with religious practitioners. Geographic setting, attention to cross cultural issues as well as studies with graduate/postgraduate students were important criteria for inclusion.

Theology and Religious Studies

The literature review starts at the core of the interest, with a discussion of studies that describe the information behaviour of theologians.1 Some studies that address research behaviour in religion in general need to be noted.

1 The terms “theology” and “theologians” are used broadly to include academicians who engage in the study of the Hebrew and Christian Bible, church and religious history, and theological doctrines and their application in church and synagogue. Due to the context in which this essay is being written and the availability of materials, focus will be limited to the Jewish and Christian traditions.

Katharina Penner is Head Librarian at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, Czech Republic.
first. Several user studies have been conducted with pastors on their use of information and with clergy being resource persons for and sometimes conducting information-seeking activities on behalf of their parishioners. The emergence of Web resources resulted in studies on the use of these by congregations for their ministry. They were also considered as challenging and exciting information sources for theological librarians to include in the traditional theological library. Although these studies are quite informative, they target the information-seeking behaviour of religious practitioners and, in one case, the practice of theological librarians but do not say much about the research habits of academicians in the area of theology and religious studies; it is assumed that these academicians will differ significantly in their approaches to information-seeking and in the sources they use.

This literature review identified four studies conducted with Judeo-Christian theologians in various parts of the world (Australia, Canada, Israel, and the USA) by authors who seem unaware of each other’s research.

In 1989, Gary Gorman was the first to analyse the information-seeking behaviour of theologians at seven theological colleges in Adelaide, Australia, using a quantitative survey with forty-nine questions. The three parts of his questionnaire addressed areas such as demographic and profile data of participants, their research and information-gathering habits, recent research activity, and provision of relevant information. The study is much in keeping with the Zeitgeist of the 1980s in that quantitative studies dominate information-seeking research and system approach questions are at the forefront. However, it was a groundbreaking study because it was the first of its kind to focus on theologians. Gorman finds that participants rely heavily on the “invisible college” for exchange of ideas; use libraries but also build their personal collections; function independently of librarians and seek information by themselves; and enjoy browsing shelves and scanning journals.

**Canada.** While Gorman included in his research representatives of various fields of theological studies and covered various information-gathering activities, David Michels in his qualitative study focuses specifically on informal information seeking and only on biblical studies scholars, which comprises quite a small section of theological and religious studies. He emphasises the interdisciplinary nature of biblical studies and finds that people were regularly

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consulted as resources for shaping research and finding relevant information. His seven Canadian participants increasingly turned to other professionals for confirmation and affirmation as they became more self-confident as researchers (104). Because of the narrow approach and a very small population it is difficult to consider the study as representative; also, the literature review does not include relevant sources beyond 2000.

**Israel.** Using Ellis’ behavioural model of information seeking, Bronstein, employing a grounded theory approach with twenty-five Israeli Jewish studies scholars, finds that information strategies chosen by these researchers greatly depend on “the stage of the research or purpose of the search.” Information activities (starting, citation tracking, browsing, differentiating, monitoring, extracting, verifying, and ending), as observed by Ellis, expanded by Meho and Tibbo (to include accessing, networking, and information managing), and verified with scholars from other disciplines, are also used by theologians but not randomly, as Bronstein believes that Ellis suggests. Bronstein defines research phases—initial phase, current awareness phase, and final phase—as separate time intervals and finds that she can identify phase-dependent information activities, strategies that can be related only to certain periods in research, and phase-independent elements (differentiating, verifying, managing information), that is, activities that can occur at any time in the research process. Some activities are used only in one phase while others are used in several phases but in a different way, depending on the purpose of the search. An understanding of research stages and the influence they have on information seeking could have implications for the design of reference services and the provision of resources to more effectively respond to differing needs and activities during each phase. Confirming previous research, she finds that users “perform several information activities with different purposes simultaneously” and especially value the central information activities of browsing, including serendipitous discovery, and citation tracking.

**U.S.A.** More recently, the American Theological Library Association has become interested in analysing “contemporary research behaviours in the theological community” with the goal of providing some guidelines for its member libraries. A pilot project conducted in spring 2007 with eight faculty member from the Lutheran School of Theology and McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago revealed that the theologians prefer to conduct their research at places where they are not accessible for student questions (that is, not in the seminary library). As also observed by Bronstein, they rely on an informal network of colleagues “alongside of and often

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9 Michels seems not to be aware of Gorman’s study which had already underlined the importance of the “invisible college” for theologians as compared to humanity scholars who prefer to work alone (see below for humanities scholars). He briefly refers to other literature that had corrected the isolationist impression of humanists (cf. Jim Basker, “Philosophers’ Information Habits,” *Library and Information Research News* 7, no. 25 (1984): 2-10 and others) but believes that the other literature breaks new ground.


13 Each stage presents a differing problem(s) for the researcher and so Bronstein comes close to Wilson’s problem-solving model (par. 45).


15 See section below on preferred information-seeking activities of humanists.

instead of any bibliographic work done in libraries,” especially at the beginning of a research project. As noted by Gorman, they value their personal libraries and journal subscriptions, but nowadays they also utilise a wide variety of electronic resources to identify helpful materials (Amazon, list serves, publishers’ e-mails, search engines). Often these activities are preferred to and substitute for bibliographic work with library catalogues, indexes, and other bibliographic materials because scholars are uncomfortable with the controlled vocabulary and unaware of or oblivious to the nonacademic weighting criteria of search engines. The end product, or the purpose of research, seems to define the information-seeking approach while the research and writing processes are “swirled together,” that is, it is difficult to define a linear progression. Wenderoth understands that her eight interviews are not sufficiently representative and calls for more research across “denominational, disciplinary, age, institutional and idiosyncratic boundaries.”

**INFORMATION BEHAVIOUR IN HUMANITIES**

Due to the scarcity of sources related specifically to information-seeking behaviour in religious and theological studies, we will need to turn to the broader field of humanities which subsumes theology and religious studies. Although many more studies have focused on humanities scholars, this area still falls far behind user studies with representatives of other disciplines.

**HISTORIANS AND PHILOSOPHERS**

Two disciplines seem of special importance and relevance to theologians and will receive additional attention: philosophers, theology’s “closest ‘secular’ cousin,” and historians, whose “evidence plus interpretation” approach comes close to much of theological research.

In her 1981 study, Steig found that historians often do not use existing resources productively. Steig offers various reasons for this: language, format, and geographical barriers; time and financial constraints; inadequate interlibrary loan services; insufficient services at archives; and relative isolation from colleagues. In a 2004 follow-up study with 278 participants, Stieg Dalton and Charnigo found that many aspects of historians’ information use “have not changed in a generation.” However, they also observed that “historians have become more sophisticated” in meeting their information needs as they increasingly use the internet and readily available electronic catalogues and indexes. Delgadillo and Lynch find that history students are often assigned by their professors to replicate activities considered standard in the discipline, such as browsing (shelves and indexes), and largely embrace similar

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19 Wenderoth 200, 183.
21 Gorman, 139.
24 Stieg Dalton and Charnigo, 400.
information-seeking activities. While change may come about only slowly, students displayed more openness to adopting new technologies. Other studies have confirmed and expanded on these findings.

In 1978, Corkill and Mann included several philosophers in their survey; in 1981, Corkill et al. analysed the information needs of humanities doctoral students. In 1984, Basker reported on in-depth interviews conducted with eleven philosophy faculty at a university in the United Kingdom in 1977; the study found that 45 percent of the interviewees consulted with colleagues rather than the library to find relevant materials, were reluctant to use bibliographic tools, and did not have helpful working relationships with librarians. In 1989, Sievert and Sievert, reporting the findings of interviews with twenty-seven philosophers, highlighted the interviewees’ extensive use of interlibrary loan to augment their institutional libraries’ limited resources, their reluctance to seek the assistance of librarians for research help, and their irregular browsing.

**Humanities in General, 1970-1995**

When discussing humanist information-seeking behaviour several reviews are traditionally noted: the 1982 review by Stone and the follow-up review by Watson-Boone. Stone’s review may have sparked an interest in this “underinvestigated community of scholarship” which displays differing research habits and is concerned with different sources than are researchers in the natural and social sciences. Although Stone has been able to collect an impressive amount of literature on the subject, she laments the fact that it is “superficial and piecemeal” with missing “links between the subjective views of humanists and librarians and the more objective knowledge provided by research.” She observes the limited impact of the “invisible college,” noticing that humanities scholars usually work alone with lesser amounts of collaboration between scholars and do not delegate literature searching


28 Basker, 2-10.


30 “Humanities Scholars: Information Needs and Uses”; “The Information Needs and Habits of Humanities Scholars,” *Reference Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1994): 203-16. I prefer to use these reviews as structural elements rather than those published by ARIST for some years as the latter are more general in nature and cover information needs and seeking studies and models while these two concentrate specifically on research behaviours in the humanities.


32 The Bath University study with social science scholars (cf. Maurice Bernard Line, *Information Requirements of Researchers in the Social Sciences* (Bath: Bath University of Technology, 1971) had already earlier emphasised the scarcity of knowledge on humanities’ use of libraries, on ways of obtaining needed information, on the preference, or otherwise, of browsing.

33 Stone, 304.
to others. They use the library extensively, often by way of browsing, and are, therefore, quite hostile to the idea of remote storage; they depend on a wide range of resources, particularly primary sources but also monographs and journals. Humanists appreciate broad retrospective coverage and a comprehensiveness of collections which many libraries cannot provide; this is where interlibrary lending becomes vital. Their research habits significantly depend on the immediate task and often they “adopt methods more usually associated with other disciplines.” Watson-Boone quotes several citation analysis studies that converge on the fact that humanities scholars prefer to cite monographs rather than journal articles—often from their personal collection and about 20-30 years old—and use primary sources more than secondary sources. Like Stone, Watson-Boone confirms the importance of browsing (which she prefers to call “grazing”) along the shelves and inside books and journals, of serendipity, of “chain-searching” or citation tracing, and guidance from colleagues. Humanities scholars tend to neglect bibliographic tools, indexes and abstracts, current awareness services, or formal bibliographies; they use catalogues mainly to locate and not necessarily to identify materials. Online searching and electronic databases did not figure prominently, if at all, as a way to find information although a significant number of scholars believe they

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34 She reasoned that this might include issues of not easily having an assistant, issues of time, trust, and the ability to communicate one’s needs to others; their style of research is so fundamentally based on the personal interaction of a scholar with the material (research journey is as important as the result) (Stone, 295).

35 See, for example, Weintraub’s deliberations on the browsing experience, not only of books on a shelf but also inside a book (“The Humanist Scholar and the Library,” Library Quarterly 50, no. 1 (1980): 26).

36 Weintraub underlines that “humanists are probably the most book-bound creatures in the world of scholarship,” they depend on “the availability of original texts” as well as “all editions of the text” (ibid. 25).

37 Humanists usually strongly disagree with weeding in spite of the fact that materials have not been used often or have not been used for a long time (Stone, 301). They would argue for retrospective purchases for all new and shifting research emphases. As they cannot experiment with their data and have no sequentially and hierarchically ordered body of knowledge, they rely on “interpretation of documentary sources in a cultural context” (S.E. Wiberley and W.G. Jones, “Patterns of Information Seeking in the Humanities,” College & Research Libraries 50, no. 6 (1989): 639) and “make moral, aesthetic, pragmatic, or theological judgements” (Weintraub, 31).


39 Stone, 296.

40 See her Table 1 on p. 206. They appreciate special collections, including the staff of these collections, although Lonnquist reports a dissatisfaction of those scholars who heavily depend on archives and museums in their research. The identification and retrieval of materials is difficult, often one needs to travel to the site, and services at archives are perceived to be “bureaucratic, slow and inflexible” (ibid, 197).

41 See Wiberley and Jones 1989 who observe that their eleven participants avoid machine-readable bibliographic databases (possibly because they are insecure in their use and do not feel comfortable asking a librarian for help) (644) and who do not care much about current awareness services or formal bibliographies (641-2). A comprehensive pattern of information-seeking would cost time which they believe not to have.

42 Watson-Boone, 207-8. Cf. the same concern that Wenderoth 2007 expresses thirteen years later about her own theological faculty.

43 Lehmann and Renfro found four components as decisive for humanists’ acceptance of electronic databases: they must include the desired content (humanists emphasise retrospective coverage and databases seemed not to offer this in 1991 to the extent to become attractive); they should offer the possibility of individualised non-observed semi-focused browsing; connectivity (at home, in office, in library study carrel) should be guaranteed (not always given in 1991); they should be user-friendly as humanists were not prepared to spend time on dealing with hardware and software ("Humanists and Electronic Information Services: Acceptance and Resistance,” College & Research Libraries 52, no. 5 (1991): 409–413).
should learn to use online services but do not have time to keep up with technological developments. As became obvious in several studies, humanists do not seek out librarians for help—except if they find themselves in special collections with an unfamiliar organisation scheme—possibly because their creative work results from a “direct interaction between the scholar and his or her material.” Because they work on their projects long-term and alone they are constantly in the process of filling a “knowledge bag,” have developed their own (idiosyncratic) research approaches, and combine different seeking patterns.

**Electronic Resources, 1995–2008**

The acceptance of, and difficulties experienced with, the use of electronic resources by humanities scholars become the dominant issue for studies between 1995 and 2008. Stone mentions an early interaction of humanities scholars with computer technology, considering them as being “anti-machine” and, therefore, reluctant to engage it. Wiberley and Jones mention careful experimentation with technology in 1989 and revisit the subject in 1994 and again in 2000. They believe that for humanists to adopt electronic technologies for their research, relevant database content will be crucial as will be search training and perceived time savings. The Getty project results confirm low search skills and dissatisfaction with content and imply that, because electronic database design follows science-based theories and terminology, humanists are currently disadvantaged. Several later studies follow up...
on this theme to embark on an in-depth exploration of research needs of humanists and their interaction with e-texts. Buchanan et al. find these “intellectually able seekers who are not technical in orientation” (218) using electronic resources especially when they are “new to an area of research,” even more so if they are at an early stage in their career (223). They see a strong relationship between high usage, strong search skills, and satisfaction with digital libraries (227) but also observe that, even though most participants felt they were successful in meeting their information needs, they could improve their skills to lower the amount of effort they expended. Buchanan et al. confirm a notion expressed in various studies that scholars less privileged with access to well-stocked print libraries are more open to electronic resources.

Studies from 1995 to the present primarily deal with English literature academicians or, without specifying the discipline, with arts and humanities in general. Changes in information-seeking behaviour as humanists are increasingly involved in interdisciplinary work are emphasised by Palmer and Neumann. As a response to the frequent admission that humanists need more training to effectively use electronic resources, East presents a full-blown information literacy syllabus for humanities researchers. Some helpful studies observe research behaviours


58 Cf. comments by Getty scholars who perceived the value of online searching to lie in the exploration of (unfamiliar) interdisciplinary topics or those of related neighbouring disciplines (Bates 199b, 19).

59 Buchanan, 221. Cf., for example, Ellis and Oldman: electronic libraries would afford them access to “collections in centrally located libraries, without the burden and expense of travel… rare holdings would be more democratically available” (“The English Literature Researcher in the Age of the Internet,” Journal of Information Science 31, no. 1 (2005): 35). This is in keeping with the higher appreciation of interlibrary loan by scholars working in small and remote colleges (Stieg 1981; S.S. Guest, “The Use of Bibliographic Tools by Humanities Faculty at the State University of New York at Albany,” Reference Librarian 18 (1987): 157-172.


61 Although such research is very important and enlightening, one should be careful, as Shaw and Davis point out, when illegitimately considering findings in one subject area as representative for all of humanities (“The Modern Language Association: Electronic and Paper Surveys of Computer-based Tool Use,” Journal of the American Society for Information Science 47, no. 12 (1997): 933).


of humanities graduate students, as compared with established scholars or undergraduate students, or attempt contextual comparisons, such as between an Argentinian and Western universities.

**Human Information Behaviour in General**

We will need to consider general developments in human information behaviour research because, as already underlined by Stone, the delineations between humanities and other sciences are quite fuzzy and humanists often “adopt methods more usually associated with other disciplines.” We will do so using Wilson’s 2000, Ingwersen and Järvelin’s 2005, and Case’s 2007 landmark reviews. Wilson and Case start their overviews with early twentieth century studies on library use, the main focus at that time being scientists and information systems, sources, and channels rather than user behaviour and attention to the person.

The shift to being person-centred rather than system-centred came in the 1980s, together with an increased emphasis on qualitative, instead of the previously exclusive preponderance of quantitative, methods of enquiry, and the development of a theoretical groundwork of models, theories, and perspectives. The best known models of the time that still exert an influence today are probably Wilson’s 1981 model on information behaviour (later modified to a problem-solving model), Dervin’s sense-making model, Kuhltau’s process model, and Ellis’ information-...
seeking activities set.²⁹ Two of these have been applied to religion and theology scholars: Bronstein, for example, attempts to verify and expand Ellis’ model, and Berryhill appreciates Kuhlthau’s model for insights it can offer to understand research behaviours of theology students. With its explicit attention to human communication, Dervin’s model also has much potential to enrich research on theologians.

Other important topics on which helpful research has been done and which relate to the information-seeking behaviour of theologians are the importance of the social framework for information-seeking behaviour,²⁷ the continuing validity of browsing,²¹ serendipitous discovery and creativity in searching,²² the impact of the principle of least effort and information avoidance, especially during information overload,²³ more sophisticated use of electronic resources in general²⁵ and by theologians in particular,²⁵ and the influence of ethnicity on information-seeking behaviour.²⁶

²⁹ B. Dervin, “Sense-making Theory and Practice: An Overview of User Interests in Knowledge Seeking and Use,” Journal of Knowledge Management 2, no. 2 (1998): 36-46; C. Kuhlthau, Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services (London: Libraries Unlimited, 2004); D. Ellis, “The Derivation of a Behavioural Model for Information Retrieval System Design” (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 1987). Many more models have been developed, cf., for example, Ingwersen and Järvelin who include task-based information searching (Byström and Järvelin), discourse analysis (Talja), the professionals’ information-seeking model (Leckie) and the information acquisition model for decision making (Saunders and Jones). The 2005 volume on Theories of Information Behaviour, ed. K. Fisher et al., features a host of other approaches such as the berry picking model (Bates), the domain analytic approach (Talja), information encountering (Erdelez), nonlinear information-seeking model (Foster), women’s ways of knowing (Julien), to name only a few that may be relevant to theology. Case 2007 has his own category of ordering existing information-seeking models.

²⁷ Hargittai and Hinmant argue “for the inclusion of people’s social attributes [gender, age, race, ethnicity, education, socio-economic status] in studies of information behaviour” (“Toward a Social Framework for Information Seeking,” in New Directions in Human Information Behaviour, ed. A. Spink and Ch. Cole (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 57) and the need to consider how their contexts may influence their behaviour. See also the Information-seeking in Context conferences with their publications.

²⁸ Cf. Case 2007, 89-93 for an extensive review.


²⁴ Theologians seem to embrace electronic resources even slower than humanities in general and express concerns that technology may become a substitute for spiritual transformation and for pedagogy in theological education. Steve Delamarter (“Theological Educators and Their Concerns about Technology,” Teaching Theology and Religion 8, no. 2 (2005): 131-143) specifically voices and confronts these concerns.

In conclusion, the first impression after a literature search suggests that the information behaviour of academicians in the area of religion and theology is a neglected area and only few information-seeking studies have been conducted directly with theologians. Singular studies have been attempted in various parts of the world but they have not (yet) interacted with or enriched each other. However, there is a wealth of materials available regarding the research behavior of humanists and human information behaviour in general that can provide helpful guidance for research design and serve as a sounding board for result comparisons. Human information behaviour research seems to have come of age and covers various aspects that can directly illumine aspects relevant to information behaviour of theologians.

Works Cited


