

# Out of the Cloister

## Theological Libraries as Spaces for Spiritual Formation

by Briana Grenert

**NOTE** This essay is the winner of our 2020 Student Essay Contest. For more information on the winner and the contest, please visit: [www.atla.com/blog/theological-librarianship-briana-grenert](http://www.atla.com/blog/theological-librarianship-briana-grenert). *Theological Librarianship* plans to run another essay contest in 2021; announcements will go out early next year.

So many people warned me that seminary would not nurture my soul. Well-meaning people admonished me to cautiously discern—was God calling me to “cemetery”? The problem they were not so subtly hinting at is laid out in clearer terms by Eugene Peterson in *Subversive Spirituality*. He claims that

The most frequently voiced disappointment by men and women who enter seminary has to do with spirituality...[students] commonly enter seminary motivated by a commitment to God and a desire to serve their Lord in some form of ministry, and then find they are being either distracted or deflected from that intention at every turn. [T]he professors seem far more interested in their spelling than in their spirituality. They find themselves spending far more time on paradigms than in prayer. (Peterson 1997, 54)

Students frequently complain that their academic work is disengaged from their spirituality and in fact working against their formation. Peterson (1997, 55) explains that “ever since the Enlightenment split between the heart and the head in the seventeenth century, schools have not been easy allies in a life of worship, prayer, and the love of God.” Many innovative and bright minds have written books and articles to address the issue of spiritual formation in theological education (see, e.g., Amirtham, Pryor, and World Council of Churches 1991; Bain, Hussey, and Sutherland 2018; Muszkat-Barkan and Rosenstein 2018; Paulsell 1998). New courses, new disciplines, new committees, and new initiatives have been launched to address this issue. One vital campus space, though, that has already been re-examining its role on campus by diversifying its programming, is underutilized in the quest for institutional support of spiritual formation: the theological library.

In this paper I would like to suggest that theological libraries have unique potential to contribute to the spiritual formation of students. I begin by sharing how Princeton Theological Seminary’s library space has already been intentionally (and successfully) used to connect academic and spiritual formation. Then, I consider how theological libraries have a unique opportunity to contribute to resisting that post-Enlightenment divide between the heart and mind, first by exploring medieval monastic conceptions of learning and formation before introducing how Descartes’s disengaged reason decoupled experience from the mind, contributing to the artificial separation of education from formation. Finally, I open a discussion on how the intentional use of the library as a space that fosters academic compassion, vis-à-vis disengaged knowledge, can challenge the dissonance between spirituality and academic work in theological education.

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## USE OF LIBRARY SPACE

Some students naturally are drawn to a sense of transcendence and theological creativity within the walls of the library. Libraries serve students with a wide variety of needs. For some students, library spaces are inherently conducive to spiritual connection and formation. Some students here at Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS) can be found praying silently on the couches or by the windows or aloud in group-study spaces to re-center themselves in the midst of exhausting work. Some students are guided and formed by the content of the books they read, or the papers they write within the library. At least one student, upon finding that the PTS library had the entire *Patrologia Graeca Cursus Completus* in print, spent several hours there connecting with the Divine by pulling volumes off the shelf at random and just reading for the joy of reading. But many students do not naturally see the connections between the work they do in the library and their calling, or between their academic work and their formation. How can libraries participate in spiritual formation for these students?

I would like to begin with a practical answer, concerning how the PTS library has already participated actively in spiritual formation. First, PTS is blessed to have a new library (opened May 2013) whose space was intentionally designed by Rayford Law (“New Library Building Welcomes Scholars, Pastors, and the Community,” *Library Place* 1, Fall 2013, [library.ptsem.edu/newsletter/new-library-building](http://library.ptsem.edu/newsletter/new-library-building)). In the words of the Reverend Jan Ammon (2020), the minister of PTS’s chapel, the library “creates the space for beautiful things to happen.” It is a space full of light, with wide open windows and atriums, grounded in the seminary’s vision to, as Caryl Chambers recorded for posterity in his notes from the tours Law gave,

provide a library to the world. With that in mind, [Law] sought to create the sense of being in the world when one is in the building. This inspired the design of the large bay or oriel windows that project beyond the surface of the exterior walls, placing anyone occupying a bay window space “outside” the building. Then, to allow the world “in,” transparency was important so that those outside could witness what is taking place inside. Mr. Law stressed again and again that the intent was to break down the barriers between the world of the scholar and the world outside. (Chambers 2015, 1)

The oriel windows, rough-hewn sandstone walls, tower, colonnade, entrance arch, all hold great symbolism, and the building is designed to be inviting: “from every angle, the building, as well as its colonnade, should pull one inside along a natural path” (Chambers 2015, 3). The tower, for example, according to Law,

is physical, as it literally guides one’s eyes to the heavens and cosmos and thus, it is symbolic of the expansive character of its purpose, but supportively, it is also a beacon, a traditional marker of safety and enlightenment. As part of the Library’s outreach and reaffirming presence in the Princeton community, we also saw the Tower, amongst the many others in the vicinity, as a building element and a welcoming icon, signifying its role in the common fellowship of scholarly pursuits. (Chambers 2015, 3)

Not every theological library is blessed with such a beautiful, intentionally designed, light-filled space (and certainly PTS’s previous libraries were not). However, that does not remove the potential for theological libraries as sacred spaces that can intentionally be used for more holistic approaches to learning and knowledge, in line with the seminary’s mission.<sup>1</sup>

What brings the formation to life is the use of the space, as in PTS’s “Wandering Worship.” The concept of “Wandering Worship” was born as a thoughtful response to the fact that, even prior to COVID-19, seminary life was disrupted because many buildings on campus are under construction,

leaving classes and residences shifted. The Rev. Ammon and the chapel office wondered what might happen “if worship was invited to move,” too, and so a set of services was designed for spaces other than the chapel (Ammon 2020). The inaugural service was held Wednesday, September 18, 2019 in the library. The experience was profound for the chapel office, for the library staff, and for many students. People who would not normally attend worship gathered together and took time to intentionally pray for the library itself and the people who serve there. It was possible to name out loud and to bless the activities that happen there and to frame the work of the library staff as ministry. This sense was only amplified when an Ash Wednesday service was held in the library this past February.

The circumstances of Ash Wednesday’s move to the library were different: the chapel had flooded over winter break, so worship became permanently wandering. The chapel office asked to use the library because of the size of the atrium. For the Rev. Ammon (2020), “having these worship services in the library really helped to name that formational piece.” In fact, having worship in the library a second time was like finding herself at a crossroads: people from disparate parts of the community were drawn together. At seminary, theological education is central to everything, and liturgy, worship, community, spiritual practices, paper-writing, and exam-taking all participate in that wider goal. Frequently, though, it is easy to lose sight of that, so bringing worship into the library gave clarity to that connection between formation and academic work, and added an invitational piece to worship. Students who frequently feel lost in the academic whirlwind stopped, sang, and blessed the space. The library was recognized as sacred space in a way that was both profoundly disruptive to its normal function and in harmony with its design, and the activities of study and research were specifically honored as works of formation.

### THE UNIQUE POSITION OF THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIES

A satisfying analysis of why theological education and formation are so divorced is far beyond the scope of this paper. That given, a few remarks on the issue are necessary to better elucidate how libraries are uniquely endowed to challenge that post-Enlightenment division of the mind from the heart.

First, this divide is not inevitable. Historically, libraries and schools have linked love of learning and spiritual formation. That very connection is explored thoroughly in Jean Leclercq’s (1982) *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, which studies the relationship between *les lettres* (literature, philology, etc.) and monastic culture/theology in 12th- and 13th-century Europe. In that monastic culture, “love itself is knowledge: the more one loves, the more one knows” (208). Quite the opposite of the grueling and bleak picture that many people in theological education paint today, education “was not a screen between the soul and its God, but rather it was transcended” (143). Study was the way into love, rather than a block to that love, and that shaped monastic theology and monastic practice both. For monks, “in the monastery, the *lectio divina*, which begins with grammar, terminates in compunction, in desire for heaven” (72). The role of grammar in that process “is to create in him an urgent need for total beauty,” which came together with eschatology’s role, which was to “indicate the direction in which to look for its fulfillment” (260). Knowledge, even things as mundane as paradigms, was seen as essential because even “elegant style” was homage rendered to God (258). Education could not be separated from spiritual effort.

Libraries were central to that effort. Libraries provided monks with access to that learning they so desperately needed to fuel and to quench their desire for the Divine. Scripture, works of the Fathers, works of pre-Christian Greco-Roman writers, and all other sorts of “scientific” knowledge were necessary to cultivate and use an “attention full of curiosity” (20).

Now, students of today are not premodern European monks, nor should we try to be—and the libraries of today do not hold the same place as a medieval monastic *bibliotheca*. Both learning and love and education and formation can be linked, and theological libraries can actively participate in that, as they have in the past, but in a new way adapted to the modern world. Already, there is extensive discussion about the changing/expanding role of academic libraries in a more diverse, digital age (e.g., Fallon and Breen 2012; Hisle 2005, 10). Academic libraries are rediscovering the possibilities of libraries as communal spaces (Gayton 2008). Can theological libraries adapt to intentionally use their space resist the separation of knowledge from love, and to participate in spiritual formation?

As I said above, the exact causes of this separation are beyond the scope of this paper, but one possible contributing factor is “disengaged reason,” which first, according to Charles Taylor’s (1989) *Sources of the Self*, comes to fruition in Descartes, who takes an Augustinian emphasis on inwardness and redefines it to situate the source of morality within the self (143). Descartes famously said “I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me,” which is a fundamental rejection of self-revealing reality (144). Reality is constructed by the individual, and this causes a strikingly different separation of the mind from the body than had previously existed. In order to know anything “we have to objectify the world, including our own bodies, and that means to come and see them mechanistically and functionally, in the same way that an uninvolved external observer would” (145). We have to disengage ourselves from our experiences to really know anything. Cartesian dualism “no longer admits that the bodily can be a sort of medium in which the spiritual can appear” (146).

This is in sharp contrast to the monastic understanding of knowledge and love as irrevocably intertwined. Instead, “the Cartesian option is to see rationality, or the power of thought, as a capacity we have to construct orders which meet the standards demanded by knowledge” (147). The self is effectively buffered from not only the experience of other selves but from our own self, as well.

While most of us do not go around actively thinking about this, we in the West are heirs to this post-Enlightenment limitation on knowledge, which is particularly keenly felt in theological education. Students enter, filled with love and desire for service, and find that education demands that they disengage from that love in order to know. As I have mentioned above, many sources and even branches of theology itself (for example, constructive theology in the Christian tradition) are trying to reclaim lived experience as a legitimate source of knowing and spirituality as an embodied experience, but the organization of schools (and Western society) is still built around dividing knowledge from love and education from formation.

This distancing of knowledge and learning from the rest of life, particularly from feelings such as compassion, is particularly alien in theological education and has certainly contributed to that sense of the seminary as a cemetery. Bo Karen Lee (2019, 55), in her chapter of *The Soul of Higher Education*, shares that “as a scholar, I have wrestled with the pressing task of bringing compassion explicitly into my academic discourse—and also with stewarding our shared academic work to increase compassion in the world.” She also notes that “compassion and academic rigor often seemed at odds with each other,” which is particularly problematic and disorienting in spaces where stu-

dents are pursuing theological education. While it is impossible for modern people to replicate the experience of 12th-century monks, is it possible that academic compassion is a path towards resisting that divide? Lee's concern, in her work, is for how the academic environment can be a space that nurtures and encourages compassion in the classroom, but bringing that discussion into the library is equally legitimate. How can the library be a space that encourages and fosters compassion through its provision of resources, to feed the mind and the soul together? Lee suggests the use of contemplative techniques in the classroom. Even more than classrooms, libraries, with their combination of quiet and group-oriented spaces, are equipped to create an environment of contemplation and thoughtful engagement with knowledge. Ajit Pyati (2019) has already argued that the public library is a contemplative space and has a role to play in cultivating the inner lives of patrons, well beyond information access and public sphere functions. How much more, then, are these opportunities open to the theological library?

## CONCLUSIONS

Theological libraries have a unique opportunity to address that divide and to participate in formation because they are wells of resistance to too much emphasis on inwardness. They carry works that demonstrate that the mind-body divide, which so much of Western epistemology takes for granted, is neither inevitable nor the only viable way to be in the world. Further, because libraries are so strongly associated with academic work, whenever libraries are able to host events or use their spaces in ways that connect knowledge to ministry and community, the relegation of knowledge to something separate from normal life is inherently challenged. As academic libraries in general adapt and rediscover their identity as communal spaces, theological libraries have the particular opportunity to reclaim the library as a space of spiritual formation.

I think that is why PTS's "Wandering Worship" was so profoundly meaningful to the students, staff, and guests present. It did feel like a crossroads that connected theological education with the vocation of all present and named the library as a space where formative activity happens. Because libraries are inherently academically formative spaces, it is a particularly meaningful space to foster an active connection between that academic labor and students' callings, be it academia or ministry or some other activity. Many people miss the opportunity to really see the relationship between their daily activities and their spiritual development, which falls back into that Cartesian divide. Libraries are spaces people take for granted as academic. What would happen if that space were claimed as something formative, and if that academic work were named as something both quotidian and sanctified by the library itself?

It is noon on Ash Wednesday and the library is full of light and filled with the voices of hundreds of students, staff, and guests singing. It is midnight on a frigid December night, and a student is blearily trying to finish her last paper in the florescent-lit bowels of the library basement. A guest is combing the library's commentary collection, trying desperately to understand the meaning of a *hapax legomenon* before their sermon on Sunday. A church history professor is wishing his Syriac was not so rusty because he cannot for the life of him figure out what a stray feminine pronominal suffix could possibly be referring to (and misinterpreting it could collapse his whole argument!). All of these are acts of love and devotion and contributions to a religious community as much as they are, in many ways, mundane acts.

By the nature of their collections and the populations they serve, theological libraries have already crossed the divide between “secular” and “sacred.” Some libraries, like PTS’s, have the advantage of being able to invite a sense of transcendence with their architecture and the opportunity to hold services in their spaces. But all theological libraries have the opportunity to own their space, the work of librarians there, and the activities of library users as in some way sacred—to name the activity within their walls as ministry and service. In that way, theological libraries, whose ministry is the conservation, accumulation, and organization of knowledge, have both a particular opportunity to help students connect their knowledge to compassion and a particularly high calling as spaces of spiritual formation.

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**ENDNOTES**

- 1 As the ACRL says in its *Academic Library Impact Report*, libraries have a unique call to balance the pressure of ranking and the demands of prestige while they “also must conversely strive to address the unique needs of specific stakeholders and surrounding communities.” See Lynn Silipigni Connaway et al., “Academic Library Impact: Improving Practice and Essential Areas to Research” (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017), 3.