

Burke Library, Ithaca S+R Report on the Research Practices of Scholars in Religion and Theology, October 2016, p. 1

**Is There Anything New under the Sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:9):  
A Local Report on the Research Practices of Scholars in Religion and Theology**

Study Conducted and Report Compiled by

Beth Bidlack (Director, Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary and co-principal investigator),

Matthew Baker (Collection Services Librarian, Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary),

Hayrunnisa Bakkalbasi (Assessment Coordinator, Columbia University Libraries and co-principal investigator)

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## 1. Executive Summary

This study of research support services for scholars in religion and theology was sponsored by Ithaca S&R and three professional associations (the American Theological Library Association, the American Academy of Religion, and the Society of Biblical Literature). The Burke Library (Columbia University Libraries) was one of eighteen participating libraries. The overall goals of the study were (1) to understand the research habits and needs of scholars in the fields of religion and theology, and (2) to develop recommendations and strategies for libraries (the Burke Library in particular and ATLA libraries in general) that address these needs by either improving current services or developing new services.

From December 2015 to September 2016, the three-member Burke Library project team conducted a study of the research needs of faculty in religion and theology, which included planning the study and seeking IRB approval, receiving training (along with other participating libraries) from Ithaca S+R staff, conducting interviews with eleven faculty members, coding the interview transcripts, and writing this local report. Ithaca S+R will also write an aggregated report that includes results from all eighteen participating institutions, which will be released in December of 2016.

This report discusses six observations and findings from the interviews conducted by the project team:

- A. The study of religion or theology is multi- or interdisciplinary.*
- B. Researchers faced challenges when organizing their research data.*
- C. The formulation of research questions and topics and the actual research process were based on tried-and-true approaches with some elements of convenience.*
- D. The nature of sources consulted was well established by the disciplines.*
- E. Participating in conferences was the primary means of professional engagement and staying current in the discipline.*
- F. Researchers utilized well-established models for disseminating their research.*

The report concludes with six recommendations and possible next steps, while raising several questions for future reflection and discussion:

- 1. The Burke Library needs to be strategic and collaborative when developing and promoting its collections.*
- 2. Related to recommendation #1, the Burke Library needs to be more strategic and collaborative in its digitization efforts.*
- 3. The Burke Library needs to collaborate with administrators for new support services, especially regarding the ethics of human subject research.*
- 4. The Burke Library should exercise caution when purchasing or promoting expensive, newer tools and services.*
- 5. In spite of libraries' commitments to open access publishing and use of social media, such trends were not of much interest to the researchers interviewed. As an alternative, libraries will need to work directly with deans and administrators and continue to promote open access publishing as a viable alternative to traditional print publishing.*

*6. Columbia University Libraries should carefully consider whether to participate in similar studies in the future.*

## 2. Introduction

The overall goals of the study were (1) to understand the research habits and needs of scholars in the fields of religion and theology, and (2) to develop recommendations and strategies for libraries (the Burke Library in particular and ATLA libraries in general) that address these needs by either improving current services or developing new services.

This study of research support services for scholars in religion and theology was sponsored by Ithaka S&R, three professional associations (ATLA, AAR, and SBL), and eighteen participating libraries.<sup>1</sup> Ithaka is a non-profit organization consisting of three units: JSTOR, a cloud-based database of journals, books, and images, launched in 1997; Portico, launched in 2002, to preserve digital scholarly content; and Ithaka S+R, a service that aims to help “the academic community navigate economic and technological change.” Ithaka S+R delivers strategic guidance, research, and publications via two program areas: [Educational Transformation](#) and [Libraries & Scholarly Communication](#).<sup>2</sup> The American Theological Library Association was founded in 1946 “to foster the study of theology and religion by enhancing the development of theological and religious studies libraries and librarianship.”<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1909, then renamed in 1964, the American Academy of Religion promotes ongoing reflection upon and understanding of religious traditions, issues, questions, and values through excellence in scholarship and teaching in the field of religion.<sup>4</sup> Founded in 1880, the Society of Biblical Literature “is the oldest and largest learned society devoted to the critical investigation of the Bible from a variety of academic disciplines.”<sup>5</sup> The AAR and the SBL, which hold their annual conferences in tandem, constitute the primary professional organizations for scholars in the disciplines addressed in the current study.

Since 2012, Ithaka S+R has conducted studies of various scholarly disciplines, including history (December 2012),<sup>6</sup> chemistry (February 2013),<sup>7</sup> and art history (April 2014).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Participating institutions include Asbury Seminary, Baylor University, Brigham Young University, Columbia University, Concordia Theological Seminary, Emory University, Harvard University, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Luther Seminary, Naropa University, Princeton University, Rice University, Temple University, Tufts University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Notre Dame, Vanderbilt University, and Yale University. ATLA staff also attended the training workshops and interviewed faculty members at various institutions.

<sup>2</sup>“Ithaka: Milestones in Our History,” <http://www.ithaka.org/milestones> and “Ithaka S+R,” <http://www.sr.ithaka.org> (accessed August 21, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>ATLA, “Who We Are,” <https://www.atla.com/about/who/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed August 21, 2016).

<sup>4</sup>AAR, “History of the American Academy of Religion” and AAR, “Mission Statement,” <https://www.aarweb.org/about#MissionPurposeValues> (accessed August 21, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>SBL, “Mission,” <https://www.sbl-site.org/aboutus/mission.aspx> (accessed August 21, 2016).

Since 2000, the organization has conducted regular surveys of faculty in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the three previous subject-specific studies conducted by Ithaka S+R, this study on religion and theology utilized a new financial and implementation model. Rather than being funded by foundation grants, the cost was shared by three professional societies (ATLA, AAR, SBL) and eighteen participating libraries. This new funding model allowed the project to move forward more expeditiously. The other major difference with this project is that participating libraries were recruited and trained to conduct interviews, analyze the resulting data, and write a report. In the past, Ithaka S+R conducted the interviews, analyzed the data, and wrote the report. For this study, each of the eighteen participating libraries will write a local report, and Ithaka S+R will write an aggregated report. With these changes, there are two major benefits to the participating libraries: (1) their staff members will develop new skills, and (2) they will have a specific local report that will be more actionable than the previous general report.

Since 2004, the Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary has been owned and managed by Columbia University Libraries. It remains in its historical location at Union Theological Seminary and serves faculty, students, and researchers from UTS, Columbia University (from a variety of departments, including religion, history, and musicology), and Barnard College. Not only does it serve those in the field of religion and theology, but its rich special collections are also of interest to researchers in history, comparative literature and languages, sociology, and medical history. It regularly attracts researchers from all over the world.

### 3. Methodology and Process

This qualitative, ethnographic study was reviewed and approved by Columbia University's Institutional Review Board. The Burke Library project team, along with teams from other participating libraries, attended a two-day workshop designed to equip participants for conducting the study, including how to interview faculty, how to code interview transcripts, and how to write a report. Each team consisted of one to three people. The Burke project team hosted one of the two workshops available to the eighteen participating libraries at Butler Library in February 2016.

Faculty from Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University, and Barnard College were invited to participate in the study. A targeted email recruitment of faculty members was based on suggestions from the administrations of each institution, especially the

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<sup>6</sup>Jennifer Rutner and Roger C. Schonfeld, "Supporting the Changing Research Habits of Historians," <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/supporting-the-changing-research-practices-of-historians/> (accessed August 21, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Matthew P. Long and Roger C. Schonfeld, "Supporting the Changing Research Habits of Chemists," <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/supporting-the-changing-research-practices-of-chemists/> (accessed August 21, 2016).

<sup>8</sup>Roger C. Schonfeld and Matthew P. Long, "Supporting the Changing Research Habits of Art Historians," <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/supporting-the-changing-research-practices-of-art-historians/> (accessed August 21, 2016).

<sup>9</sup>Christine Wolff, Alisa B. Rod, and Roger C. Schonfeld, "Ithaka S+R US Faculty Survey 2015," <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/ithaka-sr-us-faculty-survey-2015/> (accessed August 21, 2016).

Columbia religion department chair and the UTS academic dean. Informed consent forms were sent to participants prior to the interview so that they could review them and ask questions. Signed forms were collected prior to the start of the interview.

The thirteen questions in the semi-structured interview were drafted by Ithaca S+R staff and reviewed by the project's advisory board. They focused on the following topics: research focus and methods, publishing practices, and the state of the field. Interviews averaged sixty minutes in length and were audio recorded. Some photographs were taken of faculty work areas, especially if they illustrated concepts discussed during the interview. Eleven participants were interviewed during a six-week period. In order to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were applied to the interview transcripts and photographs. An external vendor then transcribed the audio recordings. In order to write an aggregated report, Ithaca S+R requested five transcripts from each of the participating institutions.

After the transcriptions were completed, each member of the project team coded all the transcripts individually. The team then reviewed the individually coded transcripts and developed a final list of codes to use for analysis. After major themes were identified via the coding process, the report writing process began.

Due to the small sample size and the qualitative nature of the semi-structured interview process, this study is not comprehensive nor are the recommendations meant to be prescriptive; rather, the report and its recommendations are intended to be suggestive of areas for further investigation.

#### **4. Observations and Findings**

##### *A. The study of religion or theology is multi- or interdisciplinary.*

The educational background and training of faculty participants differed significantly, with many faculty having multiple professional identities. Interviewees described their research interests as highly interdisciplinary and deeply interconnected with other academic disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, namely sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, literature, art, music, history, ethnography, archeology, and/or philology. There is a tremendous diversity of research methods within the discipline of religious studies. Research methodologies are widely adopted from other disciplines and the methods utilized are informed by the research questions scholars ask. Faculty in the seminary context were perhaps more comfortable than religious studies faculty in identifying a clear primary discipline "location" (e.g., biblical studies, Christian social ethics) but with secondary and complementary disciplines closely related. Several seminary faculty members utilized or advocated for a more "holistic" approach that touches on various aspects of the human condition.

In spite of their interdisciplinary interests and methods, researchers in religion and theology, tend to be lone researchers. Collaboration among multiple scholars or multi-institutional research is not typical of scholars in religion or theology.

Several interviewees noted how challenging it is to learn about new disciplines, areas of research and methods, and to keep up with trends in variety of disciplines and sub-disciplines. They also noted that they maintain multiple society memberships with varying cultures and expectations and that they attended a variety of conferences.

One of the challenges of this multidisciplinary research is the need for reliable “informants” to help evaluate sources and arguments. There may be an opportunity for librarians to partner with researchers and provide some guidance and resources for quickly learning about new sub-disciplines (e.g., the use of tertiary sources for quick mastery of new areas of study).

One immediate need that came out of the interviews was for the library to do more to support social science methods, especially to educate students about the ethics of working with human subjects and for IRB processes. Because of their ongoing work with human subjects and IRBs, librarians are in a good position to share their experience with faculty and students and refer them to colleagues who can assist them with issues of ethics and compliance.

*B. Researchers faced challenges when organizing their research data.*

When asked about their research data, many faculty members who were interviewed responded with confusion. The idea of “data” is not second nature to the researchers interviewed. Most did not think that they were creating data. Data creation was seen as the purview of the sciences rather than the humanities. Some faculty using ethnographic approaches did admit to having data, but noted the challenges of preserving it and making it accessible for future research. In several cases, old data was stored in obsolete formats.

A frequent challenge was capturing, managing, and working in a more seamless manner with a variety of sources (print, images) in a variety of formats. Most of those interviewed relied primarily on traditional productivity tools such as word processing documents and spreadsheets (in contrast to more sophisticated social or digital humanities tools) and on cloud-based services (such as Dropbox or Google Drive) to organize and preserve their work.

Most of the interviewees built their own personal collections of journal articles and printed books, and developed their own ad hoc systems to organize and keep track of their research materials. There was frequent expression of the need to update or refine their personal organization systems and to learn new or better tools (e.g., Zotero), but researchers often lacked the time to learn new tools.

*C. The formulation of research questions and topics and the actual research process were based on tried-and-true approaches with some elements of convenience.*

Some interviewees noted that their process for identifying research topics and questions was highly influenced by the availability and accessibility of primary and secondary resources. In other words, proximity and convenient access to research materials are very important for religious studies scholars with the availability of primary sources being a key factor in the shaping of research projects. The library or archives is to a scholar in

religion or theology what a laboratory is to a scientist. This study reinforced the notion that humanists continue to use primary sources (both print and digital) and the importance of the library when it comes to collecting and preserving these source materials.

The teaching load of pre-tenure faculty who are also expected to be meeting tenure publication and other service requirements was a source of concern for some researchers interviewed. In some cases, this concern greatly impacted the choice of research area, with researchers choosing topics for publication based on the advanced courses they were teaching.

There were two other observations related to research questions and processes. First, serendipity—discovering questions and topics through encounters with new sources—was frequently cited as a factor in shaping research questions and projects. Second, whenever possible, faculty members tend to work in office spaces or at home, not in the library. This physical location reinforces the importance of virtual discoverability, not just physical browsing in the bookstacks.

*D. The nature of sources consulted was well established by the disciplines.*

Almost all of the interviewees noted the importance of using primary sources in their research and teaching. Several appreciated the library's assistance in introducing students to archival materials. Mostly the interviewees processed information in linear ways and were very text-based.

Many interviewees preferred online formats (e.g., ebooks and databases) for discovering and assessing the utility of content for their project, but most used print formats for closer work (e.g., close, careful reading and note taking). While they may occasionally use newer tools (e.g., text-mining), these tools were only used so that they could get into close reading and detailed text-based analysis.

Many expressed appreciation for library resources, services, staff, and spaces. Many also noted the importance of costly, sophisticated, “go-to” library resources (e.g., ATLA, TLG) upon which their work depended. Again, the theme regarding sources was that researchers interviewed used core historical approaches (i.e., established and tried-and-true methods).

*E. Participating in conferences was the primary means of professional engagement and staying current in the discipline.*

Most faculty members who were interviewed noted the importance of attending professional conferences as the primary means of staying abreast of developments within their field(s). This may reflect the importance of a “personal presence” aspect of their scholarship. There was not much interest by most researchers in using social media as tool for research or keeping up in a field, even among more junior faculty members. In one case, a doctoral adviser warned a junior faculty member against using social media.

*F. Researchers utilized well-established models for disseminating their research.*

In keeping with the theme of tried-and-true, scholarly monographs were the most important research output for humanists. Many expressed reservations about more public or popular forums for their work. In some cases, it was due to a lack of time and in other cases, it was hesitancy to speak outside one's particular area(s) of training and specialization.

Though many were not opposed to open access options for publication, most published work in conventional venues (i.e., scholarly journals and books). Interviewees expressed traditional understandings of the tenure and promotion processes and did not show much willingness to challenge them. Only a few tenured faculty members were willing to explore other means of disseminating their work in more popular venues (e.g., *The Huffington Post* or *The New Yorker*) in order to expand the audience for their work.

## 5. Recommendations and Next Steps

Conducting the study clearly had some benefits, mostly notably professional development, promotion and outreach opportunities, building relationships with faculty and administrators, and building or strengthening connections with peers at other theological libraries and with Ithaca S+R staff. Based on the findings and observations noted above, the project team has six recommendations regarding libraries and librarians. As mentioned in section three of this report, these recommendations are meant to be suggestive of areas for further study.

### 1. *The Burke Library needs to be strategic and collaborative when developing and promoting its collections.*

There were mixed responses by faculty when asked about print versus digital formats of the same resource. While budgets can sometimes support purchasing both formats, at other times they cannot. While purchasing the same content in multiple formats may seem like a reality of collection development, it is not a sustainable practice. Libraries need to continue to recognize these tensions and constraints and communicate regularly about them with faculty and administrators. When a resource is available in multiple formats (e.g., print and digital) and is over a specified cost threshold (e.g., \$500), librarians should consult with interested faculty about whether to purchase that resource in print *or* digital format. Due to the multi- or interdisciplinary nature of religion and theology, librarians in a variety of disciplines need to continue to collaborate closely as they develop collections. Several faculty members requested that duplicate copies of print materials found at other CUL locations be purchased for the Burke Library so that they and their students can more easily access these materials. Librarians should carefully weigh the pros and cons of these requests.

In addition, the Burke Library should promote its collections more widely beyond the faculty of a specific institution. How can the library directly target a subset of professional societies (e.g., the American Academy of Religion or the American Historical Association) to tell them about important collections (e.g., the Missionary Research Library collection)? Promotional efforts should be mindful of the importance of easily accessible sources when formulating research topics and questions (see section 4C). Librarians should also be mindful of the importance of discovery—both physically



and virtually. Through collection development, promotion, and discoverability, librarians have at least an indirect role in shaping researchers' future scholarly output.

*2. Related to recommendation #1, the Burke Library needs to be more strategic and collaborative in its digitization efforts.*

Several interviewees in the Burke study and in the studies of other participating libraries noted what seems to be the random nature of digitization. Keeping in mind that faculty members reported that their research topics are often developed based on the availability of sources (including digitized sources), the Burke Library's and the larger Columbia University Libraries' digitization program should be developed strategically and collaboratively with faculty. The Provost's Advisory Committee on the Libraries (PACL) subcommittee on collections also recommended that faculty have a greater role in determining the libraries' digitization priorities and securing funding for digitization projects. What are the roles of curatorial wisdom in digitization programs? Many programs, including CUL's, is user driven. Given the importance of availability of materials for formulating research questions, there is a bit of a "chicken and egg" paradox to a library's digitization efforts.

*3. The Burke Library needs to collaborate with administrators for new support services, especially regarding the ethics of human subject research.*

This recommendation is unique to freestanding seminaries that may lack such services that are often found in university-based divinity schools. The former Burke director (now UTS associate academic dean) will work with the UTS academic dean and faculty to increase awareness regarding work with human subjects. Ideally, they will establish a simplified institutional review board process specifically for UTS students. Librarians have an important role to play in educating students about the importance of their ethical responsibilities when conducting research on human subjects. As noted above, librarians may be well-situated to do so because many library studies involve human subjects and go through Columbia's IRB process. In addition, librarians have traditionally been leaders when it comes to teaching the ethics of doing research (e.g., explaining when and how to cite sources).

*4. The Burke Library should exercise caution when purchasing or promoting expensive, newer tools and services.*

While one of the faculty members interviewed asked for an individual consultation on bibliographic software (i.e., Zotero), it is usually difficult to promote new tools among researchers who have created their own systems for organizing materials, especially when such systems appear to be working adequately and researchers lack the time to invest in learning new, ever-changing tools. Perhaps a more effective approach by librarians is to work with advanced graduate students who are in the early stages of their research projects and may not yet be wedded to a particular approach to organizing their research.. It is important for librarians to know about new faculty hires early in the process to ensure that they have the tools and resources needed for successful careers at their new institution.

The Burke Library should focus on inexpensive and readily available tools. After students graduate or when faculty move to a new institution, they may not have at their disposal the same tools they used previously. Their new context may not support expensive tools (e.g., using R for statistical analysis rather than the more expensive tools SPSS and SAS). Researchers need simple tools that talk with each other and across multiple platforms. Many libraries supported RefWorks at one time, but no longer do. Upon graduation or moving to another institution, students and faculty lost some data.

*5. In spite of libraries' commitments to open access publishing and use of social media, such trends were not of much interest to the researchers interviewed. As an alternative, libraries will need to work directly with deans and administrators and continue to promote open access publishing as a viable alternative to traditional print publishing.*

Most of the faculty members interviewed worked with publishers in traditional ways, often signing away their author rights. Researchers noted that being published in print was preferred to being published digitally. There was reluctance to push the envelope or challenge traditional means of promotion and tenure review. While open access is sometimes appreciated, most interviewees have not published any content in open access venues. In addition, there are still misunderstandings about open access (e.g., that it is inconsistent with the peer review process). At what point does continued advocacy regarding open access become counter-productive? Are conversations about subject-based repositories more beneficial than institutional repositories? Have open access mandates implemented by other institutions had a positive effect on scholarship? If so, how do we measure and articulate that effect? Should librarians continue to talk with administrations, especially financial administrators, about the long-term unsustainability of traditional publishing models and of the traditional promotion and tenure process?

**Columbia University Libraries**  
**Research Support Services Study for the Field of Religious Studies**

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Thank you for participating in Columbia University Libraries Research Support Services Study for the field of Religious Studies.

This research study seeks to examine the research practices of academics in religious studies in order to understand the resources and services these faculty members need to be successful in their teaching and research.

Your participation in the study involves a sixty-minute audio-recorded interview about your research practices and support needs as a religious studies scholar. We also may take photographs to document your workspace, however, you will not appear in the photographs. Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in the interview at any time for any reason.

There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. Subjects may experience benefits in the form of increased insight and awareness into their own research practices and needs.

If you choose to participate, your name will not be linked to your interview responses or workspace photographs at any time. We do not include your name on any of the interview data and there is no link between this consent form and your responses.

For more information about this study, please contact Nisa Bakkalbasi, Principal Investigator, at (212) 854-7151. If you have questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Subjects at (212) 851-7040, or access their website at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/irb>.

I understand and consent to participate in the study as described above. I grant Columbia University Libraries permission to use this recording and photographs for the purpose of utilizing my feedback, and to share this information with the academic community, and waive my rights to review or inspect the tapes prior to such use.

Please print your name:

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Signature of Research Participant:

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

### **Research focus**

1. Describe your current research focus.
2. Describe how your research is situated within the academy. [Probe for how they position themselves in relation to religious studies and theology studies and if they see their work as connecting to any other disciplines]

### **Research methods**

3. What theoretical approaches does your research utilize or rely on?
4. What research methods do you currently use to conduct your research [e.g. discourse analysis, historical analysis, etc.]?
  - a. Does your research produce data? If so, what kinds of data does your research typically produce?
  - b. How and where do you currently keep this data?
  - c. Where do plan to store this data in the long term? [Prompt: e.g. an archives, an online repository]
5. [Beyond data you produce yourself]What kinds of sources does your research depend on?
  - a. How do you locate these materials?
6. Think back to a past or ongoing research project where you faced challenges in the process of conducting the research.
  - a. Describe these challenges.
  - b. What could have been done to mitigate these challenges?
7. How do you keep up with trends in your field more broadly?
8. If I gave you a magic wand that could help you with your research process – what would you ask it to do? [If they cite broader issues, e.g. lack of time or funding, probe further for coping strategies or workarounds they use to mitigate these challenges when conducting their research]

## **Publishing Practices**

9. Where do you typically publish your research in scholarly settings? [Probe for kinds of publications and the disciplines these publications are aligned with]
  - a. Beyond scholarly publishing are there any other venues that you disseminate your research? [Probe: e.g. blogs, popular press, classes]
10. How do your publishing practices relate to those typical to your discipline?
11. Have you ever published your research in open access venues such as open access online journals or repositories?
  - a. If so, which journals or repositories and what has been your motivations for doing so? (i.e. required, for sharing, investment in open access principles)
  - b. If no, why not?

## **State of the Field and Follow-Up**

12. From your perspective what are the greatest challenges and opportunities currently facing religious studies and/or theology studies?
13. Is there anything else about your research support needs that you think it is important for me to know that was not covered in the previous questions?