

# The Importance of Linguistically Diverse Collections

## Decolonizing the Theological Library

by Jeffrey D. Meyers

**ABSTRACT** Although theological libraries in the United States serve speakers of many languages, they exist in a higher education environment where linguistic diversity is often absent from conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. This article argues for the importance of linguistically diverse library collections, surveys the state of holdings and acquisitions today, reports the results of a study of student, alumni, and faculty perceptions of their schools' support for multilingual and non-English speaking students, examines the barriers to adequate non-English acquisitions, and proposes actions and strategies to improve access to non-English materials.

Linguistic diversity—the reality that students come to our institutions as speakers of many different languages—is largely ignored in higher education in the United States, with most colleges and universities not even collecting data on which languages their students speak. The lack of attention to this fundamental aspect of our students' identities sets up barriers to effective education, since nothing is more integral to learning than language.

This inattention to linguistic diversity has led to a reality where we ask students to set aside a massive part of who they are and how they learn when they come into the classroom. Seminary and university professors rarely utilize the vast array of pedagogical strategies that might engage multilingual students' full linguistic repertoires and better prepare them to serve the church communities they come from. Monolingual pedagogies keep multilingual and non-English-speaking students on the margins of theological education. Most theological libraries have struggled to counteract this marginalization, most visibly by maintaining acquisitions programs that fail to support the needs of multilingual students and faculty,<sup>1</sup> leaving multilingual students frustrated and decreasing the quality and reputation of the educations offered by our institutions.

I am a professor, not a librarian. My experience of working at a theological library is limited to my time as a student worker while completing my doctorate—a role that included everything from staffing the circulation desk to interlibrary loan fulfillment to book repair but does not exactly qualify me to write about theological libraries as an expert. I write here because, although I have an incredible level of library access as an adjunct professor at multiple universities and seminaries in multiple cities—jobs which provide me access to a union catalog of over ninety academic and research libraries and borrowing privileges at literally hundreds of libraries nationwide—these libraries are not providing the resources I need to do my job. My attempts to develop diverse syllabi and support my multilingual students are frequently hindered by the inaccessibility of materials published outside of the US and in non-English languages.

Theological education is still largely rooted in colonial attitudes and realities.<sup>2</sup> European languages, scholarship, and church experience remain more highly valued than the experiences and scholarship of formerly colonized nations and communities. This is reflected in our library collections. Most US theological libraries possess—and, often, continue to purchase—far more books in the European languages of their denominational ancestors than in the non-English languages actually spoken by their current students and faculty. A focus on the linguistic diversity of library

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collections—one that recognizes the value of collecting resources from all regions of the world—is an essential element in the decolonization of theological education.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE COLLECTIONS**

The church, theological education, and the United States population are all very linguistically diverse. Even schools without dedicated programs for multilingual and non-English speaking students often have significant numbers of multilingual domestic or international students. While there is no data specific to postsecondary education, let alone theological education, other data suggest that our institutions are likely serving a large multilingual and non-native English-speaking population. Over 60 million people, or 20.8% of the US population, speak a language other than English at home, although three-quarters of these also speak English “well” or “very well” (US Census Bureau and Ryan 2013). Of K–12 students in the US, 9.6% are classified as “English Language Learners”—a classification that grants them access to additional services and which they lose once they obtain English proficiency (National Center for Education Statistics 2016). While race and ethnicity are poor proxies for language use, we also know that 18.4% of the US population is Hispanic, 5.9% Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander, and 3.4% multiracial (US Census Bureau 2019). In 2020–21, 7.2% of students at schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in the US and Canada identified as Hispanic,<sup>3</sup> 8.2% as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 9.6% were present in the US or Canada on a student or other temporary visa (ATS Annual Data Tables, Table 2.12-A).<sup>4</sup> Of faculty, 4.5% identified as Hispanic, 8.4% as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 0.54% were present on a temporary visa (ATS Annual Data Tables, Table 3.1-A). While it is unknown what portion of these groups are multilingual or non-native English speakers—and there are certainly multilingual and non-native English speakers present in other racial and ethnic groups—this data supports what we know anecdotally—that theological education institutions are rich with linguistic diversity.

Seminaries and university programs have responded to this diversity in different ways. Many schools now offer individual classes or entire degree programs taught in other languages. Of schools accredited by or seeking accreditation from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), one in five offer programs taught in other languages, mostly in Spanish, Korean, and Chinese.<sup>5</sup> Many have established programs and centers aimed at supporting international students through cultural orientations, language classes, writing support, and other means. Others provide very little support at all, even when they have student populations that would justify more substantial efforts. Only rarely do schools advertise how their libraries support multilingual students, but here too there appears to be a wide range of levels of support.<sup>6</sup>

In coordination with efforts toward greater inclusion in teaching and student services, libraries need to be prepared to support the use of all of students’ languages in teaching and learning. While one often hears the view that enforcing an English-only educational experience benefits students by helping them improve their English, this belief is contradicted by research into language development and learning more generally. Linguists have increasingly rejected the idea that multilingual students should conduct all coursework in the language of instruction in order to more quickly learn that language (the “immersion” method). Such a monolingual approach neither assists in language acquisition nor in understanding content (Fu, Hadjioannou, and Zhou 2019, 24). It also hinders multilingual and non-native speakers from developing the technical vocabulary necessary to use the material they are learning in their other language contexts—a significant issue for gradu-

ates working in bilingual and non-English-speaking churches and contexts. Researchers increasingly recommend what linguists call “translanguaging”—a pedagogical approach characterized by the simultaneous and overlapping use of multiple languages as appropriate to the context (Mazak 2016, 4). This more accurately conforms to how multilingual people communicate and learn than monolingual and bilingual approaches that maintain an ideological separation between languages—approaches often rooted in the colonialist mentality that one language is superior to or “more academic” than another.

The goals and usefulness of translanguaging pedagogy vary based on the student population. For international students, translanguaging teaching strategies invite fuller participation, allow for increased engagement with scholarship from their home cultures, and show respect for students’ backgrounds and abilities. For many multilingual domestic students, such strategies have the additional goal of maintaining (or building) their ability to use their other languages.

The degree to which translanguaging can occur in the classroom necessarily varies based on both the instructor’s and the students’ language abilities.<sup>7</sup> Multilingual professors teaching multilingual students can incorporate their various languages in any number of ways. A lecture or discussion may be conducted in one language about a text read in another, for example. Classes can be conducted bilingually, where all material is duplicated and students are assumed to know only one of the languages used, or translangually, using a fluid mix of languages in contexts where all students have at least some proficiency in both languages.<sup>8</sup> Professors need not be multilingual themselves to adopt certain elements of translanguaging pedagogy. One easy way for any professor to honor their students’ linguistic diversity is to encourage them to read the assigned course texts in whatever language(s) they find most helpful. This is obviously dependent both on non-English editions existing and on their being accessible to students.

The Association of Theological Schools’ accreditation standards outline the expectation that

The library curates and organizes a coherent collection of resources sufficient in quality, quantity, currency, and depth to support the school’s courses and degree programs, to encourage research and exploration beyond the requirements of the academic program, and to enable interaction with a wide range of perspectives, including theological and cultural diversity and global voices. (ATS Commission on Accrediting 2020, 6.7)

Today’s seminaries and universities are diverse communities that typically include multilingual and non-native English-speaking students and faculty. Theological libraries need to be attuned to the needs of their patrons for access to resources in the languages they speak and read (and be supported by their institutions in this work). For those libraries serving institutions with classes or degree programs offered in languages other than English, linguistically diverse collections are even more essential. Such collections are important for multilingual students, support the research needs of advanced students and faculty members, and help students and faculty fulfill the mandate to listen to and learn from the whole church, especially the parts that have historically been oppressed, marginalized, and ignored.

Theological libraries should, as Kenneth Sawyer (2006, 74–5) argues, both “serve and subvert the values” of their academic communities. This means, Sawyer continues, that “theological librarians have a particularly important role to play as educators within their communities, in order to contest the central value of homogeneity and the suspicion of hybridity within and among religious traditions.” In practice, this requires collecting resources in all the languages of the church, not just

those of the North American and European churches. This can be a difficult task, but it is essential for the health of theological institutions and the church as a whole.

### **LIBRARY HOLDINGS AND ACQUISITIONS TODAY**

Libraries have experienced many changes in collection development practices over the past few decades, changes that reflect broader shifts and have threatened foreign acquisitions across all types of academic libraries, from the smallest seminary libraries to the largest university research libraries. Yelena Luckert and Lindsay Inge Carpenter (2019, ix) list “changes . . . from collection to service models, the instability of budgets, the need for student spaces, the lack and cost of storage, technology pressures, changes in how research is being conducted, shortages of positions, devaluation of humanities including the lack of support for language learning, and other important and difficult issues” as among the changes that have led to decreased capacity for foreign language acquisitions.<sup>9</sup> ATS categorizes libraries four ways: “An independent library chiefly serving your institution, a department or departmental branch library within a larger university or college library system, a library integrated with a larger university or college library system, or a part of a library system jointly administered and/or funded by more than one educational institution” (Association of Theological Schools 2020). While there are massive differences across and within these categories, the majority of libraries appear to be suffering from the negative effects of many of the same changes.<sup>10</sup>

In a survey I conducted of libraries serving ATS-accredited programs, librarians named several trends that have become especially apparent since the 2008 recession.<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, many libraries report a shift in spending toward electronic resources, with this accelerating further due to the coronavirus pandemic. Quite a few reported struggling with shrinking acquisitions budgets or budgets that have not kept up with inflation, with particularly significant impacts on periodical subscriptions and materials from Europe.<sup>12</sup> Many described relying increasingly on interlibrary loan and agreements with other libraries to meet their patrons’ needs. Some libraries reported that space concerns have led them to remove many foreign-language titles from their collections, especially older works in European languages no longer widely spoken in their denominations and institutions. Responses on languages more likely to be spoken by current students were mixed. Some libraries indicated efforts to increase collections in these languages while others noted a lack of funding or staff capabilities to do so.<sup>13</sup>

Libraries serving schools offering degree programs taught in non-English languages often lack the resources to support such programs. In the same survey, I asked libraries whose institutions offer classes taught in non-English languages to share how many items (of all types) they purchased in those languages in the previous fiscal year. This is not data libraries typically collect, so I received only sixteen responses from ten schools. Excluding one school that purchased over two hundred items in Korean (a roughly 4,000-student institution offering both undergraduate and graduate degrees), the average number of items purchased in a given language in the previous fiscal year was eight. A majority of the schools (six) reported purchasing no items at all in at least one language in which their courses are taught.<sup>14</sup> While this is not a statistically significant sample of schools, it aligns with holdings data that shows that many libraries possess only a few hundred books in Chinese, Korean, or Spanish to serve their degree programs taught in those languages.<sup>15</sup>

These findings reflect what theological librarians have been saying for years. In 1980, Stephen Peterson opined that, “considering the extent of the Christian community in Europe and in Asia and

particularly the growth of Christianity in Africa, the preoccupation of North American theological libraries with literature published on this side of the oceans seems almost irresponsible” (127). In 2004, noting that ATS’s accreditation standards at the time called for a more globalized perspective of Christianity, Martha Lund Smalley and Paul Stuehnenberg argued that theological libraries have typically been left out of discussions and efforts to globalize the curriculum and build partnerships with churches and seminaries overseas and have been left without the resources needed to document world Christianity. As proof of the problem, they analyzed publications on global Christianity, finding that most cited very few sources published outside of the US, Canada, and Europe.<sup>16</sup> They concluded that

efforts to understand and describe the globalization of theological education have delved relatively little into non-Western theological literature. Perhaps this is because access to the literature of world Christianity is limited in American theological libraries. Perhaps most theological libraries are not equipped to do an adequate job of collecting and providing access to that literature, but if Western scholars read only books published by Western publishers, they surely will get a skewed view of what those outside the West are thinking. (62)

If anything, matters have continued to get worse. In a 2008 article, John Weaver surveys papers from Atla Annual conferences, concluding that, despite their best efforts, “the phenomenal growth of Christian populations in the southern hemisphere, combined with too-limited institutional interest and funding in North America, have led librarians to scale back their expectations for libraries’ collections and cooperation” (39).

As they have been forced to scale back their own collections development (both in English and in other languages), libraries have increasingly seen interlibrary loan and consortium agreements as a core part of their strategies for providing access to materials. These not only include arrangements between seminaries but also provide seminaries with access to the libraries of both small and large colleges and universities, many with collections orders magnitudes larger than what the typical seminary can support. Such cooperation massively increases the availability of resources but appears to fall short when it comes to non-English materials. As libraries increasingly purchase only the most popular titles, relying on interlibrary loan and various agreements for access to more specialized titles, the result is decreased availability of more specialized titles in the system as a whole. For many non-English theological titles, this process seems to have reached its limit. A significant portion of theological books published in languages other than English, even those by US authors, are simply unavailable through interlibrary loan.<sup>17</sup>

This is exacerbated by the fact that the few theological libraries with dedicated collections in non-English languages frequently do not lend materials from these collections via interlibrary loan. The cost of acquiring these books, difficulty of replacing lost volumes, fragility of sometimes lower-quality paper and binding, and lack of libraries with the capacity to reciprocate all incentivize libraries with large foreign language collections to keep them to themselves.

This project had its genesis in my attempts to borrow books through interlibrary loan in the languages spoken by my students. As a professor in the United States teaching predominately English-speaking students, many of the texts I use are English works that have never been translated into other languages. For those books originally written in other languages or that have been translated, I found that a large number were not available. These were typically not obscure works, but non-English editions of books by well-known authors heavily assigned in seminary classrooms.

To illustrate this, I devised a small experiment. Examining my syllabi for three upcoming courses, I made a list of all the non-English editions of books from which I have assigned a single chapter (as

opposed to the entire book). I found chapters from twenty-five books in 101 different non-English translations.<sup>18</sup> Using a random number generator, I selected fifty of these to try to obtain and post for my students. The list of what was available in translation was overwhelmingly made up of male authors, mostly well-known theologians and textbook authors including James Cone, Michael Gorman, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, Daniel Migliore, Jürgen Moltmann, Desmond Tutu, Walter Wink, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. For those chapters I had previously obtained in person or requested through interlibrary loan based on student demand, I counted the results of the previous search. The rest I sought to obtain from one of the libraries at which I have privileges or through interlibrary loan.<sup>19</sup> Of the fifty, I was able to gain access to twenty-four. I obtained seven in person and seventeen through interlibrary loan. In other words, roughly half of the chapters I sought were unavailable through interlibrary loan. While this experiment would have to be replicated by numerous faculty members and in different disciplines in order to have any statistical significance, it does support the thesis that a large portion of non-English editions of books relevant to theological education are not available to students and faculty.

Most of this reality is likely attributable to low ownership of non-English titles by US theological libraries.<sup>20</sup> Some examples will help illustrate this. The list below provides data on the availability in the United States of non-English editions of select books frequently used in US seminary classrooms. These examples do not begin to address the question of which books are translated in the first place, which is an issue both for non-native English speakers seeking to read texts in their languages of comfort and for English speakers who miss out on works published only in other languages. The holdings data is from WorldCat—a union catalog drawing data from tens of thousands of libraries. It is run by the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) and is the foundation for OCLC's interlibrary loan system.<sup>21</sup> As such, it undercounts the total number of volumes in US libraries but fairly accurately represents the availability of copies for interlibrary loan, though, as I have stated, many libraries have lending restrictions on foreign-language collections. While this is not a randomized or systematic sample, the rarity of even these common texts further illustrates the scarcity of non-English materials in US libraries.

- 1) Martin Luther King, Jr.'s classic collection of sermons *Strength to Love* (1963), sometimes appearing in an expanded version under the title *A Gift of Love*, has been translated into at least seventeen languages. For six of the languages (Italian, Hungarian, Malagasy, Portuguese, Swedish, and Turkish), not a single US library owns a copy. For eight languages (Catalan, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, Japanese, Korean, and Norwegian), between one and four libraries own a copy. Eight libraries own it in German and fourteen in Spanish.
- 2) James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970) is held in Spanish by six US libraries. The Italian edition is not held by any US libraries.
- 3) The German edition of Vine Deloria's *God is Red* (1973) is not held by any US libraries.
- 4) Of the various editions and volumes of *The Story of Christianity* (1984) by Justo L. González, nine US libraries possess one or more copies in Korean, five possess copies in Chinese, three possess copies in Russian, and none own the Japanese translation.
- 5) Five US libraries own the Korean translation of Fred Craddock's *Preaching* (1985). One owns the Italian edition. None own the French or Japanese editions.
- 6) The Korean edition of Thomas Long's *The Witness of Preaching* (1989) is held by four US libraries. None own the French edition.

- 7) The Korean edition of Kelly Brown Douglas's *The Black Christ* (1993) is held by one US library.
- 8) Ada María Isasi-Díaz's *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (1996) is held in Spanish by five US libraries.
- 9) Alister McGrath's *Historical Theology* (1998) is held in Chinese by four US libraries, in Korean by three US libraries, and in Japanese by no US libraries.
- 10) No US libraries own the Japanese translation of Daniel L. Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding* (2001). Five own one or more of the various Korean editions.
- 11) The Spanish edition of Miguel De La Torre's *Reading the Bible From the Margins* (2002) is held by only one library in the US.
- 12) Glen Stassen and David Gushee's *Kingdom Ethics* (2003) is held by US libraries in Spanish (four copies), Chinese (three copies), Korean (three copies), Arabic (one copy), and Japanese (one copy).
- 13) Jürgen Moltmann's *Ethics of Hope* has been translated from German (2010) into six other languages. Many US libraries hold it in English, nineteen in the original German, three in Chinese, two in Korean, and none in Italian, Japanese, or Portuguese.
- 14) The Korean edition of Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Justice in Love* (2011) is held by two US libraries.
- 15) Pope Francis's *Evangelii Gaudium* [The Joy of the Gospel] (2013) is held by eighteen US libraries in Spanish, four in Italian, one in German, and one in Korean.

The books above are mostly translations out of English of especially popular titles, including many that were published long enough ago to benefit from previously higher levels of non-English purchasing. The situation for books published more recently and for those that have never appeared in English is likely worse.

### **STUDENT, ALUMNI, AND FACULTY PERCEPTIONS**

I have argued that both current holdings and acquisitions practices are insufficient to support the needs of multilingual students and faculty. But what do students and faculty think? In addition to the survey of libraries noted earlier, I also surveyed students, alumni, and faculty from ATS-accredited institutions about how their programs and libraries support non-English-speaking and multilingual students and faculty.<sup>22</sup> The survey showed that, while the majority of respondents are relatively satisfied with the support available, a significant minority experience it to be lacking. This likely reflects both differences in the resources and support available at different institutions and variations in perceptions within each academic community.

Multilingual and non-English-speaking respondents—the survey was available in English and Spanish—were asked to rate their satisfaction with their school library's collections in the non-English language(s) they use. The results are shown in figure 1. The distribution is not what you want to see with a Likert-scale question. It shows that a significant minority of respondents are ambivalent about or unhappy with their library's collections in non-English languages, with the majority of respondents indicating slight satisfaction, ambivalence, or dissatisfaction.

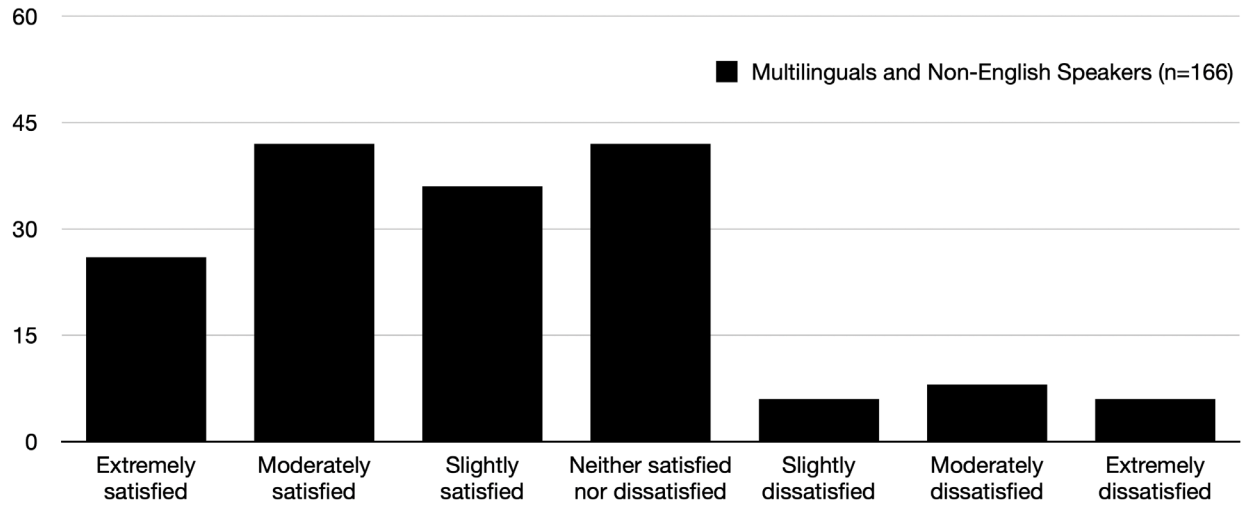


Figure 1: Respondents' satisfaction with non-English library collections

Another question asked only of multilingual and non-English-speaking respondents—“On average, how easy is it to acquire particular books in languages other than English from your library, other nearby libraries, or interlibrary loan?”—revealed similarly mixed responses, show in figure 2. While a majority (59%) described obtaining non-English materials as extremely, moderately, or slightly easy, the rest saw it as “neither easy nor difficult” or some degree of difficult, with more respondents expressing that obtaining materials is difficult than had indicated dissatisfaction with library collections on the previous question.

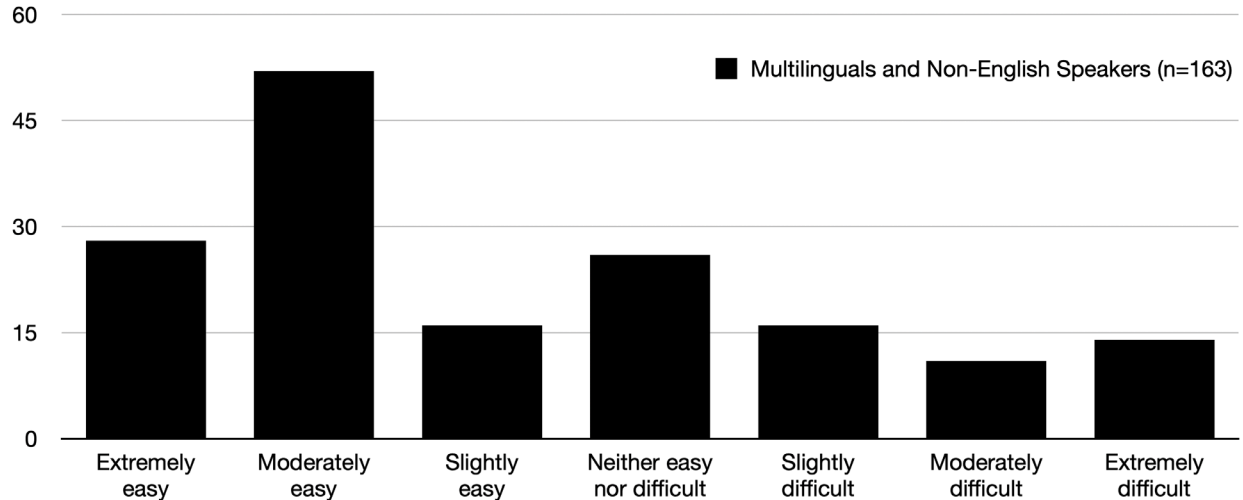


Figure 2: Respondents' assessment of difficulty in accessing non-English materials



Short answer questions, asked of all respondents including monolingual English speakers, helped flesh out the reasons for the mixed responses. Many respondents, when asked to respond to the question “in your opinion, how well does your school and its library support the needs of multilingual and non-English speaking students and faculty?” wrote answers like “not very well” and “support is minimal.” Most such commenters saw this as a negative, but others expressed the opinion that because students have to pass English tests like the TOEFL, no language resources are necessary. One wrote: “This is a silly question. International students are required to demonstrate academic proficiency in English to be accepted.” Another wrote that such efforts would be “misguided,” as a common language promotes “unity.” Not surprisingly, such opinions were exclusively expressed by faculty and domestic students. Similarly, quite a few faculty members (but no students or alumni) defended a lack of resources on budgetary grounds or stated that their student body is too monocultural or monolingual to require any language resources.

While many respondents were dissatisfied with their school’s resources for multilingual and non-English speaking students, many others praised their school’s support. This was especially the case at schools offering courses or degree programs taught in other languages. Resources like peer tutoring and writing help were particularly heavily praised, as was the presence of multilingual staff and faculty.

Responses that singled out the library were mixed. Many respondents expressed satisfaction with library resources in other languages, sometimes citing specific collections focused on a particular language. Balancing these opinions were many respondents who commented on a lack of library resources, writing things like “it is extremely difficult for me to access textbooks and documents in my mother language,” “the library is unilingual in my experience,” and “there is no book for non-English speaking students.” Some of these students expressed low expectations for support, while those who felt their libraries should have non-English collections frequently viewed them as inadequate.

Another question, asked only of respondents who indicated dissatisfaction on the Likert-scale questions shown in figures 1 and 2, asked how “poor availability of non-English materials” has “affected your studies and/or research.” Faculty used the question to note significant consequences for teaching. One wrote: “If I need to teach a course, I cannot expect students to go deeper into the topics because the resources are limited and many of them are outdated.” Another commented that “it impacts courses and the programs I would develop in Spanish if I had the resources.” Student responses were similarly disheartening. One wrote that “a veces el único recurso que se puede usar al no encontrar es wikipedia” [sometimes the only resource that I can use when others are not available is Wikipedia], adding that the effect of this on their *ensayos* [papers, exams, etc.] is immense. Another commented that “at the beginning, I was so disappointed and frustrated because I could [not] find any textbooks [in] my language that could help me understand more of the concepts that my professors taught in class. Now, I get used to it and with the tremendous help from the internet, I do not usually look for books at the library.” One student wrote a long paragraph explaining how limited resources narrow the fields of potential research and shape what questions are asked. Using the myopic focus on Latin American liberation theologians as an example, they wrote that “another thing that happens, is that we get from Latin America that what English-Speaking Academia kind of Accepts and Recognize. . . . In this context we receive a Monolithic Theology, instead of engage with the richness and diversity that exist.”

Lastly, I asked the survey respondents for suggestions on how their schools and libraries could do better. Many respondents stressed the importance of hiring multilingual faculty and staff, including librarians. Many suggested adding or increasing course and degree offerings taught in other languages. Increasing non-English library acquisitions was another frequent response; one faculty member even wrote that their school needs to “buy more non-English resources or stop offering courses in a language other than English.” Quite a few of the Spanish-speaking respondents suggested moving library materials in Spanish to their own section, a common strategy for increasing their accessibility. Other suggestions included bilingual signage; new, better, or non-English introductions to the library; commissioning translations of course materials; and forging interlibrary loan exchange agreements with institutions overseas.

While multilingual students do not always expect their schools to have resources to support their use of their non-English languages, it is clear that these resources are lacking or difficult to access at many—but not all—schools and libraries. This appears to drive many multilingual and international students away from their libraries toward other sources of information and support and significantly impacts many aspects of teaching and learning.

### **BARRIERS TO MULTILINGUAL ACQUISITIONS**

There are many reasons why library acquisition patterns fail to reflect the linguistic diversity and resource needs of the patrons they serve. Apart from the obvious racism and xenophobia, libraries face inadequate budgets, staffing limitations, and logistical challenges related to importing books from abroad. Theological schools, like all of higher education, are struggling financially, with both government and denominational support declining dramatically over the past half-century. Many have responded with repeated cuts to library budgets. These are often coupled with and reflective of a failure to fully recognize the ways that libraries contribute to the mission and strategic priorities of institutions. Budget cuts have directly affected funding for acquisitions and have limited the staff available to discover, purchase, catalog, and process new materials. Libraries have been forced to prioritize which titles they purchase, leading many to reevaluate expensive purchases of materials from overseas. While it is not true of all libraries, many theological libraries that previously devoted a notable percentage of their acquisitions budgets to materials in languages other than English have stopped doing so.

Library budgets have been further squeezed by expensive electronic journal and e-book purchases and subscriptions, with monopolistic publishers demanding increasingly unsustainable prices for such materials. This has accelerated decreases in print acquisitions—a trend that significantly affects the number of materials available through interlibrary loan, as licensing restrictions typically prevent the sharing of electronic resources. As libraries increasingly prioritize e-books and electronic access to journals, the usefulness of interlibrary loan and reciprocal access agreements will decline. At the same time, libraries must contend with major uncertainties surrounding the longevity of electronic resources.<sup>23</sup>

The shift to electronic materials has accelerated the shift toward English exclusivity in acquisitions in other ways. First, a much lower percentage of books published outside of North America and Europe are available as e-books (Celik 2019, 188–9, 192). Second, most subscription packages of electronic journals and books appear to be significantly more monolingual than the print acquisitions they have replaced (fortunately, *Atla's religion journal databases* are exceptions).<sup>24</sup> The

companies that put them together appear to have little interest in producing linguistically diverse packages, as this would be more expensive and require significant staff expertise.

Long-term trends toward demand-driven acquisitions, while important for optimizing shrinking budgets and improving user experiences, also offer several challenges. First, patrons can only ask for what they know exists. Most publishers in the global south lack the distribution networks and marketing that might alert faculty to new titles. For these titles, library holdings and union catalogs like WorldCat are an important source of discovery. Here we encounter a catch-22 that appears to already significantly impact scholarship on the global south: patrons request materials when other libraries have collected and cataloged them, but this requires the existence of libraries with more systematic, comprehensive, and documentarian approaches to collections—approaches that are no longer practiced or viable under current funding structures at all sizes and types of academic libraries. Second, just-in-time models do not work as smoothly when books from overseas can take a few months to arrive and be processed—a factor that may decrease requests since faculty and students know they will not arrive in time to be useful for their particular projects. Third, demand-driven acquisitions has a tendency to focus on present rather than future needs. The needs of future patrons ten, twenty, and fifty years from now must also be taken into account, however difficult such predictions can be.<sup>25</sup> The fact that books published outside of the US, Canada, and Western Europe go out of print more often and more rapidly makes a more proactive approach that anticipates future needs even more important for these titles. Demand-driven acquisitions were an important corrective for situations where libraries were out of touch with patron needs and a necessary strategy amid shrinking budgets, but librarians should not abdicate their roles in actively curating collections and aiding student and faculty discovery.

Personnel cuts and the staffing realities of small libraries are an important factor in hindering non-English acquisitions. Librarians, especially those at seminaries and other small institutions, are often under-equipped for the basic processes of finding, acquiring, and cataloging non-English materials. This is especially true for languages in non-Latin scripts. Most libraries are too small to have staff who can navigate Korean publisher or e-commerce websites, for instance, let alone create a robust catalog record for a book in Korean. Commercial services to help with acquiring and cataloging materials from overseas are often prohibitively expensive and may not be particularly skilled at working with theological libraries. Librarians are resourceful, often relying on community members and even librarians at other nearby institutions to help them find, acquire, and catalog particular texts, but most are unable to conduct systematic acquisitions programs in non-English languages. Larger libraries are more likely to be able to hire staff with the needed language capabilities. Some schools have also placed teaching faculty from non-English programs in charge of collection development in their languages, though such arrangements sometimes falter in practice.

Lastly, it can be surprisingly difficult to purchase books published outside of Canada, the US, and Europe. Out-of-print books are even more difficult to find, but even books that are still in print can be difficult to acquire, as publisher distribution networks frequently do not extend beyond their immediate regions. US-based retailers, including the giant e-commerce websites, seldom carry such materials. As a result, any adequate acquisitions program for materials from Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East must include a budget for librarians and faculty to travel abroad on acquisitions trips (International and Area Studies Collections in the 21st Century Group 2016).

In the early 1980s, the Association of Theological Schools and Atla, motivated by “increasing alarm” over “the emerging state and conditions of academic libraries” and supplied with funding

from the Lilly Endowment, initiated “Project 2000” to study the role of theological libraries and the necessary provisions for their support during the remainder of the twentieth century. The final report, issued in 1984, correctly predicted that “by the end of this century it is probable that the population center of Christianity will have shifted to the southern and eastern hemispheres” (Peterson 1984, 39). Given this reality, the report concluded that “the existing collections are differentiated within too narrow a view of Christianity and its historical and cultural complexity” (41) and called for a new emphasis on “documenting third world religion” (39–42). Shifts in the center of gravity of Christianity meant, according to the report, that “initially, theological students will need to be better informed about life and history of the non-western churches. In time theological initiatives emerging from Third World thinkers may shape a good deal of the general theological curriculum” (40). The report called for robust, strategic, and coordinated efforts to provide resources on majority-world Christianity, historical literature to put contemporary global theologies into context, and more sophisticated collections on the non-Christian religions central to the Christian experience in many global contexts. It noted the complexity of the task, concluding that “libraries will need to develop new and often more complex mechanisms for acquiring and cataloguing these materials” since

so much of the material which is closest to the life of the successor churches is ephemeral and fugitive. Few theological libraries are prepared to acquire this type of material. When it is acquired, it presents substantial problems of organization and description. Vernacular languages are difficult, shared cataloging often will not be available, and the physical condition of the material may be poor. Yet without this documentation, North American scholars will be disadvantaged in their understanding of the thinkers and churches which will be shaping much of the world’s Christian witness. (40–1)

Had the theological library ecosystem been equipped to act on this portion of the Project 2020 report, this article would not have been necessary. Instead, we remain much where we were in 1984, if not substantially worse off.

Libraries in the US and Canada remain rooted in Western systems deeply affected by histories of colonialism and White supremacy, with theological libraries “still working from a perspective that underserves diverse, and specifically international, student populations” (Veldheer 2019, 47–8). Just one of the great constellation of ways this manifests is the poor accessibility of resources from the majority world, especially non-English resources. This is a systemic problem—one that can only be addressed by strategic and collaborative planning backed by substantial allocation of resources.

## **PROPOSALS**

While the unfortunate reality is that most theological libraries in the United States lack the resources to acquire books in non-English languages in a systematic fashion, individual libraries can take steps to improve their non-English collections and promote their use. These include:

- 1) Working with their administration, faculty, and students to ensure that collections development policies reflect current and future needs and priorities and are backed by adequate funding.
- 2) Explicitly encouraging students and faculty to request titles in any language.
- 3) Routinely seeking to acquire non-English editions of required textbooks and other books put on reserve.

- 4) Considering linguistic and geographic diversity when purchasing subscriptions of electronic materials.
- 5) Prioritizing the hiring of multilingual staff and, where needed, hiring multilingual students to assist in the identification, purchasing, and cataloging of non-English materials.
- 6) Including clear information about their collection and who can use it on their website. This should include descriptions of any special collections, plus details on who is allowed to physically access the library, who can get a library card, consortium agreements, what libraries can request materials via interlibrary loan, and any restrictions on the above that apply to special collections.
- 7) For theological librarians connected to universities, seeking assistance from area studies librarians, who routinely acquire publications from their geographical, cultural, and linguistic areas of focus around the world but whose work is not typically focused on the needs of theological students and normally excludes translations of materials first published in English.

Attending to the linguistic and regional diversity of library collections is a complex problem best addressed collectively. Finding systemic solutions to the low availability of non-English materials from US theological libraries will involve a multiplicity of stakeholders and efforts. Some concrete steps might include:

- 1) Atla creating a full-text e-book subscription database to complement its extensive work with full-text journals and indexing.
- 2) Atla seeking funds to be able to offer acquisitions travel grants in addition to its conference travel grants.
- 3) Libraries committing to making non-English collections available through interlibrary loan, allowing for the usual exceptions for particular volumes due to age, condition, rarity, or difficulty of replacement.<sup>26</sup>
- 4) Libraries coordinating with each other to develop areas of focus for international acquisitions and to find collective solutions to the staffing, funding, and logistical problems currently inhibiting the acquisition of foreign language materials from publishers based outside of Canada, the United States, and Western Europe.
- 5) Faculty, schools, and libraries pushing publishers to forge more agreements to distribute the works of foreign publishers and to fund more translations (both into and out of English).
- 6) Seminaries and universities seeking additional sources of funding for their libraries through fundraising and grant writing. Library staff may themselves want to move into more routine grant writing and resource development activities.
- 7) Establishing a new institution dedicated to the decolonization of theological libraries. This could be primarily (or initially) a grant-making organization, or it could seek to do the work itself, likely as a combination library, publisher, and bookstore. The latter type of organization, essentially a library serving all theological education as well as immigrant church communities, could develop staff competencies in many different languages and simultaneously address barriers in interlibrary loan availability, e-book availability, cataloging, library staff development, publishing, and distribution. With the right facility, it could become a hub for multilingual theological education, hosting classes, conferences, and other events.<sup>27</sup>

These proposals are necessarily provisional and incomplete. Doubtless, others will have additional ideas to contribute. What is important is that the scarcity mindset that currently prevails in much of higher education not be allowed to hold back its forward progress toward greater inclusivity and vibrancy.

Theological libraries are bound by their missions—and accreditation standards—to support their multilingual student bodies, their faculty members' research agendas, and their commitments to listen to and learn from the full diversity of the global church. Efforts to increase the linguistic diversity of theological library collections are essential for meeting these needs, both today and in the future. They offer exciting opportunities for learning, collaboration, and growth that have the potential to contribute to new vibrancy in a theological education landscape increasingly shaped by the diversity of its academic and church communities.

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**ENDNOTES**

- 1 Loida I. Martell-Otero explains that “theological education seems to be working on an older paradigm, or at least on an idealized paradigm of a homogenized world, when the global—particularly the poor, brown, and broken—stayed on their respective side of the border and did not invade the lily-white towers of intellectual purity.” The result, she writes, is that “we have ill-prepared our students to live in a global world. We provide educational credentialing, but too many of our students graduate *mal educados*—with a lack of a holistic spirit of hospitality toward, or concern for, the cultural, religious, and linguistic ‘other’” (2015, 146–7).
- 2 While much of the data in this article includes Canadian theological schools and their libraries, I have intentionally limited its conclusions to the United States because the libraries serving Canadian theological schools are often quite different from their US counterparts. Some of the realities described in this article likely apply, while differences in structure, funding sources, and institutional priorities mean that Canadian schools may not be experiencing all of the same trends and difficulties.
- 3 Note that the percentage of students at ATS-accredited schools who identify as Hispanic is significantly lower than the population as a whole, despite the fact that Hispanics are more likely to be religious (Pew Research Center 2014).
- 4 The proportion of students using a temporary visa is down from a high of 11.1% in 2017–18.
- 5 Since the Association of Theological Schools does not track these programs, I gathered this data myself in December 2020 by visiting the websites of all the schools listed on the ATS website. The data includes a few schools offering programs built around bilingual classes or a mix of English and non-English classes, includes certificate and non-degree programs, excludes undergraduate programs, excludes programs designed to prepare English speakers for Spanish-language ministry, and excludes programs taught at campuses outside of the US and Canada. It may be an undercount given the difficulty of finding this information on most school websites. Of the 276 schools accredited by or seeking accreditation from ATS, fifty-six (20.2%) offer programs taught in other languages. Thirty-five schools (12.7%) offer at least one certificate or degree program taught in Spanish, twenty-two (8%) in Korean, and eleven (4%) in Chinese. There are also two schools with at least one program taught in French (both Canadian—one francophone and one anglophone), one with a program in Farsi, and one with a program in Portuguese. I was unable to determine the dialect of many of the schools offering programs in Chinese, but most or all appear to be in Mandarin. US schools are slightly more likely to have programs taught in other languages, with fifty of 237 schools (21.1%) teaching at least one program in a language other than English, compared to six of thirty-eight (15.8%) of the Canadian schools (one additional school has English-only programs in both countries).
- 6 For treatments of how libraries can serve international students and English-language learners, see Rod-Welch 2019 and Luckert and Carpenter 2019.
- 7 Whether translanguaging occurs is another question. Without encouragement from professors and a welcoming environment, most students are understandably reluctant to use their other languages.
- 8 This distinction between bilingual and translanguaging courses, while my own adaptation of “translanguaging” terminology, may be a useful way to describe what already happens in both officially monolingual and officially bilingual classrooms.
- 9 Megan Browndorf and Erin Pappas (2019, 174) report additional threats to area studies programs and collections at large research universities, traditionally the main purchasers of foreign-language titles in the US, which have suffered from the elimination of federal funding, massive budget cuts, and loss of region-specific knowledge as schools replace regional programs and centers with generic “international studies” and “global studies” programs with far fewer resources. They note a loss of acquisitions capacity “that sidelines vernacular languages in favor of English-only.”
- 10 Obviously, not all of the changes listed are negative (though some certainly are). Many are important and necessary. Luckert and Inge Carpenter simply point out that there have been the negative side effects of such changes.
- 11 The survey was conducted in the fall of 2020 and received a total of forty-six responses. It was distributed through the Atlantis listserv and via individual emails to thirty libraries selected from the list of ATS schools using a random number generator, fourteen of which completed the survey.
- 12 The effects of declining budgets was also a major theme in a recent study (Welsh and Odicino 2020) focused on trends in the collection development methods used by religious studies and theological librarians.
- 13 I have been able to identify only a few libraries that are actively engaging in efforts to increase the linguistic diversity of their collections. These efforts typically reflect a desire to support particular degree programs, though they are



sometimes carried out independent of any institutional recognition of the importance of the library in supporting such programs.

- 14 For five of the six, the school offers at least one degree program taught in that language (as opposed to just isolated courses).
- 15 I have looked at holdings data reported by libraries through my survey as well as data from public catalog searches. There is a considerable range, with some schools holding almost no titles and others with collections in the low thousands. While I do not have sufficient data to make a specific claim, my observation is that schools typically own fifty to one hundred times as many books in legacy languages like German as they do in rising languages like Chinese, Korean, and Spanish—though there are also schools that have virtually no foreign language holdings at all and a handful that have significant collections.
- 16 This appears to remain the case. While in the process of evaluating possible textbooks for an undergraduate introduction to Christianity class, I found citations of works published outside of the US and Western Europe to be virtually non-existent. For example, the chapter on Latin American Christianity in what is otherwise my favorite book, published in 2015, does not cite a single source published in Latin America.
- 17 Stephen Peterson's detailed 1980 analysis of shifting collection development practices, which warned of the potential for "serious lacunae to appear" in the combined collections of theological libraries, seems prescient. He worried about shifts toward collection development policies oriented around current ("short-range if not short-sighted") educational objectives and what we would now call patron-driven acquisitions, arguing that libraries have a responsibility to anticipate the needs of future patrons and a responsibility to document, in coordination with other libraries, "some particular topic in Christian life and thought—some particular piece of the whole" (147–9, 153).
- 18 A handful of chapters were excluded from the experiment because I had previously obtained them from a non-library source. These included four open access titles available from the publisher but not from my libraries and two titles a friend overseas had obtained for me.
- 19 The requests were submitted in 2019–21 through the interlibrary loan systems of Catholic Theological Union, DePaul University, Elmhurst University, Whitworth University, and, in a few cases where public libraries were the primary owners of a book, the Spokane Public Library (Spokane, WA). When I could find the chapter title and page numbers, I requested just the chapter. When these were not available, I requested either the entire book or a scan of the table of contents to facilitate a chapter request. The books found in person were from the collections of Catholic Theological Union and the JKM Library of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and McCormick Theological Seminary. A slight majority of the requests were submitted during the coronavirus pandemic, though none during the lockdowns of its initial stages. It is not clear what effect the pandemic might have had on the results, as some libraries became more generous and efficient at lending while others placed temporary restrictions on it.
- 20 Analysis of the entire WorldCat database by OCLC research staff suggests that "rareness is common—in other words, individual library collections are often sufficiently distinctive that when aggregated together, a rich and diverse long tail of scarce or uniquely held materials is built out within the collective collection." They conclude that "no institution or set of institutions can rely on the rest of the group to fully steward the breadth and scope of the collective collection; instead, coverage of the collective collection requires the cooperation of the entire group" (Lavoie, Dempsey, and Malpas 2020, 988–9).
- 21 This data includes all libraries that participate in WorldCat, including seminary, university, and public libraries. The data frequently combines multiple records for the same text. It may miss editions for which there is no copy listed worldwide.
- 22 The research survey was conducted November 2020 through April 2021. Academic deans (or similar leaders) from one hundred randomly selected schools were asked to forward the survey link to their students and faculty via email. Twenty-six agree to do so. In a few cases, it was forwarded only to a subset of students (like those in particular degree programs). Alumni were recruited primarily via social media during pilot and follow-up phases, which generated a handful of current student and faculty responses as well. The survey received 302 responses from 223 students, thirty-one alumni, and fifty-nine faculty members (some respondents identified with more than one role), 172 of whom (58%) identified as multilingual or non-English speaking.
- 23 The longevity of electronic resources is highly suspect. Many are rented rather than owned. Materials are removed from databases. Databases become too expensive to justify. The companies that host electronic resources go out of business or discontinue products. Online journals cease publication. Hard drives and servers fail. Technologies evolve, leaving older file types inaccessible. Files slowly become corrupted over time, with ones literally switching to zeros at random. There is little guarantee that the electronic materials subscribed to or purchased today will be any more use-

ful a few decades from now than the e-books on floppy disk or VHS tapes still found in our stacks. While digitization is today's preferred preservation strategy for older print materials, simultaneous collecting of paper copies alongside e-book purchases and electronic journal subscriptions may itself prove an essential preservation strategy.

- 24 The linguistic diversity of packages of electronic resources requires further study. At one theological library I collected detailed data on, 93.8% of cataloged electronic resources were in English, compared to 78.6% of physical books. That said, if we limit the search to items published 2010 to 2019, 94.5% of electronic items are in English compared to 96.4% of physical books, reflecting a nearly complete collapse of purchasing of non-English items of all types even though this particular library supports degree programs taught in English, Korean, and Spanish. I collected the same data on the union catalog of the ninety-one Illinois academic and research libraries that participate in the I-Share program. For these schools, which include all types and sizes of academic and research libraries, 83% of electronic resources published 2010 to 2019 were in English compared to 74% of physical books. (The data was collected shortly prior to the system's switch from Voyager to Alma in the summer of 2020; Alma better integrates electronic resources into the catalog but is not capable of the kind of robust public catalog searches I used to gather the data because it disallows blank searches limited by other parameters).
- 25 I once again must cite Peterson (1980, 147), who argued that "in a very real sense, we are buying today the research collections of the next century. Collection development programs which are too narrowly defined in terms of present curricula and institutional needs will almost assuredly leave a legacy of severely impoverished resources for scholars of the twenty-first century."
- 26 Lending policies define and reinforce institutional boundaries, making claims about who is welcome and who is not. Restrictive lending policies reflect theological commitments to division and a scarcity mindset that run counter to the inclusiveness and abundance of the gospel. For lending policies as theological statements, see Sawyer 2006, 75.
- 27 Much like a seminary, such an organization might be funded through a combination of private donations, grants, an endowment, and revenue from services. Its focus might allow it to draw on funding from foundations otherwise uninterested in seminary education and from ethnic and immigrant church communities not well integrated into theological education today. Its creation would be an ideal use of the remaining assets of a closing seminary or small college.