Theological Librarianship
Moving Beyond Unjust, Inefficient, Unsustainable and UnWesleyan

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Digital Theological Library

In this brief paper, I want to offer three timeframes of analysis. First, I will look back on my previous work for the Oxford Institute of Methodist Studies (OMITS). Second, I will offer an overview of my current, more chastened, approach to the problems which I addressed in 2018. Third, I will renew my hope for a better future for the information needs of Wesleyan (Methodist) theological education.

First, A Look Back

At the 2018 OMITS, I presented a brief paper entitled, "Grace, Justice and Access to Knowledge: A Different Future for the Theological Library in Theological Education." The thesis and ideological argument of that paper are still well summarized by the opening paragraphs of that paper:

> Theological education for most Methodists in John Wesley's day and into the mid-nineteenth century consisted of reading Wesley's works and publications. Wesley famously provided inexpensive abridged versions of many of the theological works which he deemed the most significant for Methodist readers. The mid-nineteenth century saw the rise of the "theological library" within Methodism. This change involved the acquisition and preservation of thousands, then tens of thousands and eventually hundreds of thousands or even millions of print books and journals in secure locations with restricted access. With their local circulation, these libraries were designed to support the professors and students at a single institution. The mid-twentieth century saw the standardization of relatively rapid and efficient interlibrary loans (ILL) to facilitate the exchange of knowledge between libraries and their authorized users. This model of theological librarianship created a great chasm between the "haves" with access to these libraries and the "have nots" with no access to these libraries. Of course, this deficit of knowledge was precisely the kind of graceless inequity which the Oxford-trained Wesley was seeking to mitigate with his publishing activities.[1]
>
> ***It's a Mad, Mad World***
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> In the contemporary setting, the model of theological librarianship inherited from the Cold War era still reigns supreme with two important twists. First, with the exponential growth of large for-profit publishing companies, the division between the "haves" and the "have nots" has intensified. The contrast between access to contemporary theological scholarship on the campus of

[1] On Wesley's publishing efforts, see Brian Shetler, "Prophet and Profit: John Wesley, Publishing, and the Arminian Magazine," *Methodist History* 53:2 (January 2015): 85-100. OA version: http://archives.gcah.org/ bitstream/ handle/ 10516/9735/Methodist-History-2015-01-Shetler.pdf? sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

> a North American, university-based divinity school on the one hand and a clergy training center in central Africa on the other hand is truly overwhelming. Likewise, even within the 13 UMC seminaries in the US, the information disparity between students at the sister institutions can be stark. Second, the recent rise of online and hybrid models of theological education has created a great information deficit for non-residential students who have limited access to the print legacy in their campus library. Even in the age of the digital delivery of content, many students' access to recent, high quality, peer-reviewed and scholarly content is severely restricted—especially book content. For many institutions, the cost of supplying appropriate graduate level resources to non-residential students is simply prohibitive.[2]
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> If one believes—as Wesley apparently did—that access to knowledge is a means of grace and if one believes that justice demands—as Wesley again apparently did—broad access to knowledge as an issue of economic justice, then the existing model of theological librarianship must undergo radical realignment. Not only must theological librarianship change, but much broader changes in the publishing and distribution models for theological scholarship must also be adopted. Theological education today needs to reappropriate Wesley's passion for disseminating the best theological scholarship to the masses in an economically feasible manner. The current model of theological scholarship and librarianship fails miserably in this regard.
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> In short, I judge the current approach to theological libraries as unjust (the poor are underserved), inefficient (most non-residential students are underserved), unsustainable (it costs way too much) and unWesleyan (too many people are excluded from the means of grace). If I'm correct—and "unjust, inefficient, unsustainable and unWesleyan" are fair evaluations of our current system of scholarly communications in theological education, then let's use those terms as an epitaph on the tombstone of traditional theological librarianship and resurrect something much better in its place.

Having made this argument against the reigning approach to theological librarianship, I advocate strongly for an Open Access model of publishing in religious studies, a model in which all content was placed on the web immediately and made freely available to all persons without charge. As I explained in that paper, this Open Access model of publication would *not require any additional resources from theological institutions*; it would only require a realignment of spending priorities and approaches to publishing.

Second, Where we are Today

As we all recognize, the trends which I identified in 2018 (increased disparity between the "haves" and the "have nots" and also rapidly growing need for online resources) have only intensified in the intervening years. Traditional face-to-face education and traditional "dead tree"

[2] For a succinct overview of the evolution of Methodist education, see John T. Smith, "Methodist and Education," *The Ashgate Research Companion to World Methodism* (ed. William Gibson, Peter Forsaith and Martin Wellings; New York: Routledge, 2013), 407-30

librarianship are now the clear exceptions in the Protestant theological education—trends which most of us expect only to continue accelerating.

Although I remain convinced that we (readers, writers, scholars and educators) have the capacity to create a completely open economy of religious studies scholarship, my experience has chastened my dreams of creating such an economy in the short term. Therefore, as an accommodation to the power of "the old way of doing things," the DTL has been forced to accept the current reality of the paywall culture (licensing digital content and paying a third party for access to that content) and we have, therefore, been forced to adopt a multi-faceted approach to addressing the information needs of contemporary religious educators and professionals.

To be clear: We remain convinced that *the transition from the current "unjust, inefficient, unsustainable and unWesleyan" system of information delivery is a matter of will – moral courage and commitment, if you will – and not a matter of technology or money.* However, while we continue to educate decision-makers on the importance of Open Access publishing, we have adopted a system of multi-level library access. We have created a series of separate (digital) libraries which are designed to affordably serve the needs of most faculty, students and religious professionals. Let me explain our current models of operations.

First, it is a post-pandemic world. The pandemic forced schools to cease traditional face-to-face education. In the aftermath of the pandemic, traditional face-to-face education is quickly becoming the exception, not the norm, for Protestant theological education. Students—and increasingly faculty and administrators—often have only infrequent contact with the physical campus and its traditional "dead-tree" library. This reality has two direct impacts on libraries: (1) Libraries need digital resources and (2) physical libraries are quickly ceasing their operations and divesting from their traditional print libraries.

Second, digital libraries are really expensive. Digital libraries require highly specialized software, highly skilled libraries and seriously overpriced electronic licenses. Even worse, licenses for electronic books typically have explicit language in their terms

of use which strictly prohibits libraries from using their e-books for Interlibrary Loan (ILL) purposes. These realities mean that a school must acquire expensive software to distribute electronic content, must hire specifically trained librarians to manage that content, and—in the absence of any reliable system of ILL—license every single ebook that their faculty and students wish to use. To make matters worse, ebooks are typically much more expensive than the same book in print.

The ensuing reality is simple. Most seminaries in developed nations struggle to afford an even modestly supplied digital library—and seminaries in developing nations simply cannot afford even a modestly supplied digital library.

Again, a serious commitment to Open Access would solve all of these problems. However, in the absence of the corporate will to transition to Open Access, there is a pronounced need to develop an intermediate solution to the affordability crisis.

The DTL has created that intermediate solution via co-ownership models of librarianship. The DTL began with the assumption that the fixed costs of creating a digital library are essentially the same for 1 user or 1 million users. Unlike print librarianship, the librarianship and infrastructure are essentially the same regardless of the number of users. So, there is the potential for vast savings in the simple elimination of redundant librarianship and software management. Additionally, the cost differential between licensing for 100 or 10,000 users is not significant. The DTL reasoned that by having multiple institutions co-own and co-manage one shared digital library, we could create bigger, better libraries collections at lower cost.

Without straying too far into the world of library management, we need to briefly explain one key reality of digital librarianship: *Digital content, unlike traditional print books, is never "owned;" digital content is licensed.* The distinction is very important. When content—like a print book—is owned, the owner has the right of "first sale," that is, the owner can loan—or even resell—that print item to anyone they wish. However, with licensed content, the library can only share the content with the user group identified in the license. If the license says "no ILL," then the library cannot loan the content via ILL. If the license says that the content may only distributed to the faculty and students at one

institution, then the content may only be distributed to the faculty and students at that one institution. Digital licenses never give the licensees the rights of "first sale." Libraries cannot share digital content with one another—via ILL or any other way—without violating the terms of their licenses.

The DTL has chosen to address these licensing challenges by creating a series of libraries which are co-owned by multiple institutions. The content is licensed to the DTL and can be legally distributed to all of the co-owning institutions. The seminaries participating in the DTL are not sharing their content with one another; they are co-owning one shared library.

Although this co-ownership model enables the DTL to vastly increase library services to its member schools, licensing restrictions remain an important limiting factor. (The DTL spends a lot of time negotiating licensing agreements.) The DTL's mission is to enable all people to engage in self-critical reflection upon their own faith and humble dialogue with those of other traditions. (We are naïve enough to believe that this makes the world a better place.) We try to fulfill this mission by providing as many people as possible with access to high quality (scholarly, popular and peer-reviewed), digital content in religious studies and related disciplines (within the confines of copyright). The DTL currently pursues this mission through the five libraries, each serving a different group of users. The libraries are distinguished from one another in order to comply with copyright and licensing restrictions. The DTL libraries are:

#1 The Open Access Digital Theological Library (OADTL): This professionally curated and managed library is free for everyone, everywhere. The library contains nearly 1,000,000 ebooks and millions of articles and dissertations. A student of religious studies anywhere in the world can use this library to become aware of scholarly discourse in nearly any area of religious studies. The user would still not have direct access to most scholarly discourse, but the user could become aware of that discourse through reliable secondary Open Access publications. The gold standard would be to create a world in which all religious studies content was immediately and permanently Open Access. http://oadtl.org

#2 The Original Digital Theological Library (DTL): This library contains the world's most comprehensive collections of digital content in religious studies and related disciplines. This library contains Open Access and licensed content (over 1.5 million ebooks and over 120,000,000 articles). This library is the gold standard for students of religion, but unfortunately, due to licensing restrictions, the library is closed to new members. However…

#3 The Digital Theological Library 2 (DTL2): The DTL2 was created to parallel the Original DTL and provides collections nearly equivalent to the original DTL (over 1.4 million ebooks and over 120,000,000 articles). Although the DTL2 offers a cost-effective way for schools in developed nations to acquire access to a world class theological library, the licensing costs associated with DTL2 means that the DTL2 is not an affordable option for schools in developing nations… and the DTL2 is only available institutions, not to individuals. However…

#4 The Global DTL (GLDTL): The GLDTL was created to meet the needs of *schools in developing nations*, where the cost of software and licensing makes the DTL2 financially inaccessible for most schools. By negotiating extraordinarily generous deals with vendors and publishers of goodwill, the Global DTL is able to provide schools in developing nations with access to a world class research library in religious studies (over 1.2 million ebooks and over 80,000,000 articles) at prices beginning at just a few hundred dollars. Again, co-ownership which merges fixed costs is an important key to affordability. The DTL2 and Global DTL are only available to institutions, not individuals. However…

(5) The Seminary BookShelf: The Seminary BookShelf was created to meet the needs of *individuals who are working as religious professionals* (pastors, leaders of religious communities, therapists, counselors, independent scholars, etc.), but who are not associated with an academic institution. For just $10/month, library provides this user group with access to over 1.3 million books in the field, including nearly all of the biblical, theological and practical books most desired by ministers and counselors.

Where we are right now: Through its co-ownership model, DTL can provide seminaries anywhere in the world with a comprehensive, world class, library at a fraction of the cost of that institution creating its own—less comprehensive—library. The DTL can also provide any religious professional in North America—who is not associated with an academic institution—with access to a world class theological library for less than the cost of any standard movie service.

Third, Where we are Going

The DTL will continue to advocate for Open Access and will continue to develop its Open Access Digital Theological Library. Additionally…

With the emergence of affordable Artificial Intelligence (AI) solutions, we are on the cusp of a technological revolution of unimaginable scale. The DTL is determined to ensure that theological educators, students and religious professionals reap the immense benefits of these rapidly developing changing. Without becoming overly pedantic, let me briefly explain (a) the inadequacy of the current implementations of AI technology for theological discourse; (b) what the DTL proposes to do in order to address perceived deficits in the current information economy related to AI and theological discourse; and (c) the steps involved the DTL plans to use AI to promote religious literacy.

(a) The Current Situation: *The Wisdom of the Crowd*

In the last several months, discussions of Artificial Intelligence (AI) have dominated public discourse. Major technology companies have created public sites which encourage enquiries about any topic. Unfortunately, the data sets which trained these AIs face one of two problems: (1) the AI was trained on content taken entirely from the public web, meaning the AI merely reflects the wisdom of the crowd or (2) the AI was trained on proprietary content, meaning the AI's answers (potentially) infringe upon copyright. We need a way to employ the incredible power of AI (Large Language Models (LLM) in particular) to bring the insights of the scholarly community to the public in a copyright compliant, deeply informed and fully accessible manner. We need to think creatively about how to provide engaged minds with wisdom that exceeds the mere wisdom of the crowd.

(b) The DTL Approach: *The Ability to Listen to the Scholars*

The Digital Theological Library (DTL) wants to create an Open Access LLM that allows interested parties to have their questions about religious matters addressed—not answered—by experts in the field. We want to create an LLM unlike any that currently exists. Current LLMs create derivative answers based on generally accepted information with little or no regard for specialization or expertise. At the DTL, we are librarians and religious studies scholars; we want to replace that derivative wisdom of the crowd with the expertise of scholars. To be clear, our proposed LLM will not provide an "answer" to users' questions. Instead, the LLM will deliver brief abstracts of scholarly discussions on the topic with each abstract representing the ideas and perspective of an individual scholar. We want people to experience the convenience and utility of being able to have their questions immediately addressed by a series of scholars in a series of brief abstracts of journal articles or book chapters. For many people, these abstracts will be sufficient in themselves to meet their information needs. For other people with more advanced information needs, there is always the option of taking the bibliography which accompanies the abstract to their local library to gain access to the complete document.

Excursus: What About Copyright?

An AI (Large Language Model) cannot be trained on licensed content (since the licenses prohibit such use), but can an AI be trained on copyrighted printed content? There is no case law to address the training of an AI on copyrighted print content to produce traditional "question and answer" AI interfaces like ChapGPT. (However, the precedents established by *Authors Guild, Inc. v. HathiTrust* and *Authors Guild, Inc. v. Google Books, Inc.* make it highly probable that the courts will regard AI training on copyrighted print content to be fair use). Still, the law is unclear at the point.

Therefore, out of an abundance of caution, the DTL is not going to create a traditional "question and answer" AI. Instead, the DTL is going to follow the established scholarly practice of abstracting for its AI outputs. Of course, abstracting has been a standard scholarly practice for decades and this history of practice would curtail the intellectual property challenges being confronted by some current commercial AI sites. The DTL will draw upon its print—not its licensed—collections to train its AI to make these abstracts of individual book chapters and journal articles. The key differences between this abstracting project and existing scholarly abstracting projects are scale, speed and access. (The use of AI will make it possible to abstract

far more material much more quickly.) The key differences between this abstracting project and existing AI websites are specialization, expertise and copyright compliance. (The creation of abstracts based on curated library content will make it possible to provide scholarly output without infringing upon copyrights).

(c) The Processes: *Six Distinct Steps in LLM Creation and Delivery*

The DTL's abstracting project (like all AI projects) involves six distinct steps. Those steps are:

Acquisition: The results delivered to end users will be no better than the data set which informs the LLM. The DTL now owns over 1 million print volumes in religious studies, including full sets of most major journals and reference works. The DTL has acquired 11 complete theological libraries in the last three years and our acquisition continues.

Digitization: The print material must be digitized in some manner. The DTL has digitized over 500 journal runs and over 50,000 print books. Our digitization is ongoing.

Recognition: After the content is digitized (pdfs in our case), the content must be transferred into a format that is machine readable. Although Optimal Character Recognition (OCR) is already quite good for English text, accuracy is still unacceptably low when multiple languages appear in the same text. The DTL has a partner with a team of engineers working on this problem now.

Tokenization: After the content is made machine readable via OCR, specialized software is needed to translate the words into numbers so that the algorithms in LLM can comprehend and manipulate the data. The DTL has a partner that is creating a data center to do this work now.

Training: After the content is tokenized, very high level computing power is needed to "train" the LLM with the data set. This work will also be handled at the third party data center which is under development.

Interface: After the LLM is trained, web designers must create an Application/Program Interface (API) to allow end users to engage with the LLM. This phase of the project needs to be developed after specific "use cases" are established.

Thus, here's the vision toward which we are now working. We want anyone, anywhere in the world to ask a theological question to our AI bot. Our bot will then produce results in the form of an annotated bibliography which explains what a wide range of scholars within our curated libraries have said regarding that topic. Each scholar's view will be present as his or her individual voice. For many users, this output

will be sufficient for their information needs. Users with more detailed needs can gain access to the content via a traditional theological library (or one of the DTL's libraries).

Takeaways:

(1) Open Access publication is the one clear to all information issues in religious studies.

(2) Currently, as a concession to the slow adoption of OA publishing, the DTL has created specialized libraries for seminaries in developed nations, seminaries in developing nations, and individual religious professionals.

(3) The DTL is drawing upon AI to create an inquiry bot which focuses on religious studies, which draws upon curated content, and which delivers results in the form of chapter and journal abstracts.