

Collection Development: New Guidelines for Religion

Les R. Galbraith

With all the "religious" books published each year, how can any conscientious librarian know what to buy and what to leave alone? Religious books are everywhere. You can buy them at general bookstores, from special religious book clubs, from churches, door to door sales persons, or from the mail-in business associated with radio and television religious programming.

In 1980, there were 2,055 new religious titles published in the United States,¹ and when added to the previously published and still in-print titles, there are enough to fill a special volume of *Religious Books in Print*. What other category of books has given birth to its own special brand of bookstores? In a recent check of the *Indianapolis Consumer Yellow Pages* under the heading "Book Dealers—Retail," I counted 69 separate bookstores. Eighteen were religious bookstores, 17 were general stores and the remainder were distributed among adult, law, engineering, metaphysical, etc.² The point is, there are a lot of religious books to choose from and someone must decide what goes into each library's collection.

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The traditional guidelines for book selection may have some flaws when it comes to religious books. It is my intention to point out some of these flaws and then to offer some new guidelines that may prove helpful in sorting through this sticky problem.

Religion is the only subject area I know of, with the exception of fiction, where the author of a book does not need to be an expert, or at least have some credentials to validate his or her writing. Any person who wants to write a book about religion has a good chance of finding a publisher. Everyone is a religious expert, at least of his or her own religious experiences, and that is what is selling today. In other subject areas, a librarian can usually check biographical reference works, subject indexes, and other lists to decide whether an author has the background to write a book. That is not true in religion, at least not for a large percentage of the annual book production in the religious area. Who would have thought a book called *The Hiding Place* by an unknown, elderly woman named Corrie Ten Boom would have the impact on America that it had?

The number of publishers of religious materials is also growing. There are numerous established publishers we have all come to know and respect, i. e. Abingdon, Westminster, Word, Eerdmans, etc., but the number of small publishers increases, each seeming to find a market for its output. Some are related to churches and some are independent publishers who know what is profitable. If our library materials come only from those major publishers, we may miss some very good titles.

The other traditional guidelines for collection development may be of some help, but reviews are often slow in seeing the light of day, recommendations and referrals from others may tend to develop unbalanced collections, depending upon the personal tastes of those making the recommendations. The needs and wants of the reading public cannot always be accurately determined, and the content or approach of works is difficult to determine from publisher promotions.

Perhaps it is time to take a new look at the area of religious publishing and examine an idea that could bring sense to what we collect and retain. Stephen Peterson, Librarian at Yale Divinity School, in an address to the American Theological Library Association in 1978, proposed that we think of religious materials in three categories; source materials, critical materials, and historical materials.³ When a book is published it is either source material or critical material, and may remain in that category as long as it is current to the needs of scholars, but when it ceases to be current, it becomes historical material.

Source Materials

Source material is primarily documentary literature: minutes of meetings, annual reports, statistics, and other works which document the life and activity of any religious body.⁴ This material tells what happened to a group at a particular time. It is easy to identify this kind of material and to determine its value to a library serving its unique constituency.

A second type of source material grows out of personal faith and religious experiences. Peterson says that it is often intended to nurture and admonish the laity and that it is usually published and read for its current interest and present utility.⁵ Books describing personal religious experiences of individuals and their interpretations are good examples of this literature. This is perhaps the largest body of religious publishing each year and also the hardest to select. Every library has this kind of source material, and it may be that in a public library it constitutes the largest portion of the religion collection. However, this material tends to lose its utilitarian and present value and must then be seen as belonging to the historical category, as will be discussed later.

A third type of source material is the sacred writings of a religious group. This material remains source material as long as the religious body exists. If it is no longer used for sacred edification, then it too would become historical material.

Critical Materials

The function of critical material is to "assess, evaluate and understand source documents, historical problems and/or intellectual questions of current or past importance."⁶ Critical literature is usually written either by a scholar to other scholars or for interpreting events in light of their impact on society. Commentaries on the sacred writings would obviously fit this category. A less obvious type might be a book on the significant issues of the Council of Trent. This would seem to be historical material, but it would become historical in this scheme of things only when it is no longer studied for its scholarly value. According to Peterson:

One of the important aspects of critical literature is that it is a contemporary literature. That is, while important works of critical scholarship may maintain importance for decades, some of yesterday's critical literature is rendered obsolete by new discoveries, new insights, new data, as well as the ongoing process of scholarly analysis.⁷

Historical Materials

This leads us to the third category of religious materials, the historical. Whenever source documents and critical documents no longer have their current impact, they move over to the historical area.⁸ That does not mean, though, that they are no longer important. Materials in this category become, themselves, the primary documents for the study of some historical event or for a survey of the study of a particular discipline. Biblical commentaries written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were written before significant archaeological discoveries helped clarify some of the errant passages of scripture. Therefore, these commentaries do not reflect the current state of biblical scholarship. However, anyone writing on the religious situation in eighteenth and nineteenth century America must examine these commentaries to understand the frame of reference of the religious leaders who were relying upon them for their study of scripture.

As librarians, concerned with the quality of our collections, it is important to pay special attention to the religious materials we keep. The turnover rate for source materials may be quite rapid, allowing our patrons to have access to the popular, devotional, life experience materials while they are fresh and in demand. Regular weeding is needed so that materials retained are the ones which are representative of the period and therefore of historical value. The collection of critical material is easier to deal with because most of the critical literature is published by major publishers who are concerned with scholarship and can afford to have a small press run of particular titles. These works will be mentioned in *Library Journal* and other review media, and the traditional guidelines for book selection will be helpful. Historical material is quite difficult to collect in retrospect. If it was not purchased when it was current, it may no longer be available. However, there are always those persons in the community who want to give their book collection to the library. This may be the only way to acquire material for the historical portion of your religion collection if they were not added when they were current. The process of selection and elimination becomes one of careful consideration of the balance, scope, direction, and constituency of each library.

Notes

¹ Grannis, Chandler B. "Domestic Statistical Update Final 1980 Figures," *Publisher's Weekly*, September 25, 1981, 32.

² "Book Dealers—Retail," *Indianapolis Consumer Yellow Pages*. Indianapolis Indiana Bell Telephone Company Incorporated, 1981, 154-5.

³ Peterson, Stephen L. "Documenting Christianity: Towards a Cooperative Library Collection Development program," *Summary of Proceedings, Thirty-second Annual Conference, American Theological Library Association*. Philadelphia: American Theological Library Association, Inc., 1980, 83.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

Nominations Sought

The Awards & Honors Committee request nominations for the following for 1982: special service award, outstanding trustee award, outstanding librarian award, outstanding library assistant award, outstanding library award, and citizen's award. All nominations and supporting materials must be submitted no later than August 31 to Jean Jose, Indiana State Library, 140 N. Senate Avenue, Indianapolis, IN 46204. Information may be obtained from Jean Jose or from the ILA headquarters at 1100 W. 42nd Street, Indianapolis, IN 46208.