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Trust in Libraries: 2012 ATLA Presidential Address

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Presidential Address: Trust in Libraries
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Trust and Libraries

If you were to promote a disposition regarding the library and librarians at your school, what would it be? If you could cultivate an attitude that would promote and support your theological library, and also the American Theological Library Association (ATLA), what would it be? Perhaps we would seek to grow our school's generosity, or maybe its wisdom. What state of mind in our presidents, provosts, faculty, students, and alumni/ac would we develop in order to advance the missions of our libraries, and the professional association that supports them? For me, the answer is "trust."

Whether it is termed "faith," or "confidence," or "principled reliance," trust is the disposition among our academic leaders and clientele that is most important to the thriving of theological libraries and their professional association in the twenty-first century. One piece of evidence in support of this thesis: when the premier large-scale collaborative repository of digital content from ARL libraries was formed in 2008 — serving to store over 10 million digital volumes from over 50 research libraries — the name chosen for this digital library was HathiTrust, which is a combination of the Hindi for elephant (an animal highly regarded for its memory), and also the word "trust," which the HathiTrust website describes as "a core value of research libraries and one of their greatest assets." The mission statement of the HathiTrust emphasizes the need to "build a reliable . . . digital archive" and "To help preserve these important human records by creating reliable . . . electronic representations."¹ As with the HathiTrust, the disposition of trust and reliability is important both to our ATLA libraries and to ATLA, not only with regard to our preservation of digital materials, but also every other aspect of our professional and academic enterprise, especially our capacity for innovation in library services and resources.

Trust is a cardinal virtue of libraries and the librarian. Librarians often seek to cultivate trust among our library patrons through their reading. For example, librarians build trust in practices of reading, in places of reading, and in the persons of reading — in faculty and other ministers — who write and mentor from a well-informed perspective. From the first day of new student orientation to our final review of graduate theses and dissertations, we emphasize the importance of credible sources — sources that can be trusted. We emphasize the physical and digital places that can be trusted to be accessible when most needed. We emphasize the librarians to whom people can turn with confidence for both information and encouragement. Students who once lacked confidence in finding sources, evaluating information, and formulating research papers leave our tutelage with newfound confidence — new trust in their ability to create knowledge for academic, ecclesial, and public communities.

Similarly with ATLA, we promote the notion that our religion databases are the "premier" databases in theology and religion, to which students can turn with trust, confidence, even faith, in the results it provides. Most of our institutions continue to have confidence that ATLA products are not overtly duplicating resources already available, either from larger databases or from electronic resources freely available on the web. This is not blind trust; it

is often substantiated by the recommendation of our librarians, as well as the performance of our database. Indeed, trust is an attitude toward the library and ATLA that has long been fundamental to the identity of our libraries and association.

Losses of Trust in Libraries

However, trust in our libraries may be eroding, and reliance on ATLA's databases may soon follow, if this loss is not already in process. This trust is eroded by a variety of societal factors. We might think that one factor is the financial pressure that our schools and libraries have experienced in recent years, and the related loss of societal confidence in the value of higher education, especially as relates to its value for students' intellectual and moral formation, and also preparation for the job market and workplace. These difficult financial circumstances are not a cause, however, but only a context within which our administrators and faculty act on previously formed lack of trust in libraries and their associations. As has been recently argued by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, and in other related works, like James Davison Hunter's book *To Change the World*, the potential erosion of trust in cultural institutions like libraries is directly related to cultural phenomena that are not so easily observed as trends in the stock market and higher education, but are nevertheless pervasive in our society.² Specifically, reasons for the potential erosion of trust in our libraries and ATLA are located in three cultural phenomena: 1) cultural pluralism, 2) the deconstruction of pre-modern and modern assumptions about the correspondence of reality and language, and, 3) the cultural ascendance of digital technologies. However, even in the face of these challenges, I argue that trust in our libraries and ATLA can be maintained and increase, and that our institutions can endure, and even thrive, through 1) innovative information services, 2) re-articulation and reaffirmation of the library's cultural significance, and 3) recommitment to trustworthy personal and professional practices among our librarians.

How can our libraries and ATLA retain or regain trust? This is both a matter of addressing our patrons' trust in libraries, and also our own trustworthiness as librarians.

Building Trust: Libraries as Centers for Learning Innovation

One answer to the question of how to maintain and develop trust and confidence in libraries resides in two hyphenated words: "problem-solving." Our libraries must in perception and reality be the solvers of problems, or at least the observable support system for other problem-solvers in higher education, not only for students who come to our service desks, but also for administrators, who might not initially perceive the library as their first resort for solutions to institutional challenges poised by the North American economy and society, as well as the broader global marketplace. Beyond preservers of textual and electronic traditions, we must be seen as centers for educational entrepreneurship that innovate through supporting faculty and students' own innovative creation of new types of solutions to educational and broader societal problems.

This understanding of trust in the library, and its formation through problem solving, is similar to representations of trust or faith in God in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. In the Bible, faith in Yahweh is repeatedly grounded in the guidance, deliverance, and new life provided by Yahweh during times of distress and danger, for example during the escape from Egypt in Exodus, or the miraculous flight from prisons in Acts. Similarly, our library patrons'

confidence has always been based on our presence and provision in their times of need. As their real and perceived needs change, so too must the guidance and deliverance we provide, if we are to retain their trust.

First, libraries' future credibility depends on their ability to become *centers for learning and teaching with digital texts and other electronic data*. Libraries have, of course, long been trusted as stewards of the printed word, and some faculty continue to look to libraries for circumspect action during the current revolutionary cultural shift toward digital texts and data, away from a predominately print-based culture. However, the credibility of librarians as caretakers and curators of words and images relies in large part on our capacity for steady and, at times, opportunistically rapid transition to digital formats. A doctrinaire refusal to transition to digital versions of library holdings of almost all serial publications and most book publications will result in an erosion of the trust our patrons, and especially our administrators, who may never have used a digital book but will read daily of the implications of digital texts for higher education and its future marketplace, have. On the other hand, a seemingly precipitous adoption of electronic texts will equally discredit us with significant portions of our faculty and librarians who have both visceral allegiances to the printed word and also experiential evidence of the disadvantages of digital texts in their present form — from the challenges of licensing, to the uncertainties of usage, both in terms of user-needs and user-preferences.

A central demonstration of our trustworthiness with regard to e-books will be our campus *leadership in the licensing and distribution of digital textbooks* and other type of digital publications in the next one to three years. The rapid expansion of tablet computing, combined with the advent of freely available publishing tools, have led us to a tipping point in the large-scale adoption of digital textbooks for higher education. The library's role in this adoption is still uncertain and will likely be uneven among our different institutions in the coming years, which makes it all the more important for ATLA libraries to collaborate in the ways that we leverage our digital licensing prowess, our expertise in intellectual property issues for teachers and researchers, and also our experience with online course reserves and other educational materials in order to provide cost-effective and user-friendly access to digital textbooks within the Learning Management System and other digital platforms supporting digital rights management (DRM) and possibly electronic commerce.

A related question: who at your institution is prepared, or preparing for, the sea change in the format of textbooks that is likely coming in the next couple years? Our libraries' *leadership in consideration of this new modality of teaching and learning* will be important to institutional confidence and investment in our libraries as licensors of the digital content that our faculty and students need, both in the classroom and in other increasing distributed and contextual learning environments. Similarly, this reformulation of educational content provides ATLA with both an opportunity and a challenge to its business model. On the one hand, the growing distribution of scholarly resources outside of traditional scholarly journals, essays, and reviews will likely continue to de-incentivize the usage of scholarly databases like ATLA. On the other hand, the digital "unbundling" of traditional textbooks and other previously multipart texts is allowing scholars and scholarly associations to extend the utilization of textual pieces (often of out-of-print materials) in the classroom and other learning environments. This increased functionality of scholarly texts in digital formats suggests that ATLA might raise its credibility

by reaching and developing full-text resources that are focused not only on research but also teaching in theological and religious studies and related disciplines.

Second, libraries must maintain trust by becoming *centers for the innovative creation and curation of online and blended courses*. Confidence in the library as a learning center will be steadily eroded if our technical support continues to focus only on licensing and management of information resources that, although essential to teaching and research, are largely “invisible” to our faculty and administrators in strategic discussions about the future of our universities and seminaries. This confidence will also erode if our public service librarians continue to work on the fringes of course design and delivery — focused on voluntary workshops, supplementary instructional sessions, and “elective” for-credit courses on research skills. Academic confidence in the library and librarians will only increase through their direct and determined contribution to the design and development of online and blended courses, which will often be revisions or reinventions of the existing face-to-face courses that librarians have struggled for so long to impact through bibliographic and information literacy instruction and resources.

As teaching materials increasingly come to be viewed as modular “learning objects” that are described, stored, and distributed digitally for reuse and remix in both restricted and “open” learning environments — think, for example, of the university course sections currently available through iTunes U — course design and development will increasingly become part of seminary and university information resources and services. As this occurs, library directors and coordinators of library instruction should begin to gain greater input and oversight in relation to instructional design of online and blended courses, with corresponding development of learning outcomes, including critical-thinking and research-literacy learning objectives and grading rubrics. This realignment of the instructional design team in closer proximity to the library, or even as part of the library and its information services, should bring with it collaborative responsibility for support of the learning management system(s), including licensing of digital publications and other educational resources, such as the ATLA database, for more seamless integration into the teaching and learning process. Unless this expansion of the library’s information resources occurs, then our schools’ effectiveness will be increasingly impaired both by two disabling disjunctions in their organization: 1) the separation of technological innovation from the library’s unique connection to faculty teaching and research practices across the seminary/university, and 2) the separation of the management of educational technologies from the library’s programmatic instruction regarding scholarly standards and competencies for investigation and publication in the twenty-first century. To help maintain this coherence between the educational technologies and educational mission of our institutions, libraries should begin to require instructional design and educational technology experience as a hiring qualification for new librarians (in addition to traditional qualifications in scholarly communications and information technologies). More substantially, as the organizational and personnel implications of online and blended learning become apparent on our campus, librarians must be willing and proactive to step into the gaps, taking responsibility and leadership for the instructional and information needs of our schools in collecting, curating, and helping to create courses and educational content for new online modalities of teaching and learning.

For ATLA, as both a membership and production organization, there are potentially significant implications of this further conflation of information and educational resources, of course delivery and library support. As seminary and university courses become increasingly intertwined with seminary and university library resources, our association's support of librarians will increasingly involve support of instructional designers and multimedia specialists who license and provide access to information resources, not only in order to develop a collection but in order to enable active and problem-based learning in course assignments and course products, which themselves become important parts of the distinctive collections of the university. The credibility of our library products will increasingly depend on their integration into the teaching and learning experience, and the confidence of our membership will increasingly rest on the pedagogical and digital technology training that ATLA affords.

Third, trust in libraries will increase or decrease depending on the extent to which we "flip the library," which means reorienting our work to more radical support of *faculty and student collection and creation of the library resources*. Rather than emphasizing only librarians' creation of reliable collections and instructional materials – which is increasingly difficult due to the doubling of scholarly information every few years or months (depending on whom you believe) – our libraries will likely find ourselves emphasizing our mentoring and coaching roles in support of direct selection of library materials by faculty and students through demand-driven acquisition, and through their creation of digital content for inclusion in our digital institutional repositories.

Our teaching faculty are increasingly "flipping the classroom," focusing less on transmitting information through lecture-format instruction and other pedagogical models in which students are only passive recipients of disciplinary information; so too librarians will become most credible in our roles as coaches and mentors to our faculty and students in creation of need-based library collections and program-based course and research content. Our roles will be decreasingly to transmit information to our faculty and students based on our assumptions about their needs and increasingly to network our students and faculty to digital materials that they select or create, and to describe these materials in ways that are subsequently discoverable within and outside our academic community. In a phrase, libraries will increase our credibility by emphasizing the *creative role of libraries* in supporting faculty and student creation of instructional and scholarly content, including the support and provision of open-access models of scholarly communication among both our faculty and students.

Fourth, in the same breath as we emphasize creativity, we reemphasize the importance of *conservation and preservation*. Because the needs of the present moment are so pressing upon our institutions, libraries and archives have often faced an uphill battle in advocating for the long-term preservation and conservation of our institutional and cultural heritages. However, our uniqueness, even oddity, in advocating for the long-term preservation of information is also a source of significant social trust. People trust us because we at least attempt to keep our word about keeping texts and data safe. Most libraries and archives are unique in raising questions of historical preservation and conservation, and this distinctiveness, though sometimes troublesome to our institutional consciences and budgets, is at the same time a demonstration of our social consciousness and trustworthiness. Similar to the opportunities and challenges facing our libraries, ATLA's policies and procedures related to the preservation of

its digital content will be an opportunity for the association to reaffirm its identity as a librarian association committed to the preservation of scholarly resources for the study of religion and theology, as our organizational ends currently state. Most pragmatically, our professional association and our libraries have a crucial role to play in identifying both the promise and the challenges with the ascendant model of digital storage known as “cloud-computing.” Stated differently, our association and libraries have the ability and responsibility to identify both the advantages and disadvantages of not holding digital data in “local” storage and back-up cycles that are not directly controlled by our academic institutions. The advantages of cloud computing are many, and libraries need to seize on every one of them while also seeking to mitigate any disadvantages, if only through rigorous negotiation and management of digital hosting and service licenses so as to minimize costs and maximize accessibility and stability.

Fifth, as caretakers of the printed and electronic expressions of our schools’ histories and traditions, our libraries increasingly bear the distinctive responsibility of *advocating for the awareness and critical use of these historical traditions* in our universities and colleges. I am not here addressing the very real need for digital curation of our schools’ e-mail and other digital file systems, although these are important concerns. I’m thinking primarily of the vital roles libraries have as trustworthy stewards of our communities’ institutional and broader cultural histories, especially in relationship to the research and teaching responsibilities of our faculty. Of special importance is faculty and student orientation to the intellectual and religious traditions, especially the primary documents and appertaining literature, that have defined our institutions for decades. With the possible exception of the President and Provost’s offices, no other campus office is as well attuned as the library to the cross-campus and cross-departmental reliance on shared traditions of religious faith and scholarly values for their distinctive institutional approach to teaching, research, and services. As stewards of the institutional history, including the special collections and archives related to our institutions’ religious pasts, the library has a unique and pressing need to foster an appreciation of the importance of these traditions to the educational mission of our schools. This critical but appreciative relation to our institutional histories and legacies is articulated in Philip Eaton’s recent call for seminaries and schools of religion to be brokers of a “hermeneutics of trust,” which critically, but faithfully, educates students and faculty regarding the intellectual, social, and spiritual importance of the histories of our schools.³

The Trustworthiness of Librarians

Why do we trust libraries? Why do we trust ATLA? I have asked a number of ATLA members this question in recent days, and the answers have not focused on the nature of the library’s collection, nor its building, nor its products nor services, nor its innovative relation to the curriculum and broader school, but rather the answers have mainly related to the excellent character, the virtuous dispositions of the librarians, and other library workers in the library. Put simply, trust in our libraries is often rooted in the trustworthiness of the librarians at that library. We have come to trust each other and have confidence in each other through experience of our reliability, and even our faithfulness. If time permitted, I’m sure that we could all tell stories of librarian trustworthiness, and of the significance of the librarian’s character, like that of other teaching faculty, to the education of our students.

I think, for example, of recent ATLA retiree Seth Kasten, who worked the reference desk for many years at The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. When I worked at The Burke, Seth had the distinctive habit of repositioning his chair during our staff meetings, so that he could see the unstaffed reference desk in the adjacent room, observing students coming up for assistance, and hopping up to help them when needed. Now, although this behavior was maddening for me during my meetings, I also saw in it a professional faithfulness that had over the years built social trust in our library's information services, and led to considerable confidence in those services and the librarians who provided them. Of course, there are many other stories of colleagues who are essential to the value and virtue of their libraries.

Our faculty, students, and administrators' trust in ATLA, if they have it, is deeply connected to their confidence in the librarians that represent our association and license its products. I want to thank you all for your professional and personal practices that have helped to develop the social trust that ATLA enjoys, and I want to encourage you to continue and grow in your habits of reading, of research, of reflection, of writing, of conversation, of worship and prayer, of loving others, and serving others in both meaningful and innovative ways. Truly, these faithful habits of life are the primary and precious sources of trust in our libraries and association.

Endnotes

- ¹ "Mission and Goals HathiTrust Digital Library," HathiTrust. http://www.hathitrust.org/mission_goals. Last accessed May 25, 2012.
- ² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: the Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
- ³ Philip W. Eaton, *Engaging the Culture, Changing the World: the Christian University in a Post-Christian World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011), 147.



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