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# Library as Place: Fostering the Christian Traditions of Scholarship, Silence, and Hospitality

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> Libraries, as a component of culture space, are ubiquitous to almost every society during almost every time period. However, as places of cultural, symbolic, and intellectual meaning, libraries have varied greatly. From the royal library serving the elite in ancient Mesopotamia to the cross-cultural scholarly library of Alexandria, the private libraries of the Greek philosophers, the Cathedral libraries of historical Britain, the university libraries of colonial America, and the contemporary public library, all have played a role in the development, collection, and spread of knowledge in their respective eras. All have represented a particular kind of place at a particular period in time to a particular culture and community. (Buschman & Leckie, 2007, p. 3)

Academic libraries have changed and evolved, yet they remain a staple of academic life, supporting students by providing them with the services, spaces, and materials they need to succeed in their courses. Beyond housing physical collections, library space holds a special significance and fulfills a vital need in the community to which it belongs. In exploring the meaning and function of Library as Place, three qualities of libraries emerge that are also deeply rooted in the Christian tradition: scholarship, silence, and hospitality.

## The Academic Library

The academic library of today has its roots in 19$^{th}$ century higher education. As colleges and universities grew and changed, so did academic libraries as they sought to accommodate the needs and demands of their parent institutions. From colonial times to the early 1800s, libraries were relatively small with limited access to their collections of mostly religious and foreign language texts. Student literary societies filled the gap by creating libraries with more popular books and journals. Educational reforms after the Civil War included an expansion of disciplines, career training, and an emphasis on research and scholarly pursuits. Library collections grew to include a variety of subjects and required more space to house these collections. Many institutions constructed one central library building or reading room as well as establishing departmental libraries located throughout campus (Atkins, 1991).

By the beginning of the 20$^{th}$ century, colleges and universities had grown considerably. As enrollment rose, disciplines were added, more instructors were employed, and new buildings were constructed. During this time, the library became the symbolic center of the university; "size and aesthetics mattered greatly, and the number of volumes and grandeur of the library building became a matter of prestige" (Stewart, 2010, p. 8). As more and more GIs entered college during the years following World War II, libraries increased in size and acquired more materials, especially in science and engineering. In the 1960s, enrollment increased as Baby Boomers reached college-age, again raising the need for more library space for collections and study areas (Atkins, 1991).

The next several decades of change in academic libraries were characterized not by the growth of institutions but by developments in computing and technology. During the 1970s and 1980s, librarians automated operations by incorporating computers into the workflow. Libraries experimented with technologies such as the online public access catalog—the electronic version

of the card catalog—and fee-based online database searching facilitated by a librarian (Atkins, 1991). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the expansion of the physical technology infrastructure on campuses, the rise of personal computers, the development of free search and discovery tools, and the creation of the worldwide web and the first web browser "catapulted the internet into a key position in the library community" (Namachchivaya, 2012, p. 633). Libraries clamored to provide access to networked information resources, both free and subscription-based. Digitization projects and virtual libraries abounded. Libraries revolutionized access to information to the point where users could go online to search, find, and in many cases, view or download the content they were seeking (Namachchivaya, 2012).

Libraries embraced the access to information allowed by digitization, electronic formats, and the Internet, thus significantly improving services provided to their patrons. Yet with these changes, an identity crisis occurred. Historically, a library had been defined by the collection housed within its walls. Libraries had measured their impact by the number of volumes they held and circulated. In this new era of online access, librarians worried about their role and the future of libraries. Many librarians pontificated on the fate of libraries, ranging from fears of obsolescence to the complete disappearance of libraries (Antell & Engel, 2006; Gorman, 2000).

Over the past decade, libraries have settled into an identity that combines physical and digital spaces. Student use of library spaces has remained steady or increased even as libraries have dealt with challenges such as shrinking budgets, staff shortages, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Cox, 2023). During the pandemic, libraries closed their doors to the public but "continued online services, kept their communities informed, and adopted innovative collaborations and technologies to adapt to changing circumstances" (Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL] Research Planning and Review Committee, 2022, para. 2). Library use is returning to pre-pandemic levels and libraries are focusing on DEI initiatives, mental health and wellbeing of staff and patrons, and providing and preserving access to the scholarly record through shared print collection agreements and advocating for open access (ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, 2022; Cox, 2023).

While academic libraries have evolved and adapted as society and parent institutions have changed, one thing remains clear: the role of the academic library within its community hinges not on what is *in* the library, but on what *happens in* the library. Libraries house considerable print collections that are necessary to support the wide-ranging work of students and faculty, as well as maintaining extensive online collections and research databases. Librarians provide research support and facilitate access to materials and equipment. In addition to these valuable services, providing adequate study spaces, furnishings, and technology is vital as libraries seek to be a place in which staff and students can complete their work. The spaces in the library "are often a dual expression of the library's traditional role as a place for books and contemplation along with its emerging role as a place for learning and collaboration" (Stewart, 2010, p. 8).

Libraries strive to offer a mix of study spaces, ranging from active, flexible areas for group or individual work to strictly quiet zones. Large tables to accommodate laptops, books, and other necessary items—think caffeinated beverages—, comfortable lounge seating, and private study cubicles allow for choice and variety, depending on a student's requirement for the task at hand. As "pedagogical trends now call for students to work together… with a variety of electronic and technological support systems" (Foote, 2004, p. 42), rooms for groups to meet in and spaces for multimedia creation are made available and equipped with the technology students need. "Well-designed libraries remain essential as flexible, evolving, and relevant

learning centers in an increasingly decentralized information environment" (Shill & Tonner, 2004, p. 149). Libraries are popular places for students as an "informal, comfortable, non-classroom place dedicated to study" (Lewis, 2016, p. 94). The academic library of today adapts to changes in pedagogy and technology as needed to create an environment that is most conducive to learning.

## Library as Place

The space of a library has meaning beyond the sum of its parts—beyond square footage, books on shelves, computer labs, or tables and chairs. Beyond the physical, there is also a library's sense of place, it's atmosphere—that evokes the personality and character of a library. "Place-making involves the art and science of crafting spaces in ways that transcend their physical attributes. The successful library building, with its programs and its staff, create a sense of connection to the values, traditions, and intellectual life of the community" (Demas & Scherer, 2002, p. 65). This sense of place has significance within a community:

> Individuals need places where they can engage with others like and unlike them, with whom they share an affiliation just by virtue of inhabiting a particular city, town, or neighborhood. Groups of people need places to help constitute them into and symbolically represent their community. (Goldhagen, 2013, p. 54)

In sociologist Ray Oldenburg's *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg identifies places outside home—the first place—or work—the second place—as essential parts of any community. "The third place is…the great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 16). These public places are open to anyone and everyone and create a level playing field (Oldenburg, 1989). They are easy to find and easy to access, attract regular visitors, and feel homey and comfortable (Oldenburg, 1989).

Public libraries are often one of the first places that come to mind as a third place. Public libraries "welcome members of the public regardless of age or socioeconomic status and provide access to information, educational services, and a (usually) safe environment…They can foster socialization through public talks and events, children's play areas, group work spaces, and interior cafes" (Finlay et al., 2019, p. 2). The academic library can also function as one of these third places on a university campus: "By cutting across all disciplines and functions, the library serves a significant social role. It is a place where people come together on all levels and in ways that they might not in the residence hall, classroom, or off-campus location" (Freeman, 2005, p. 6).

## Libraries and the Christian Tradition

A library's sense of place is understood by its community, "and has come to symbolize cultural and intellectual purpose" (Foote, 2004, p. 47). Libraries have long been associated with preserving the intellectual history of a culture, facilitating engagement with ideas and information, providing a place of quiet reflection, and being open to all regardless of social or economic status (Gorman, 2000). These themes are especially significant to a library at a Christian institution of higher education. Scholarship—the pursuit of knowledge as an act of loving God; Silence—being in solitude to come closer to God and others; and Hospitality—

bearing witness to Christ through caring for others—are traditions deeply rooted in Christianity. The library can be a place for these spiritual practices to flourish.

**Scholarship**

When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus answers "The first is, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:29-30, Revised Standard Version). Within this verse, we see that we honor our Creator by loving Him with our minds:

> The love of God frees the mind to probe the mystery of every existing thing, from the smallest microbe to the farthest reaches of the cosmos, in the conviction that by the love of God are all things made and that by this love alone do all things cohere. The God who is the Logos-Reason made flesh is the God of the mind. (Wood, 2007, p. 399)

In *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind*, Mark Noll (2011) argues that exercising our minds is intrinsically bound to the divine nature of Christ. Referencing Colossians 1:13-20 and 2:1-3, Noll writes that because of the "Christ-centered creation of the world, we study what came into existence through Jesus Christ" (Noll, 2011, p. 27-28). The world exists because of Christ; thus, everything in the world comes from Christ. Alistair McGrath finds inspiration in the analogy of Christ as the light of the world, writing "Christianity gives us a new set of spectacles through which we see the world, allowing us to discern its deeper logic. The world is illuminated by the light of the gospel, and interpreted by the believing mind" (2011, p. 137).

A Christian institution of higher education has the privilege and responsibility to prepare its students to worship God by using their minds (Williams, 2002). A Christian university "enables persons to participate in the institutions of society by giving them the necessary knowledge and skills" (Anderson, 2005, p. 37), while at the same time pointing them toward a greater purpose—knowing and serving God. Arthur Holmes (1987) lays the theological foundation for Christian higher education in *The Idea of a Christian College*:

> To confess God as Creator and Christ as Lord is thus to affirm his hand in all life and thought. It is to admit that every part of the created order is sacred, and that the creator calls us to exhibit his wisdom and power both by exploring the creation and developing its resources and by bringing our own created abilities to fulfillment. (p. 21)

At Bethel University, its Pietistic roots deepen the call of a Christian university to "nurture Christian character [by] develop[ing] more whole and holy persons" (Nevins, 2015, p. 53). Students are encouraged to excel academically while growing in their faith and relationships with others. David Williams (2015) reflects on his time as a student and professor at Bethel University, observing that "I was exposed to the idea that learning should affect one's whole being, that it should involve the heart as well as the mind and that scholarship done in the context of personal relationships can be very powerful" (p. 50).

The library exists to support intellectual pursuits and to provide a setting in which truth-seekers feel comfortable to linger, read, think, discuss, and grapple with ideas. In an academic community, the library is uniquely situated to create a space devoted to scholarly needs, including access to books, articles, and other materials—physical and online—as well as areas

for community members to work in alone or in groups. An atmosphere focused on study and scholarly work creates an environment that supports and encourages such activities.

In their article "Serving Higher Education's Highest Goals: Assessment of the Academic Library as Place," Heather Jackson and Trudi Hahn (2011) investigate the feelings evoked by the traditional library building. In the words of one student interviewed, "the library atmosphere puts me into a totally different frame of mind…I'm ready to read, to think, to reflect" (Jackson & Hahn, 2011, p. 429). Jackson and Hahn (2011) extrapolate, "Students may not actually use the books on the shelves, but they 'sanctify' the books—being around the books makes them feel more scholarly and connected to the institution's education mission" (p. 436). This bears out in Karen Antell and Debra Engel's (2006) study of faculty use of the library as well, finding that "the physical library is a unique place that facilitates the kind of concentration necessary for doing serious scholarly work" (p. 552).

In 2011, the Bethel University Library staff undertook an ethnography project to find out who was using the library and why they chose to use the library. When reviewing qualitative data collected from short interviews conducted in the library, the theme of an atmosphere conducive to academic work emerged. Comments from respondents such as "I go to the library to get things done"; "there is really no other suitable place for what I want to do"; "others are doing the same thing [studying]; and "I get distracted when I try and work in my room and can be more focused at the library" demonstrate how students intentionally chose to use the library for their academic tasks (Fabbrini, Getahun, Mitchell, & Keillor, 2011). Furthermore, Bethel Admissions tour guides routinely stress that the library is the place to get work done on campus, with one tour guide saying, "There's something in the air that just makes you work" (personal communication, January 22, 2023).

Bethel librarians also seek to nurture the intellectual development of students through personal interactions at the Research Desk, in the classroom, and through individual consultations, furthering the development of whole and holy persons. Last academic year, librarians connected with 3660 students- 2217 students through instruction and appointments, and 1443 through the Research Desk (Fabbrini, 2023). As a space entirely dedicated to the support and pursuit of scholarly work, the library holds a unique place in the academic community.

**Silence**

The spiritual discipline of silence is an important—though oft-neglected—practice in Christianity. "The Christian spiritual tradition, from the earliest times, saw silence and solitude as essential constitutive elements in a developing life of prayer and progress towards Christian maturity" (Leech, 1989, p. 18). Psalm 46:10 tells us to "Be still, and know that I am God." The classical Christian writings of the Desert Fathers, Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, St. Benedict, Thomas A. Kempis and others speak to the power of silence in deepening our relationship with God and others (Moriichi, 2009; Olson, 1983).

Jesus spent time in silence throughout his ministry, seeking out quiet places. In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster (1998) gives many examples of Jesus' retreat into solitude: Jesus spent forty days alone in the desert before beginning his ministry (Matthew 4:1-11); he spent the night alone in the desert hills before choosing the twelve disciples (Luke 6:12); and he went to the garden of Gethsemane to pray on the eve of his crucifixion (Matthew 26:36).

Jesus instructs his disciples to follow his example in Mark 6:31: "And he said to them, 'Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while'."

Cultivating the practice of silence has many spiritual benefits. Dallas Willard (2013) writes "Silence well practiced opens a living space in which we can be effectively attentive to God, to our own souls, and to the genuine needs of those around us" (p. 47). Foster (1998) adds, "The fruit of solitude is increased sensitivity and compassion for others. There comes a new freedom to be with people. There is a new attentiveness to their needs, new responsiveness to their hurts" (p. 108). Practicing solitude allows us to "scale back our intrusive interactions with others…We give our neighbors space and time away from us" (Bennett, 2017, p. 109). Ultimately, spending time in silence helps us become more Christ-like in our relationships with others. "The first step to claiming silence is finding a quiet place" (Olson, 1983, p. 17). One must seek out places to be in solitude, such as Jesus going into the wilderness, monks retreating to a monastery, or finding the nearest library.

While today's library is perhaps louder than libraries of yore, creating a space for silence and contemplation is still an essential part of its role. Libraries offer a respite from the noise and busyness of the constantly "on" world in which we live today. This space for quiet meets a need in the community. A 2013 Pew Research Center Internet and American Life survey found that 76 percent of respondents think it is very important for libraries to provide quite study spaces (Zickuhr, 2013). In an academic setting, one can expect to find space in the library to be quiet, to contemplate, to study, and to think:

> The classical image of the solitary reader is as valid now as it ever was and continues to resonate to a deep humanistic urge for personal thought and reflection—from the lonely copying of manuscripts in the Renaissance or study in the Reader's Alcove at Oxford's Bodleian Library to today's college student at work on a term paper. (Foote, 2004, p. 44)

The 2011 Bethel University Library ethnographic study found that Bethel students value spaces for quiet as well. The most common reason for choosing to be in the library was "quiet" with responses such as "this is the best quiet place," "I can focus when there's no noise," and "my room is too noisy and I wanted to discuss [my] work with someone else" (Fabbrini et al., 2011). In 2012, the staff repeated the study and found that, once again, quiet was one of the most common reasons for being in the library (Fabbrini, Getahun, Mitchell, & Keillor, 2012). In the midst of all the spaces available to students such as student commons, departmental lounges, and coffee shops, students still need quiet places and the library fulfills that need.

## Hospitality

Hospitality is a prevalent theme in both the Old and New Testament. In the ancient world, survival often depended on the generosity and kindness of strangers when travelling through unfamiliar lands or dealing with natural disasters. Ancient civilizations placed a high moral value on hospitality (Oden, 2001). The whole social order was based upon reciprocal hospitality; caring for the stranger was necessary because a person might find him or herself in the same situation in the future (Kessler, 2012). Leviticus 19:34 echoes this sentiment: "The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

Jesus' teachings stress the importance of extending hospitality to those at the margins of society. In contrast to the conventional attitude of hospitality that focuses on friends, relatives,

and neighbors, Jesus calls his followers to welcome the poor, the sick, and the needy as seen in Luke 14:12-14:

> When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.

Jesus teaches that caring for others who cannot repay such kindness "reflects the welcome of God" (Pohl, 1999, p. 21). Similarly, in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus tells us that the judgment of nations hinges on the hospitality shown to others. Verses 35-37—"for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me"—and Verse 40—"Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me"—leave no doubt that through these acts of hospitality, we serve Jesus himself. Thinking of hospitality as serving Jesus "does not eclipse the particular human being who stands there in need, but it challenges Christians to offer the most gracious welcome possible" (Pohl, 1999, p. 22).

> With a strong Biblical mandate, hospitality remains important to the Christian faith in contemporary times. Paramount to providing hospitality is creating a space: Hospitable places are comfortable and lived in; they are settings in which people are flourishing. Although not necessarily beautifully maintained or decorated, they are evidently cared for. Such places provide the people that inhabit them with shelter and sanctuary in the deepest sense of these words—not only with the shelter of physical buildings but also with the shelter of relationships. Such places are safe and stable, offering people a setting where 'they can rest for awhile and collect themselves.' Hospitable places are not frenetic, though people within them may be busy. When sanctuary and slower pace are combined, there is a sense of peace. (Pohl, 1999, p. 152)

The academic library can be a place of hospitality within its community. A library welcomes anyone who choses to enter its doors. Thinking of the stranger in the context provided by Thomas Reynolds (2006) in his article "Welcoming without Reserve? A Case in Christian Hospitality," Reynolds writes: "All human beings are strangers in one sense or another and at one time or another. The stranger has inherent value as a human being precisely in his or her dependence, lacking the ability to reciprocate in kind" (p. 196-197). Libraries are constantly welcoming in and graciously caring for the stranger. They are safe, comfortable places where an individual in need can expect to have his or her needs met without offering anything in return. They provide resources and technology that individuals may not be able to purchase on their own. As Sam Demas (2005) writes in his article "From the Ashes to Alexandria: What's Happening in the College Library?":

> Libraries are among the busiest, most welcoming spaces on a college campus. As egalitarian common spaces associated with learning and culture they hold strong appeal. Free and open to everyone, they are distinctly noncommercial and operate on a uniquely communitarian character and business model. Well-run and well-designed libraries serve, in effect, as a form of academic community center. (p. 33)

Libraries practice hospitality when creating student-centered services and spaces. Libraries design spaces with an emphasis on "the use of technology, knowledge integration, and viewing learners as producers" (Nieves-Whitmore, 2021, p. 492). Students expect to be able to use their devices, wireless or wired, to complete their work. Students also need spaces for both solo work and group work (Khoo, Rozaklis, Hall, & Kusunok, 2016). Do they wish to work alone but in a public area or hide away in a small study room, or work with a group of friends around a table or use a large room with a whiteboard? A hospitable library provides a variety of study spaces to meet the various requirements a student may have for the task at hand.

In the Bethel University Library, intentional efforts have been made to give students a place beyond the classroom or dorm room that feels like home. Artwork from Bethel University's Permanent Art Collection warms up the concrete walls. Plush couches and chairs and a cozy fireplace area enhance the necessary study tables and cubicles, with furnishings updated as budget allows. The computer lab and numerous outlets throughout the library give students access to the technology necessary to complete their coursework. As student use of the library changes, the library staff adapt space as needed. Last spring an observation of how students use the computer lab was conducted by the author. Based on these observations, user-friendly improvements were made to the lab by reducing the number of desktop computers and giving students a larger work area for both individual and group work.

When restructuring of departments moved the Teaching and Learning Technology team out of the library, library staff reevaluated the placement of service desks and decided to merge into one service point for both research and circulation assistance. One service desk creates an obvious place to go to for help in the library, and allows library staff to determine who is best equipped to assist a patron, instead of the patron needing to figure it out for themselves (Keisling & Sproles, 2017). With doors opening at 7:30am and closing at 11pm during the week, students have ample time to visit the library as it fits into their busy schedules. On average, over 400 students pass through the library doors each day, taking advantage of the efforts made by the library to create a welcoming and valued place on campus (Bethel University Library Data, 2023).

Libraries can also be places where minority students receive hospitality. In "Is the Library a 'Welcoming Space'? An Urban Academic Library and Diverse Student Experiences," the authors found that "the library plays an important social role in the life of the campus, perhaps as a counter-space critical for students of color" (Elteto, Jackson, & Lim, 2008, p. 335). The Bethel University Library has also noticed that it may serve as a "counter-space" or "neutral third space" (Elteto et al., 2008, p. 334) for minority students. In both of the Bethel University Library ethnographic studies, headcounts recorded the presence of students of color in the library at 9% in 2011 and 12% in 2012 (Fabbrini et al.), similar to the percentage of students of color enrolled at Bethel during that time, 12% in 2011 and 13% in 2012 (Bethel University Institutional Research, 2012). Kuh and Goyea's (2003) study of the academic library's role in student engagement found that underrepresented groups visit academic libraries more often than other groups, noting "the library appears to be a positive learning environment for all students, especially members of historically underrepresented groups" (p. 270). By creating hospitable places, libraries receive all students with a warm embrace, offering sanctuary and comfort.

**The Library's Unique Place**

Libraries have symbolic meaning as an academic space, unlike any other place on

campus. By providing a space beyond the classroom (work) or dorm room (home), the library functions as a "third place"—an easily accessible, neutral, frequently visited "home away from home." The library is uniquely positioned as a space dedicated to academic work. The scholarly needs of students are met by providing access to technology and books, articles, and other materials—physical and online. Staff are available to support students in their research and learning. A variety of study areas and furnishings allow students to customize their experiences in the library. Students feel the scholarly ambiance in the library and find the quiet that they seek, both encouraging them and enabling them to focus on their academic work.

The spiritual practices of scholarship, silence, and hospitality flourish in this environment. Students grow academically and spiritually as they rigorously pursue their studies—honoring God with the life of the mind—and soak in the benefits of solitude and quietude. Library staff create an atmosphere in which all types of students feel welcomed and supported. Within the space of the library, one can be in the presence of a community of scholars, be in the midst of the scholarly record on shelf upon shelf, and have a vast network of knowledge at his or her fingertips.

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