

## Unity and diversity : collections and connections in an interdisciplinary and multilingual community

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### Abstract:

The library for Theology and History (BHT) at the University of Fribourg is a central provider of library services for research and teaching, especially with emphasis on history, theology and religious studies. For several years the library has been in a continuous process of change on different levels, which is closely linked to the changing disciplines and interests of the students and researchers. The BHT has made up a special service portfolio for bilingual environment by using different strategies and activities with regard to the heterogenous users within and outside the university.

**Keywords:** community-building, cooperation, inter-Christian dialogue, interdisciplinarity

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### Introduction

The library for Theology and History (BHT) which serves several faculties is one of the largest decentralized libraries at the University of Fribourg.<sup>1</sup> This university is a completely bilingual (German-French) academic institution in Switzerland with at present more than 10,000 students. The BHT fully incorporates two faculties: the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of (Catholic) Theology. This library was founded in 1977 and offers access to more than 110,000 printed works. It is important to point out the special interdisciplinary research regarding Contemporary History, European Studies, the ecumenical dialogue and Biblical

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<sup>1</sup> [www.unifr.ch/bht](http://www.unifr.ch/bht) [26.04.2016]

studies.<sup>2</sup> The library supports the scientific activities of the Bible+Orient Museum which is supplemented by a comprehensive digital collection.

Additionally the acquisition activities of the library regarding the literature required for various courses of study make up the special service portfolio of the BHT. Of particular note are the bilingual courses of study in the local Faculty of Theology, especially the interreligious scholarly dialogue, for instance with the Orthodox churches.

One of the central aims of this paper is to present the different developments and strategies of the library with regard to the heterogeneous clients as well as to take a look at the various possibilities of interconnecting the library within and outside the university. Apart from students, researchers and teachers, the users from outside the university make up an important group of clients, who frequent the library as a "third place".<sup>3</sup>

## **I. Special Collections**

*Acquisitions for research and teaching:*

Beside the general collections previously mentioned the following text presents the special collections regarding the ecumenical movement or the inner-Christian dialogue.

*Collections comprising the ecumenical or inner-Christian dialogue*

The BHT owns several collections in the realm of interreligious and inter-Christian dialogue. First of all the research activities of the Institute for Ecumenical Studies in Fribourg must be mentioned here. Large stocks in the library and the archives of the institute as well as in the general library are linked to a special field of research. Four collections, which are of particular importance, are either now completed or still being continued:

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bible-orient-museum.ch> [26.04.2016]

<sup>3</sup> See Servet, Mathilde. Les bibliothèques troisième lieu. Bulletin des bibliothèques de France [online], n° 4, 2010 <<http://bbf.enssib.fr/consulter/bbf-2010-04-0057-001>>. ISSN 1292-8399. [26th of april 2016].

- Fonds Iso Baumer (BHT)
- Fonds Ernst Christoph Suttner (Institute for Ecumenical Studies)
- Library Walter Nigg (Institute for Ecumenical Studies)

Within the framework of the research center "Sergij Bulgakov" the Institute for Ecumenical Studies owns a sound documentation of the works of this Russian-Orthodox economist, religious philosopher and theologian, including all the available translations of this work. In Fribourg a complete edition of his works in German is in progress.

Overall these selected stocks are of theological and ecumenical relevance, but they also carry a grave cultural and political importance. Orthodox Christianity with its relationship to Islam is of great significance for the dialogue among religions, especially on the European continent and its borders. Western Christianity may acquire new perspectives in contact with Orthodoxy, which can meaningfully be applied to matters relating to Islam.

*Collections and special material for teaching and research in the Biblical Department*

The BHT comprises a large stock of scientific literature on the Old and the New Testament. The section for the Old Testament is above all of special relevance for the scientific activities of the Bible and Orient Museum. The collections of the museum help to answer questions on the history and presence of the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam as well as their oriental origins.

At present the library aims at integrating the collections of the newly created interfacultative center for Islam and Society into the library service. This center constitutes a university section which devotes itself to Islamic self-reflection and its scholarly foundation, as well as to finding its place within an academic environment. Its main task first and foremost aims to create a scientific Islamic self-exegesis in Switzerland and to tie it to the framework of a university. This will contribute to a constructive synthesis between Islam and European

scientific tradition. The various stocks of the library form the basis for research and teaching in all the disciplines involved.

## **II. Connections**

### *Information Literacy*

In order to evaluate the service of the library in a qualitative and quantitative sense and if necessary to optimize it, it is essential to establish close contact with the different groups of users and – above all- to cultivate it intensively. The library does not only offer access to printed and digital works, but it is also the qualitative service of advice and information which forms a central element of exchange. In addition, there are also regular consultations with groups of users. The homepage of the library serves to document the service of the latter via internet. In this way access to the digital collections is provided and an interface between reality and the digital sphere established. A further important point concerning the users is their schooling in digital competence. The courses are partly obligatory and will in the future be part of the curriculum, which means that they will directly be tied to introductory courses for beginners. The effective use of the library's information resources is thus an important precondition for a successful course of study. The introductory courses running for one term are aimed at students in their initial years of study and consist of obligatory classes as well as practical exercises, which teach the relevant knowledge and skills for using the most important tools of research. Further emphasis lies on the systematic search for literature (bibliographical database) and on the acquisition of printed and electronic documents. The existing offer is supplemented by training courses for advanced users. These diversified options make it possible to establish contact with the users and to react to various challenges with the help of a unified communication strategy.

### **III. The BHT as a "third place"**

The BHT is one of the central places of the university where students from different faculties can meet and learn: It is therefore a place for communication and a social meeting place, which make dialogues possible.<sup>4</sup>

While in the past a library was seen merely as a mere place for learning and reading, this concept has been undergoing a dynamic change in recent years. With the help of a modern room concept orientated towards the different needs of the groups of users, libraries are transforming into a place for encounters and dialogues. In this way the sterile atmosphere of library space can be changed into a varied scene for learning or simply reading.

Recently several changes in the room concept of the BHT have been undertaken. Here a strong focus was put on the improvement of the residential quality by creating different zones. Thus there are new zones for reading and active working in the reading room. At the entrance a sitting area offers opportunities for talks and teamwork. Computer work stations complement the offer and enable the users to do their research.

The library is also a place for spiritual welfare work within the university student initiative "Refugees meet students UNIFR".<sup>5</sup> This initiative offers diverse activities like tutoring and general help in language acquisition for refugees. The aim of this initiative is to offer young refugees a first insight into Swiss history, civilisation, culture and religion and the chance to enter into a dialogue with young people from different cultures and religions.

It becomes evident that the exchange between the different user groups succeeds in entering into a dynamic dialogue which would not be possible without the aforementioned activities

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<sup>4</sup> See Buschman, John E.; Leckie, Gloria J. The library as a place. History, community and culture. Westport 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Further information concerning "Refugees meet students" can be found on the website of the catholic spiritual welfare, <http://www.unifr.ch/aumonerie/de/rms/> [26.04.2016].

and the resources of the library in the fields of religious scholarship, history and theology. The scientific fundament, which consists of collections in these fields, plus the possibilities of meetings within the library provide chances for new encounters and further discussions.

### **Outlook / further steps**

The library continues to regard itself as a central service point for scholarly work. Furthermore the service portfolio has been expanded in the past few years. New dynamic developments are coming to the fore. Certainly the strengthening of digital competence in the different courses of study in history as well as in theology will become more and more important in the years to come, even for non-student groups. Barrier-free access to scientific literature will increase with more open access opportunities. As such, the chances for dialogue on several levels in and outside the library must be guaranteed in the future, as well.

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