

# An Interview with Beth Bidlack



**B**eth Bidlack is Bibliographer for Religion and Philosophy at the University of Chicago Library, a position she started in September, 2005. Responsible for developing and maintaining the Library's collections in the areas of religion and philosophy, Bidlack also provides specialized reference service and bibliographic instruction for faculty and students in religion and serves as a liaison between the Library and the Divinity School.

**CIRCA:** You have a background as both a biblical scholar and a librarian. What was your training, where have you been, and how did you end up here?

**BB:** At Urbana University in Urbana, Ohio, I majored in philosophy and religion. After graduation, I went to Boston University School of Theology. Since I was eligible for work-study, I went to the library and soon learned about cataloging. After completing an M.T.S. degree with a concentration in biblical studies, I stayed at Boston University to pursue a Ph.D. in the History and Literature of Ancient Israel. I also continued my work-study position in the library. With the encouragement of a few librarians, once I was "ABD" I found my first full-time job in the cataloging department at Andover Newton Theological School. From there I became a bibliographer and systems supervisor at the Episcopal Divinity School/Weston Jesuit Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Shortly after completing my Ph.D., I became the library director and member of the faculty at Bangor Theological Seminary in Bangor and Portland, Maine, where I taught courses in biblical languages and theology and directed studies in theological librarianship and Unitarian Universalist theologies.

In terms of library work, I have worked in all three major areas of librarianship: technical services (e.g., cataloging), public services (e.g., reference), and administration (e.g., report writing, budgeting, staff supervision). In addition to my library work, I was an adjunct instructor for ten years, teaching courses in biblical languages and

literature at Boston University, Merrimack College, Emmanuel College, and Episcopal Divinity School. While at BU, I was a teaching assistant for courses on the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Western Religions.

What appealed to me about the position here at the University of Chicago Library was its university context. I have really enjoyed the interdisciplinary nature of my work here.

**CIRCA:** How do libraries contribute to and enhance theological education?

**BB:** That is a great question. Theological librarians have been discussing this for quite some time. There are two ways I think libraries contribute to theological education. In my experience, libraries have provided

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contexts for critical thinking and information literacy, essential components of theological education. When students shift from assigned readings in a course to writing research papers, it is sometimes difficult for them to locate, organize, assess, and synthesize large amounts of information. In my current position, not only do I help build a collection in religion and philosophy, but I also help users navigate the collection to find and assess the resources they need. Rather than giving users a static list of resources to consult, my approach is more dynamic: I try to “teach them to fish.” During workshops and research consultations, I give them an overview of the resources the Library provides and suggest some search strategies. I try to ensure that they have the research skills they need to narrow their topics and locate relevant resources.



The second contribution I would like to highlight is the multifaceted role of librarians. One the one hand, we are preservers of religious tradition (especially texts), but on the other hand, we challenge homogeneity and the status quo by collecting “voices from the margins” and by identifying areas of study which are not yet “mainstream.” Theological librarians combine their

roles as sustainers of tradition, prophets, and pastors. In building our library collection, I feel like a take on a prophetic role when I seek out innovative electronic resources and voices that are underrepresented—but not to the detriment of print resources, which I strive to sustain. One also needs to be pastoral when guiding users through the millions of library resources, whether print or electronic.

**CIRCA:** Could you say something about plans to expand the library and other future plans for the library?

**BB:** As you may know, the Library is planning a \$42 million addition, which will hold 3.5 million volumes and be built adjacent to Regenstein Library. When added to our current 4.5 million volume capacity, we will have one of the largest library collections under one roof in North America. Unlike many other research libraries, we have the funding and physical space to build an

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addition on site; many of our peers have had to resort to off-site storage. The addition will include a reading area, a much needed state-of-the-art conservation lab, and a high-density storage and retrieval system. For more about the addition to Regenstein, see the Library's website: <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/reg/addition>.

There are other projects currently under way, such as increasing the number of electrical outlets for users, acquiring new chairs, and updating the HVAC system. In addition, in order to continue being central to teaching, research, and learning, over the next few years the Library is planning to convert up

to four seminar rooms in the reading areas of Regenstein Library into technology-equipped teaching and learning spaces. One such room is scheduled to be completed by the end of this academic year.

The Library has recently received a \$617,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Community outreach for a project entitled "Uncovering New Chicago Archives Project (UNCAP)." The grant will allow graduate students (who will be trained by librarians) to organize and describe the archives at the DuSable Museum of African-American History, the *Chicago Defender*, and the Vivian G. Harsh Collection of

Afro-American History and Literature, located in the Woodson Regional Library, as well as the archives of contemporary poetry and the Chicago Jazz Archives, located in the Special Collections Research Center of the University of Chicago Library. Descriptions of these collections will be available on a centrally located website. This project is the embodiment of the synergy among faculty, students, librarians, and the community. For more information, see the recent article in the October 19, 2006 issue of the *University of Chicago Chronicle*: <http://chronicle.uchicago.edu/061019/library-archives.shtml>. □

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something that was *added onto* the traditions I wished to study. Subsequently, I have come to see those traditions in an important sense as constituted by and through different kinds of media. To put it rather more concretely, I would argue, for instance, that one cannot possibly understand present-day configurations of "traditional" Islam in Indonesia without understanding the role of television and the Internet in mediating the Muslim community today — both within Indonesia and abroad. That is to say, I don't think it's simply a matter of strapping "media" onto an otherwise unreconstructed model of social scientific or humanities-based inquiry. Rather, I believe any serious attempt to grapple critically with mass mediation as a global phenomenon will require rethinking most of our key critical categories, including perhaps most prominently tradition, community, agency, and identity, as well as religion itself. This is not simply an abstract theoretical point. On the contrary, it's one that has quite far-reaching implications for how we approach the day-to-day practices that — when taken



**"The question is how one might think differently."**

together — comprise the religions of the world. I would press further to argue that this is not only the case in overtly "globalized" urban centers, but also — or perhaps especially — in the more rural locations that have long been imagined as the primary sites of authentic "tradition." Hi-fi stereo equipment and cellular phones, for instance, are now an integral component of the most "traditional" of Balinese Hindu temple ceremonies. A karaoke machine is frequently the instrument of choice for broadcasting mantras during the *odalan* ceremonies at village temple complexes. Assuming our object of study lies somewhere outside these developments is, in my opinion, to take history out of the History of Religions. □



**For calendar updates**, please consult the Divinity School's website at <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/news/>. Access the most up-to-date events information, sign up for our electronic events calendar — "At the Divinity School" — and get current, and archived, news.