Practice What You Preach: Exploring the Role of the Catholic Church in the Development of the Library and Information Science profession

Renate Chancellor, Ph.D.

The Catholic University of America

Author Note

Renate Chancellor, is a Clinical Assistant Professor at the School of Library and Information Science at the Catholic University of America
Contact: chancellor@cua.edu
Abstract

Libraries during the classical period in Greece and Rome flourished. These first literate Western societies, promoted literacy and laid the foundation for the development of libraries and the profession of Library and Information Science. However, literacy declined during the middle-ages and as a result books and libraries all but vanished. One institution survived that was devoted to the preservation of the written word: the Catholic Church. The role of priests and monasteries in the development of cataloging, preservation and the organization of manuscript production pioneered what are common practices in the library profession today. This study traces the evolution of the Catholic Church in the historic development of libraries. A historical approach is used that includes documentary research. Two overarching research questions will be explored: In what ways did the Catholic Church impact the historical development of the Library and Information Science profession? What is the impact of that role today? Findings will provide insight into the relationship of the Catholic Church and its role not only in the development of library and information science, but also its important role in the preservation of religious texts and other information objects.

Introduction

Catholic monks and priests were librarians in early Greece and Rome long before the founding of the American library profession. When the American Library Profession was officially founded in 1876 by notable library luminaries, Melvil Dewey, Charles Cutter and Samuel Green, many of their professional practices were already developed by the Greek and Roman religious during the Middle-Ages. The Middle-Ages is a period of European history that comprised the 5th to the 15th centuries. It is the middle period of the traditional three-period division of Western history into Classical, Medieval and Modern. During this era, Europe experienced a time of unprecedented advances in arts, literature, philosophy and scientific thought, Greece and Rome became literate societies and influenced the foundation for western civilization. This study explores the role of the Catholic Church in the development of the library profession. It aims to answer the following questions: In what ways did the Catholic Church impact the historical development of the library and information science profession? What is the impact of that role
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today? These are some of the questions that prompted this research. Of particular interest, is the exploration of how these two distinct disciplines conjoined in their relatively early foundations?

Much has been written about the historical development of the American library profession. Most notably is Wayne Wiegand’s (1986), comprehensive work, *The Politics of an Emerging Profession: The American Library Association, 1876-1917* in which he examines the issues during the early formation of the profession. About ten years later, Wiegand (1996) published another monumental work, *The Irrepressible Reformer: A Biography of Melvil Dewey* that recounts the life of the man who is attributed for founding the American library profession and its first school of library education. Other authors have also explored the history of the library and information science profession. For example, John Richardson’s (2009), *Library Science in the United States: Early History* and Rosemary DuMont’s (1986), *Race in American Librarianship: Attitudes of the library profession*. However, few have tried to examine the relationship of the early history of the profession with religion, and even more specifically, the Catholic Church. Research on the role of the Catholic Church in the development of the library profession is scarce in the scholarly and professional literature. This paper aims to contribute to a growing body of literature in this area.

**Information Revolutions**

Marshall McLuhan (1962) characterized four information revolutions that have transformed society and culture: Oral, Writing, Print, and Electronic. Each of these revolutions provides context for this study, however, greater emphasis will be placed on *Printing* and *Writing* for the purposes of this discussion. Prior to the invention of writing, early human societies stored and transferred information orally through speaking, listening, and remembering (Clanchy,1993). This mode of communication fostered an oral culture and a social organization different from
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traditions based on the printed word (Ong, 1993). The invention of writing was an information revolution that enabled the permanent storage and retrieval of tangible information (McLuhan, 1962).

Early written records can be traced as far back as 3000 BC in ancient Greece when Sumerians developed the first writing system in order to record financial, political and religious information (Rubin, 2010). First, clay tablets known as cuneiform scripts were used to imprint images and symbols became the primary means to record written data. “These archives which mainly consisted of the records of commercial transactions or inventories marked the end of prehistory and the start of history” (Roberts, 1997, p. 35). Writing represented a technology, and as such relied heavily on a combination of skills to produce the artifacts of written record. It required the expertise of a variety of technicians ranging from the tanner to the Illuminator. Also required were specialized tools such as colored pigments, quills, razors, and various artifacts for preparing the parchment. In addition to these, scribes also needed tools for ruling lines; these included the stylus and awl, which was used for pricking the holes that marked where the lines began (Clanchy, 1994, p. 116). Writing was an arduous process in which the entire body labored. It was so difficult, that it might even have been a seasonal activity in some monasteries (Clanchy, 1994).
The spread of literacy to the public began with the growth of reading, not writing. Not only was writing too technical and arduous a process, but there was also no need for lay people to write at that time. It was the public’s need to read the government documents it was forced to use – people’s need to function in that society – that became the focus. As the methods of documentation the rulers used began to filter down to those conducting everyday business, the lay person was forced to adapt. Thus, our notion of literacy, which is firmly entrenched in reading and writing, evolved from the medieval perception of reading and writing as separate skills, which were very much independent of each other. Therefore, an individual who possessed only the ability to read could have been perceived as literate in medieval times.

Clanchy comments:

...writing was considered a special skill in the Middle-Ages which was not automatically coupled with the ability to read. Hence it is an anachronism, arising from a failure to appreciate technological differences, to apply modern criteria of literacy to the medieval past. A medieval historian has to be aware of the technology of manuscripts, as a historian of nineteenth-century Europe is of the industrial process (1993, p. 115).
Once ancient civilizations acquired the ability to make records, a method was utilized to store and retrieve them. Storage rooms in palaces and temples were constructed into libraries in order to accommodate the tablets. These libraries were comprised of thousands of cuneiform tablets, stored in large jars and organized in rows on shelves by specific subjects such as religion, legal and financial records.

The printing revolution made both ancient and medieval texts available to a broader audience which brought tremendous changes to the western social and cultural landscape during the Middle-Ages. Elizabeth Eisenstein (1983) theorized that printing was revolutionary in that it changed the ways in which knowledge was preserved, used and passed on for future generations. The most significant contribution to this phenomenon was the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg. During the Middle-Ages, book production was largely confined to monasteries and churches. Scribes spent countless hours meticulously copying manuscripts in the scriptoria. However this labor-intensive task did not allow for mass production of manuscripts and access was limited to clerics who were primarily curators of books. This changed with the printing press. The West now had widespread access to reading materials and literacy flourished. The Catholic Church also thrived during this era. It became a leader in the industry of bible publishing and helped promote expedient dissemination of bibles to the Christian world.

The Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church is considered one of the oldest institutions in the world. It remains steadfast in its teachings that it is the one true Church founded by Jesus Christ. Embedded in the Church’s doctrine is the ideal of Catholic Social Thought (CST) where the principle of solidarity
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– that we are all in it together and that we should help the poorest of society. And, the principle of subsidiarity, that everyone has a personal responsibility which affirms that human affairs are best handled at the lowest possible level and closest to the affected person (Catholic Bishops, 2009). It is the author’s contention that these two principles are inherently intertwined with the discipline of library and information science.

Although it is difficult to determine exactly when Catholicism emerged in Rome, scholars of Catholic theology has generally accepted that the great apostle Peter travelled to Rome to start the Church sometime around AD 50 (Oxford, 2005). Peter is also attributed with being the first Roman bishop. In its early beginnings, the Church was as strong force in European society. Greco-Roman culture had made significant strides and it was a time of great prosperity. However, after the fall of the Roman Empire, the Church became the major catalyst for preserving traditional civilization by developing monasteries and sending missionaries to convert people throughout Europe, Asia and Africa. As one scholar posits:

From 590 to 1517, the Roman Church dominated the western world. The Roman Catholic Church controlled religion, philosophy, morals, politics, art and education. This was the dark ages for true Christianity. The vital doctrines of Biblical Christianity had almost disappeared, and with the neglect of true doctrine came the passing of life and light that constitutes the worship of the One True God as declared in Christ (Arnold, 1999, p. 1).

After the fall of the Roman Empire, much of the progress made during the Classical period reverted back to a time of low literacy. The production of manuscripts, books and libraries all but declined. However, it was the Catholic Church that remained a powerful structure in society. It provided an infrastructure for the facilitation of information much like libraries do today. In
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essence, the Church became the most stable institution during a time of great turmoil and distress. Catholic priests used this pulpit to evangelize and spread the Gospel to the downtrodden and to minister to individuals about the Catholic faith.

One of the most well-known monasteries, the Abbey of Monte Cassino (see figure 5 below), is located near Rome, Italy, and is where St. Benedict first established his monastery around 529. Like many others, the library at this monastery, chained books to shelves to protect the laborious effort that was made to in copying the books (Bloch, 1986). Often considered, “chained libraries,” the chains represented how much early priests valued their work. An earthquake damage the Abbey in 1349, however, the buildings were reconstructed and remains one of few Abbeys within the Catholic Church today. During the middle ages, there were nearly 200 monks that worked in the scriptorium (Bloch, 1986). They were known for being a school of manuscript illuminator and they were famous throughout the Western world. The site has been visited numerous times by the Popes, including a visit by Pope Benedict XVI as recent as May 2009.
Located in Bulgaria, the Zograf Monastery’s library (See figure 6) preserved medieval manuscripts starting in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century. The library houses 388 manuscripts in Slavic and over a hundred in Greek, as well as about 10,000 books. Because of its large collection, this monastery is known for sharing manuscripts and books to other libraries, despite the protectiveness of the collections.

![Figure 6. Zograf Monastery, View from the bell tower](image)

There were numerous monasteries that existed in the middle Ages. It would be futile to profile all of them here. However, in this short presentation, the author has attempted to provide you with an understanding of monasteries during the medieval period.

**Early Library Practices**

The *bibliotecarius* or *armarius*, otherwise known as the librarian at the scriptorium, applied many of the same practices that are performed by today’s librarians and information professionals; specifically, cataloging, interlibrary loan (ILL) services and the union catalog. The librarian managed all of the copying done by monks and was responsible for the care of the
books produced. The librarian also oversaw the distribution of books to the monks. A monk would get one book a year to read and contemplate. This process is described below:

The librarian, with the aid of the brothers, takes all of the books to the chapter meeting. There they spread out a rug upon which the books are placed. After the regular business of the chapter meeting has been conducted the librarian announces from the check-out list the titles of the books and the names of the monks to whom they had been lent the preceding year. Thereupon each brother deposits his book on the rug. Then the provost . . . collects each book and as it is being returned he probes the brother with questions whether he has diligently studied his assignment. If the response is satisfactory, he inquires of the brother which book he considers to be of use to him in the coming year and provides him with the desired book. However, if the abbot finds that a desired book is not suited for a brother who asked for it, he does not give it to him but hands him a more suitable one. If the interview establishes that the brother was derelict in his study, he is not given a new book, but asked to study the old one for another year. . . . After the brothers have left the chapter meeting, the abbot sees to it that all the books that have been entered in the check-out list are accounted for, and if they are not on record, searches until they are found (Hanson, 2007).

Many monastery library collections were quite extensive such as the aforementioned, Zograf Monastery Library. The monastery at Richelieu, housed 415 books, the St. Gall monastery owned 400 books. As a result, there was a need to provide some form of organization of the materials. For instance, in 814 a church order was sent to various monasteries providing one of the earliest explanations and rationales for cataloging library collections (Lerner, 2009). The order stated:

If there is too great an abundance of books that the memory is not able to comprehend their number or retain their names, let [the librarian] make a brief booklet for himself . . . in which he will record every single book by name. . . . If you do this, you will have an enduring record of books; you will be able to know what you have and what you do not have, and the monastery will have a sure testimony (Hanson, 2007).
Union catalogs were established in the 11th century. These catalogs were a compendium of holdings of monstery libraries, and they were used to organize manuscript production and assist with interlibrary loan processing. In later centuries, monasteries developed more sophisticated ILL systems, allowing monasteries to use each other’s books to share resources. This system resembled current practices today.

Conclusion

Monastery libraries originated and developed during a time of great literacy and prosperity. The Catholic Church was a powerful institution in society and they were instrumental in the production of manuscripts and books. It can also be argued that the Church was also a pioneer in many of the practices of library and information science. We have explored the how early monks and librarians designed a classification system to organize their resources. They engineered a union catalog that parallels what was used in modern libraries prior to the development of the Internet and new technologies.

This particular study should not be considered conclusive evidence for any of the questions posed. The limited access to religious who currently work in libraries prevent the study from claiming scientific authority. It does however, reveal valuable insights by providing a historical look at the relationship between the Catholic Church and the profession of library and information science. It also provides a basis for future research into an interesting and often overlooked within library history. This study found that the Catholic Church played a pivotal role in the historical development of libraries and the library and information science profession.
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