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Different Aspects of Sustainability Discussed at BETH's Annual Conference in Sarajevo

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The BETH 52nd annual conference was held in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, from 18 to 21 September 2024. The theme was “Sustainability in European Theological Libraries.” Participants came not only from all over Europe but also from North America, East Asia, and Oceania.



[Image 1] BETH Visit (photo provided by Hannie Riley)

Although I have visited the Balkans before, Bosnia and Herzegovina was a new destination for me. The country consists of two entities: the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the capital of which is Sarajevo. The city's name first brings to mind the Sarajevo assassination in 1914, which triggered the First World War. As a Finn, I vividly remember the Sarajevo Winter Olympics in 1984, where Marja-Liisa Härmäläinen won three gold medals in skiing. Later, I recall the city's name being in the news for more tragic reasons, as Sarajevo was besieged during the Yugoslav Wars from 1992 to 1995. In contrast to these dark memories, I now had the opportunity to explore a beautiful, vibrant city with a rich cultural scene, where time passes pleasantly in its alleys, museums, and cafes.

When thinking about the conference theme of sustainability, the first things that come to mind are environmental protection issues, such as recycling and reducing carbon footprints. While the preservation of the Earth's carrying capacity is the most crucial condition for the existence of humanity, the concept of sustainable development includes other goals as well. The 17 UN sustainable development goals, which were adopted by all United Nations members in 2015, are a universal call to action to end poverty and inequality, protect the planet, and ensure freedom, peace, and prosperity. For libraries, in addition to environmental protection, key goals include, among others: 4. Quality education, 5. Gender equality, 10. Reduced inequality, 16. Peace, justice, and strong institutions, and 17. Partnerships.

In the city of Sarajevo, the traveller's attention is drawn to the coexistence of different cultures and religions. The cityscape features not only mosques with minarets but also Catholic and Orthodox churches and a synagogue. The conference itself was held at the Gazi Husrev-beg's Library, founded in 1537, the collections of which include not only books, magazines, and other documents but also a very significant selection of Islamic manuscripts.



[Image 2] BETH Tour
(photo provided by Hannie Riley)

Digitisation as a challenge and opportunity for sustainability

On Wednesday, the program began with a visit to the City Hall and its magnificent architecture, which suffered severe damage during the siege of Sarajevo but was restored to its former glory between 1996 and 2022. The program also included a reception for first-time attendees, reports from member associations, and a welcome dinner.

Professor Mario Hibert opened the Thursday session of the conference at the University of Sarajevo. In his presentation, *Postprint Assemblages, New*

Extractivism and Disenchantment, he called for a more critical stance from libraries towards development managed by technocrats, in which excessive consumption of digital technologies becomes, according to the speaker, a key driver of the climate crisis and ongoing societal instability. Hibert emphasised that datafication is a new paradigm of power and therefore it is important to understand how algorithmic systems, especially Artificial Intelligence, work. The essential question arises: will power in the future reside with the technology companies based in Silicon Valley or with more democratic institutions?

Anna Cascone from the Lasallian Library, Rome, told us about Relindial (Religions: Libraries and Dialogue), which is one of IFLA Special Interest Groups. This group is dedicated to libraries serving as places of dialogue between cultures through a better knowledge of religions. It also helps libraries to meet challenges of sustainable digital preservation and reuse of their collections.

Rodrigo Nilo Palominos and Donatella Bellardini from the General Library of PP. Barnabite Centre for Historical Studies discussed ways in which the library can promote sustainability by collaborating with schools and offering education and workshops where children and young people can learn about their community's culture and history from a religious perspective. One example of these activities is the Beweb portal which gives ecclesiastical



[Image 3] BETH Tour
(photo provided by Hannie Riley)

institutions the possibility to share their historical research and enhancement activities with different audiences.

On Thursday, we heard two presentations on digitisation, which promotes sustainable development from both the perspective of preserving cultural heritage and improving its accessibility. Tomas Stolarczyk from the Polish association FIDES noted that many libraries have precious collections of old theological prints and archives that are often

difficult for researchers and students to access. The solution to this problem is the digitisation of these collections, for which public funding has been obtained in Poland.

After a guided tour within the almost five centuries-old Gazi Husrev-beg's Library, librarians Hamza Kurtanović and Ejla Ćurovac told us about the library as an institution for preserving precious collections throughout the centuries. This task was threatened by the war from 1992 to 1995. During this period, the collections were taken to safety from the bombings, and the process of microfilming then began. Later, this work continued with digitisation, and the result now is a rich digital repository.

At the end of the day, Thomas Phillips presented the possibilities of artificial intelligence for librarianship and his library's project, which aims to implement AI in indexing, creating abstracts, and interlibrary loans. Areum Cho represented Libtree, the conference sponsor. She introduced Libtree's e-CIP Contents Solution, which can be used for connecting individuals with the world's knowledge provided by libraries.

Sustainability as local and global co-operation

Friday began with a presentation by Stefano Malaspina, President of BETH. Malaspina spoke about the challenging but rewarding work that has been done in recent years to compile and organise BETH's archives.

Juergen Warmbrunn (Herder-Institut) gave a presentation on the Polish priest Jerzy Popiełuszko (1947-1984): his life, work, and tragic fate under communist oppression. According to Warmbrunn, Popiełuszko's life's work and example promoted many goals of sustainability, such as peace, democracy, and equality.

Jon Purcell (ABTAPL, Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries) discussed in his presentation two closed British Catholic seminaries, the libraries of which had valuable collections. Their fate was happily resolved when new caretakers and users were found for the collections. One collection went to China, and the other to a local university and cathedral.

Hannie Riley's (Wycliffe Hall, Oxford) presentation focused on the redistribution of surplus books from European theological libraries to theological libraries around the world, where there is often a shortage of literature. An organisation called Oxford Theology Resource Link has been established to facilitate book donations to libraries in the majority world, ensuring that surplus books are not wasted but instead reach those in need elsewhere in the world.



[Image 4] BETH Presentation
(photo provided by Hannie Riley)

After lunch, we participated in a guided tour to the Bosniak Institute Museum and Gallery, where we enjoyed art treasures from various centuries as well as an unforgettable, luxurious coffee service in the institute's premises.

In the first presentation of the afternoon, Raul Cervantes from Friedensau Adventist University described the process by which books in his library are handled throughout their lifecycle, from assessing the condition of returned books for repair or removal and subsequent recycling. Nina Sundnes Drønen (VID Specialised University, Stavanger) spoke about her university's campus renovation, in which the library staff also participated in the planning, keeping the principles of sustainable development at the forefront. The result was a functional unit where old furniture continued its life in harmony with the new environment.

Siong Ng from Carey Baptist College, New Zealand, talked about various forms of library information training sessions her library has provided. In 2018, the library launched a course which aimed to introduce new students to the institution, community life, academic writing, and the library. The course design was based on the integration of the student into the community, upon which learning is built. After that, our Spanish colleagues,

Fran Cortés and Jaime Lopez de Eguilaz, presented the joint catalogue of Spanish ecclesiastical libraries, which was completed after nearly 20 years of work in 2023. Currently, the ABIE Union Catalogue contains 6 million records.

Finally, John Kutsko from our American sister association (Atla) told us about Atla's role as a connector of theological libraries, a producer of research tools, and a maintainer of databases. Atla's support and collaboration with other theological libraries around the world are invaluable.

On Saturday, the conference program included a workshop for the first time. Under the guidance of Maja Drobne from PiNA (Association for Culture and Education, Slovenia), the participants prepared EU funding applications in groups and received feedback from Maja on their effectiveness and potential improvements.

I thank everyone who participated in the arrangements and our Bosnian hosts, especially Irena Pejić, for an unforgettable conference!

See you in Stavanger next year!



[Image 4] BETH Participants (photo provided by Hannie Riley)