



# BETH

Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie

# BETH Bulletin 2025

---

No. 03

Christine Love-Rodgers, Esther Jeon  
Hannie Riley and Jussi Hyvärinen

## Reflections on BETH Conference 2024: Sustainability in European Theological Libraries

**Esther Jeon**

Library Assistant, Philosophy and Theology Faculties library,  
Bodleian Librarians, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

I first heard about BETH and the annual BETH Conference from Hannie Riley, its Vice-President and Librarian of Wycliffe Hall. Hannie encouraged me to attend the 2024 Conference in Sarajevo, and was instrumental in making it happen. Thanks to the generous sponsorship of BETH funded by Libtree, I was able to enjoy the wonderful hospitality and beautiful historical sites of Sarajevo, as well as immerse myself in the stimulating talks and ideas of the Conference upon the theme of 'Sustainability in European Theological Libraries'. I am grateful to BETH for delivering a stellar conference, to Libtree for their sponsorship of the conference as well as my attendance, and to all the delegates who were so welcoming despite the fact that my librarianship journey has been but a brief one.



[Image 1] Gazi Husrev-Beg Library in Sarajevo (photo provided by Esther Jeon)

What comes to mind with the term 'sustainability'? For most of us, it will conjure up climate change and environmental awareness; the creation of systems to endure the foreseeable future and secure the survival and longevity of our existence. Coming to

the BETH Conference 2024 with these preconceptions in mind, I was struck by the refreshing twists on the theme supplied by this year's delegates that upended my expectations. The concept of sustainability rests upon 'three pillars': environmental, economic, and social. All three were explored during a series of surprising and truly delightful case studies and vignettes that differed immensely from talk to talk.



[Image 2] On the Roof of the Gazi Husrev-Beg Library (photo provided by Esther Jeon)

We were lucky enough to be hosted by the incredible Gazi Husrev-beg Library in Sarajevo for the duration of the conference. We were screened a film about the preservation of books during the war, which reminded us of the intangible qualities of history, art, and cultural heritage that are preserved in books, and why we too must save them and the libraries that house them. There is nothing as violent a reminder as war of the fragility of human life, and the risk of violence to the sustainability of human existence. We live in a world where the forces of technology, the changing climate, and tensions in politics continuously evolve our perceptions of the future, and where sustainability has never seemed more important.

A recurring topic during the Conference was that of AI, a looming giant that has crept up on our society from 2022 and now holds a disconcerting, ubiquitous, and persistent influence over our daily lives. It has become increasingly common to use AI to write, critique, create 'art', and to seek answers to our questions without lifting a finger to do the research ourselves. The keynote talk given by Professor Mario Hibert was a stirring call to all librarians to educate themselves about AI and meet its dogged advancement with informed readiness rather than taking a neutral stance or blindly welcoming it. In other talks that followed, delegates presented plans of action and demonstrated software that harnessed the power of AI, thus offering concrete examples of how AI is consolidating its position as an aspect of librarianship in its own right, as well as demonstrating ways in which we can



harness this power as librarians. Many, such as our sponsor Libertree, see a promising future in the utilisation of AI to assist readers with finding books and using libraries to their full potential, as well as providing invaluable digital support for librarians through their platform. These talks demonstrated the extraordinary power that AI affords us, whilst reminding us of the immense need for regulations and an understanding of its possible pitfalls and risks.



[Image 3] With Libertree directors (photo provided by Esther Jeon)

Another theme explored by a majority of the talks was sustainability through the means of digitisation and the creation of online catalogues. Many colleagues delivered talks on how they have made immense progress on the digitisation of their collections, or upcoming projects to do so, including the Gazi Husrev-beg Library in Sarajevo, in which we were lucky enough to spend a large part of the conference. Fran Cortes gave a talk about how the ABIE has created a pioneering online catalogue bringing together the collections of many Spanish ecclesiastical libraries.

Sustainability was also reimagined in terms of the afterlife of libraries in the event of the closure of their patron institutions, and how to inject new life and purpose for theological books or library furniture. A talk from Jon Purcell provided a fascinating insight into the possibilities available to seminary libraries after the closure of the seminaries themselves, using such examples as one library finding a new life abroad in a seminary in Macau, and another becoming part of Durham University. BETH Vice-President Hannie Riley delivered a talk detailing how her charity, Oxford Theology Resources Link, provides seminaries with invaluable physical books and resources by sourcing surplus theological books. Nina Sundnes Drønen of VID Stavanger talked about how old library furniture was repurposed for their new library, whilst Raul Cervantes of Friedensau Adventist University demonstrated how books can be either sold, given away, or disposed of in a dignified manner befitting them.

Various talks focused on the element of social sustainability, or improving the links between libraries and their wider communities, including students and the younger generations. Donatella Bellardini and Rodrigo Nilo Palominos of the Centre for Historical Studies PP. Barnabiti shared how they ensure a sustainable future for their institution by endeavouring to inspire a love for their collections within children and young adults.



[Image 4] Bosniak Institute (photo provided by Esther Jeon)

Using outreach programs and educational activities, they opened their archives and invited students to touch manuscripts, learn more about palaeography and Latin, and discover Dante's writings in fresh and engaging ways. By educating the community, they strive to change perceptions about libraries and History through these different approaches. In a similar vein, Siong Ng of Carey Baptist College delivered a talk about how she strengthens connections between students and the college library by using orientations and training sessions in order to facilitate dialogue and familiarity.

Thus, through fascinating talks, many of which could not be included here, the 2024 BETH Conference provided us with an array of new insights, methods, ways of thinking, and inspiration for not only new sustainability ventures for institutions but also for the future of libraries as a whole. I left the conference with a greater understanding and appreciation for the theological libraries, as well as a fresh enthusiasm for this sector and the people and organisations which make it thrive.