



BETH

Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie

BETH Bulletin 2026

No. 04

Hannie Riley, Esther Jeon,
and Jussi Hyvärinen

What AI Did Next: Exploring AI's Role in European Theological Libraries

Christine Love-Rodgers

College Lead for Library Academic Support and
Academic Support Librarian, The University of Edinburgh

In September 2025, I was privileged to attend the BETH (Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie) conference in Stavanger, Norway, which had the theme of exploring AI's role in Theological libraries. I really appreciated the practical nature of many of the papers in this conference, which highlighted projects and processes using AI that had been implemented in libraries. I also felt that there was also a second theme or undercurrent: that of highlighting the human value of libraries and the books they contain.



[Image 1] the BETH Conference Poster (image provided by BETH)

Before we dived into AI, we enjoyed a walking tour starting at the 900-year-old Stavanger Cathedral, the oldest cathedral in Norway. Stavanger is located in what is known as the 'Bible Belt' of western and southern Norway, and used to be called 'the mission city' because it sent out so many missionaries. I was impressed by several richly detailed epitaphs with paintings of the deceased with their family. Our tour

also visited St Peter's Church, a more 'regular' Norwegian church, where a rehearsing worship band created an atmospheric visit. Our last church stop was at a historic 'prayer house', an upstairs room used as a meeting room by non-conformist churches that sprang up after the Dissenter Act in 1845 permitted Christians to gather outside of the established Church of Norway. Today, it is used as a youth church meeting place by the Church of Norway. Our tour allowed us to enjoy Stavanger's streets of painted wooden houses, hilltop views, and its harbour. We ended up back at the conference location, VID Specialised University, where lovely Norwegian waffles and coffee greeted us.

The conference began with a BETH members' meeting where we heard reports from our colleagues across Europe. These include large associations like ABCF (France), which has 155 members, but also very small ones such as the new association in Croatia with four members. Some member associations are thriving, such as the association in Hungary which ran a three-day conference in the summer with almost a hundred attendees, and is offering four training days per year. Other associations are facing challenges, including drops in membership, member libraries that have ceased communication or membership, and difficulties in filling committee posts. Highlights included the cataloguing training for religious publications being run in Italy and Poland, and Hungary's move to publish their journal on an open journal system.



[Image 2] Irena Pejic and Hannah Pope
(photo provided by Stefano Malaspina)

The first day of the conference closed with a film showing of *Le Poids des livres: la bibliothèque de Port-Royal*. In preparation for the Bibliothèque de Port-Royal's move to new premises in 2022-23, filmmakers Camille de Chenay and Adrien Pierre followed the life of the library for six years. The resultant documentary film is a love

song to the library and a powerful piece of advocacy for the value of the library and the human stories it holds and creates. Whilst it is not currently available on YouTube due to it being shown in the film festival circuit, it should be in the future, and I would definitely recommend you watch it.

Anna Cascone from the Lasallian Library, Rome, told us about Relindial (Religions: Libraries and Dialogue), which is one of the 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 the challenges of sustainable digital preservation and reuse of their collections.

Hannah Pope from VID Specialised University kicked off the papers about AI by exploring the role of the librarian. She suggested that we may feel over-saturated by suggestions about AI, and struggle between knowing that it is important but also hearing that it is problematic. AI is a tool, or rather a whole series of tools, but the difficulty is that we may not be able to pick up and put down that tool at will. AI is appearing all the time in our environment, in "an AI gold rush" not necessarily in our control. Ignoring AI is no longer an option. We are still in the early stages of understanding AI, and since it is similar in some ways to the advent of the World Wide Web, it could be argued: "That all turned out fine." But AI, particularly Generative AI, is an explosion of bots, deep-fakes, and disinformation. In the library, we are often expected to be ambassadors for AI, but conversations surrounding AI often lack nuance and a deeper understanding of the complexities. Thus, there is a role for the information professional here. Librarians are ideally positioned to have a foot in both camps, to both challenge and adopt.

Juergen Warmbrunn from Herder Institute Research Library in Marburg shared a paper "AI in Libraries: Just Think About It or Do It?" This immediately got my attention since he talked about using Gen AI to handle lists of large donations to the library. Warmbrunn has had success using ChatGPT LLMs to identify unique items from donation lists, although there have been some challenges applying LLMs to the PICA Library system. Other successful projects had used AI tools in cataloguing a large donation in Latvian, and in developing a 'Table of Contents' awareness service for incoming research publications. Warmbrunn felt there had been a positive reduction in work processes and increased outputs. Importantly, there had been no negative consequences for staffing levels.

In contrast, Donatella Bellardini, from the General Library of the Historical Studies Centre, PP. Barnabiti, Rome spoke about “Reading Literacy, Gamification, Library Services, and Artificial Intelligence”. This focused on a pilot project aiming to combat educational poverty and counter the negative effects of AI through the promotion of reading and critical thinking. Reading groups were held in the library, with children engaging in activities to follow clues about the books they liked best. The underlying premise was that books remain essential in supporting critical thinking, and that we should honour our traditions whilst embracing technological achievements.

Henrik Holtvedt Andersen from Oslo’s MF Norwegian School of Religion and Society presented his paper “Using AI to Digitise and Curate Sensitive Research Data”, in a project where paper surveys were digitised to create image (JPG) files. He discussed the data issues of using ChatGPT as a tool: the free version of ChatGPT is open data, whilst the Teams or Enterprise subscription models enable data security. The University of Oslo has its own AI tool which is GDPR compliant. The project also



enabled him to develop his skills in prompt-engineering, such as delivering queries in natural language, providing context and background information, clear instructions, and examples working well. Learning points for me included the fact that ChatGPT has memory, so previous prompts are to some degree part of new ones, thus meaning that to create a project in ChatGPT which saves all your chats would be an effective way to work.

[Image 3] VID Specialised University Library
(photo provided by Stefano Malaspina)

We had the opportunity to visit the library, archives, and museum collections at VID Specialised University. VID has an agreement with the National Library of Norway to retain mission and church archives from denominations other than the Church of Norway. There are about 550 archive collections. ID Library has about 80,000 volumes

in total, and benefits from the digitisation programmes of the National Library of Norway, which has digitised a significant amount of Norwegian material printed before 1980.



[Image 4] Conference team with John Kutsko from Atla (photo provided by Stefano Malaspina)

John Kutsko from Atla reported on the Global Survey, picking up on the survey themes of changes in theological education and the relationship of the Library to the organisation, the full report of which should be published shortly. Riccardo Amerigo Vigliermo and Federico Ruozzi then presented on AI and Non-Latin alphabet Cataloguing: the Digital Maktaba Project. This project developed AI tools to catalogue Arabic-script theological collections. Do follow up with them for more information, as the project was impressive and well thought out.

At the BETH Annual General Meeting, Norway was congratulated for running the successful 2025 BETH Conference, done with a small informal Association of less than ten member libraries. Next year's conference will be held in Poland. BETH are looking for more colleagues to take on activities, and is also keen for BETH members to participate in sister conferences of member associations. ASDAL (Association of Seventh-Day Adventist Librarians) were admitted as an extraordinary member, and Hanne Lopez was elected as a new Board member, whilst Ward de Pril was re-elected to the Board.

Continuing the theme of AI & Cataloguing Workflows, Hannes Lowagie of the Royal Library of Brussels spoke about how they have embraced artificial intelligence to reimagine cataloguing workflows. AI was used as part of a large cataloguing retroconversion project, which scanned title pages of books to identify them and create a basic record. This used the Microsoft Power Platform, designed for ‘Citizen developers’, and worked well for early 20th- and late 19th-century books, which hold a lot of information on the title page. Lowagie has also explored the potential use of AI for classification by building prompts to add classification terms. This has set up an automated classification workflow that covers basic tasks, meaning that he can now ask more in terms of complex subject indexing from staff. Key benefits include consistency in bibliographic records, a scalable infrastructure to support future book deposits, and AI integration that enables collaboration and the shared use of models, training data, and cataloguing rules. Last but not least, AI enables the use of human cataloguers for their expertise. Issues include a reliance on Microsoft: if or when they end the licence, they will lose the tool.

Martin Fassnacht from the University of Tübingen spoke about how AI is changing the IXTheo tool. They have piloted using DeepSeek with IXTheo data and have come back with plausible results. Enabling natural language queries in IX Theo is one of the goals. Risks include the quality of the answer, and financial longevity, since licenses can change.

Jaime Lopez de Eguilaz spoke about the Bilbao Diocesan Library,

which is marking the 75th anniversary of its diocese. This diocesan heritage library is showcasing its journey since 1956 through public exhibitions and community engagement, and is now also looking ahead to the integration of AI by using a chatbot.



[Image 5] Martin Fassnacht from Tuebingen University (photo provided by Hannah Pope)

On Tuesday afternoon, we visited the Norwegian Museum of Printing. A fascinating exhibition on the history of the printed book in Norway displayed 16th and 17th century imprints with their waste manuscript bindings. These manuscripts preserved as bindings represent some of the very few fragments of pre-Reformation medieval manuscripts in Norway. Norway came relatively late to book culture, as until the 19th century, it was governed by Denmark, and most printing took place in Copenhagen. The museum maintains a hands-on print shop with historic examples of printing equipment and machines, with student placements, internships, and community groups working to maintain and retain historic printing skills.

To close, the most memorable quote of the conference for me was from Juergen Warmbrunn of Marburg's Herder Institute Research Library, who said, "With the use of AI, clever people will become more clever and stupid people will become more stupid." What does this mean? Reflecting on my own experience, I believe it means that if we can engage cleverly, critically and creatively with AI, we can leverage the benefits of AI to make the world better. If we ignore AI, we risk AI influencing and even controlling us through its omnipresence in the digital environment that surrounds us all.



[Image 6] BETH Participants (photo provided by Hannah Pope)