

The Art of the Bibliographic Essay

by Beth M. Sheppard

Theological Librarianship is pleased to present a selection of bibliographic essays in each issue of the journal. For those not familiar with this time-honored method by which librarians share expertise on a topic, and to assist those who hope someday to contribute to the field using the medium of the bibliographic essay, a brief introduction to the art of this important library tool will be helpful.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

In the final chapter of the Fourth Gospel the Evangelist remarks that if everything that was known about Jesus' life and deeds was recorded, even the world itself would not be able to house the resultant books. If the entire globe might provide inadequate shelving for works detailing the intricacies of the ministry of the founder of Christianity, then how many lifetimes might it take to read them all? And when might one also master texts on or by other figures in religion be they Barth, Borg, Bahinabai (a Hindu female poet), or Blavatsky (the founder of the Theosophical Society)? The fact is that regardless of how large the reference staff at a theological library, or how well read an individual information professional might be, the vast amount of material associated with the field of religion or its related disciplines dictates that it is impossible to grasp it all. Inevitably, in a robust learning environment a patron will ask a question involving a methodology, figure, subject, or movement beyond the bounds of the librarians' own areas of expertise. Reading bibliographic essays, whether written by a librarian, a teaching faculty member, or researcher with expertise in the subject, is an excellent way for librarians to gain awareness of important work in fields that may be outside their own special knowledge. The bibliographic essay is not, of course, the only tool available to librarians. The reference librarian well versed in the craft of librarianship has access to a host of tools to guide patrons forward on their journeys of intellectual discovery, even when the subject matter appears to be arcane. Everyone has a favorite research utility. The OPAC is often a first line of inquiry and is easily supplemented by abstracts, dictionaries, databases, book reviews, and the rich resources of the reference room and internet. In some desperate cases an enterprising librarian may even seek to contact a colleague with whom he or she has networked at a professional meeting. When delving into the librarian's bag of tricks, however, the value of the bibliographic essay is not to be underestimated. In addition to serving as a "pathfinder" to guide patrons or as an introduction to important work in a previously unexplored (by the librarian) segment of the field of knowledge, a well-written bibliographic essay may also assist the librarian in collection development.

THE NATURE OF THE BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

While bibliographic essays are *de rigueur* in some fields such as history, to the uninitiated the bibliographic essay inhabits a hazy terrain. It shares characteristics with the book review, the annotated bibliography, and the full-blown article. Yet, it is not quite any of these. It might be best described as a hybrid. Its essence is integrally linked with its purpose. In short, a bibliographic essay provides an introduction to several of the key sources on a given topic, rather than just one. Thus, the bibliographic essay differs from the book review, in which authors tend to address the merits of a single, recently published title. Because the essay incorporates discussion of many books or articles, the bibliographic essay likewise has affinities with the annotated bibliographies found at the conclusion

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of books, but it goes well beyond the scope of these. Indeed, individual sources within a body of literature are discussed, evaluated, compared, and contrasted, resulting in a fuller presentation of the material than would occur in even an extensively annotated list. In addition, as distinct from an annotated bibliography, a bibliographic essay frequently reflects a point of view or position about the topic or how the resources relate to one another. Finally, while a bibliographic essay in many ways resembles the format of a full-blown article, it does not fall into that category either. For instance, the bibliographic essay does not typically include footnotes, and its characteristic content as an overview of existing literature is in marked contrast to the objectives of articles in which an author might report of the results of a new experiment or theory, or advance the implications of a new archeological or historical discovery.

As a consequence of this hybrid nature, the bibliographic essay might best be conceived as a conversation between an author who has read extensively on a given topic and those less experienced with the subject wishing to benefit from the author's advice regarding the best resources to deepen their own understanding. In such a conversation, the expert would not merely list the items that would be read in a terse list, but would detail each recommended resource's importance to the field, where it stands in relation to developments in the field of study, and what newer studies supplant or supplement older classics. The bibliographic essay is a written proxy for this rich dialogue about the materials available to those preparing to delve into a subject. Of course, like any other written document, the author of the bibliographic essay must take care in how the essay is crafted so that potential readers may use it to best effect. That is the nature of the art.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STRUCTURING A BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

There are a number of questions that an author will do well to keep in mind when weaving a list of recommended readings into a coherent and vibrant bibliographic essay. The list below, even though it isn't intended to be comprehensive, contains five questions that authors of bibliographic essays should consider when crafting manuscripts.

- 1) *What possible organizational scheme may be employed to assist with the flow of the essay?* The author must lead the reader along a well-ordered path where the discussion of the materials flows naturally from one resource to the next. The organizational scheme, for instance, may be based on chronology, theological perspective, format/type of material, common methodologies in the resources, denominational viewpoints, schools of thought, status of works as classic or trendy, common lines of argumentation, the intended level of material (introductory, intermediate, or advanced), or any other organizing principle that suggests itself when the materials are taken together as a body of literature.
- 2) *What resources should be included?* Unlike an annotated list, which may easily be comprehensive, the author of a bibliographic essay must judge which materials should be included in the essay and which others may be excluded. The object is to find things similar enough that they may be readily compared/contrasted, or which fall into an established theme. Authors should also keep in mind that the primary objective is to provide advice regarding what works are worth reading on a topic, rather than identifying what should not be read. This does not mean that one should avoid pointing out weaknesses or oversights in texts, but does imply that truly inferior works may be left out of the discussion. The goal is to highlight prominent, distinctive, standard, innovative, or influential works.

- 3) *What is the context, discipline, or historical period that is the focus of the essay?* The topic of the bibliographic essay must be established clearly and be easily identifiable for the reader. As a consequence, a few sentences introducing the main focus near the start and also a conclusion at the end are appropriate elements for a bibliographic essay.
- 4) *Are there other formats or media?* In a day when electronic formats are becoming more prevalent, including resources other than those of traditional print may be appropriate for bibliographic essays in some fields.
- 5) *Has attention been paid to prose and stylistic elements?* Even though hammering out the content and the structure of a bibliographic essay are vital, authors should not overlook stylistic matters such as word choice, figures of speech like alliteration or metaphor, avoidance of redundancy, variations in sentence length, and other techniques. Along these lines, care should also be exercised in using personal pronouns such as “I,” “me,” and “you.” The prose and style of bibliographic essays is a bit more formal than that of the reaction paper or editorial, so in general the use of personal pronouns and an autobiographical tone in the essay should be avoided. Focusing on stylistic details such as these increases the reader’s pleasure and grasp of the material while elevating the essay from the realm of the mundane.

The author who begins the task of writing a bibliographic essay with these considerations in mind is well on his or her way to producing a well-structured piece, written with flair.

CONCLUSION

The bibliographic essay plays a crucial role in the field of information studies. Librarians may use this tool to assist patrons in areas of research in arenas beyond a personal realm of expertise, develop the collection, or dive into recommended readings to increase the breadth of their own professional knowledge. The bibliographic essay is characterized by a type of learned writing that straddles the fences between the full academic article, the book review, and the annotated bibliography. Despite the ambiguous location between these three genres, authors should pay careful attention to its composition and structure.

A few bibliographic essays appear in this inaugural issue of *Theological Librarianship*. It is hoped that the combination of this short exposition on the art and nature of the bibliographic essay and the examples provided by these essays will help to guide and inspire prospective contributors in this format. While the world may not have room to contain all of the potential books that might be written in religious studies, there is certainly space for bibliographic essays to help point the way through the stacks. Who will accept the challenge?

