

## TWO THEOLOGICAL CLASSIC LIBRARIES ON INTERNET

For students and teachers in theology outside Europe and N. America, to find patristic literature and other landmark documents of christianity, e.g., important monastic rules in the western church, has always been difficult, if not impossible. Collection of important christian works in the patristic and medieval eras among theological libraries in Hong Kong is far from comprehensive. Acquisition of all these works is a severe financial burden and is probably not treated an urgent need for a seminary. This is an area where the Internet can fill in the gap.

Despite all the popular talks of audiovisual applications, interactive games, low-cost intercontinental communication on various one-to-one, one-to-many bases, the Internet's power in the more dumb and traditional application of transferal of large text files should not be overlooked. It is especially useful in the area of provision of educational materials. The two websites reviewed below serve well in this manner. They can widen the access of classical christian texts, thus enrich Asian theological students' horizons.

### *The Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL)* (<http://ccel.wheaton.edu>)

This is a service from Wheaton College, maintained by one of their associate professors in computer science, Harry Plantinga. It aims to supply English classical christian works or English translations of classical and medieval texts. Apart from these there are some fiction, e.g., works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Most of the texts have endnotes.

The "library" can be divided into 3 parts:

- a) Bible Study Tools (9 dictionaries, synopses, encyclopedic commentaries and a KJV arranged by subject);
- b) The 38-volume Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF) series;
- c) Other selected works (arranged alphabetically with respect to the names of authors, total no. of authors in this section is 59)

The NPNF series has been the basic collection of patristic literature in the English-speaking world for a century. The Wheaton website now allows anyone wishing to use the NPNF works to download each volume at a time as text files, "pdf" files, zipped files or "html" files ("html" files available for works in the Augustine series of the

Post-Nicene Fathers only). The fact that the user cannot download individual documents proves to be inconvenient. The user must endure situations like picking out the work of Ignatius of Antioch among those of Justin, Clement of Rome, etc., from vol. 1 of the Ante-Nicene Fathers series; or search for Gregory of Nyssa's "Life of Macrina" from the whole translated corpus of his work in Vol. 6 of the Post-Nicene Fathers series II. Also, the smallest uncompressed text file is 1.5M large, which makes it impossible to store any of them on a 1.44M floppy disk. The last problem does not exist for works outside the NPNF corpus. However some files have the opposite problem. They must be read as individual chapters or even sections of a chapter, e.g. "the Spiritual Exercises" of Ignatius of Loyola, "On Loving God" of Bernard Clairvaux and the "Confessions" of Augustine. It is really a nuisance to have to activate more than 100 links in reading the "Confessions."

In addition to the problem of file organization, the CCEL provides no external links to similar collections. To access texts not collected by the CCEL, the user has to connect him/herself to other servers, e.g. the "Enneads" of Plotinos (which is made available online by a server in MIT), and then access other texts by the non-Wheaton server. Compared with the CCEL, the ECOLE service reviewed below has much better outside linkages. The latter allows the user to jump to 12 other similar libraries directly.

Despite the three shortcomings mentioned above, the CCEL search service pleases the reviewer greatly. The CCEL uses "EXCITE" to do both keyword and concept searches in its library collection. The user can activate the search engine on the whole library or just on the NPNF corpus. Such search facilities have great potential for developing novel and student-defined topical studies. The reviewer would never have imagined a concept search of "German theology" captures three Wesleyan sermons!

Though CCEL cannot be considered a complete library of christian classics, the fact that it has managed to collect christian writings from the late 1st century AD (Clement of Rome) to the early 20th century (Dorothy Sayers) in two menus. It should help significantly in dispelling the sense of remoteness of classical christian writings.

### ***The Early Church On-line Encyclopedia (ECOLE)***

*(<http://cedar.evansville.edu/~ecoleweb> or*

*<http://www.evansville.edu/~ecoleweb>)*

Like the CCEL, ECOLE is also a US-based project. It is created by Anthony F. Beavers, associate professor in Greek metaphysics and early Christian thoughts in the University of Evansville. But contributors to the ECOLE materials also come from Canadian, English, French and US universities other than Evansville. Unlike CCEL, ECOLE explicitly stops itself at the Reformation (thus one cannot find early Quaker

writings or the works of Wesley). However, ECOLE aims at more than provision of documents, it also supplies visual images concerned with early christianity, e.g., icons of saints, a chronology that can be accessed year-by-year or country-by-country, as well as collections of Internet sites related to the study of western antiquity. One can safely call ECOLE a project aiming at being a multimedia encyclopedia.

ECOLE have documents by 114 named authors, arranged in alphabetical order. However instead of author-based like the CCEL, the arrangement in ECOLE mixes author, title and subject together. One can find "Bible" under "B," "lives of western saints" under "L," and etc. ECOLE managed to organise texts without a clear author into an easily searchable scheme. This organisation surely avoids the need to have multiple indexes. However, it is too early to say if putting author, title and subject into one search index would be accepted by the academic community.

In spite of its name of "Early Church," ECOLE has collected many documents that fall outside the proper range of christian theology, they include many works of classical Greek philosophy, e.g., the whole corpus of Plato (24 works) and Aristotle (29 works), classical history and mythology as well as the canons of Islam (the Koran found under "K") and sermons of Mohammed. Though the collection of such materials can never be comprehensive in an index devoted to christian documents, the existence of such materials in ECOLE facilitates students and teachers to access texts closely tied with the development of christianity much more conveniently than in conventional library settings. For small institutions like most seminaries in Hong Kong, sites like ECOLE should spare much efforts and resources in acquiring background materials which do not fall inside the proper domain of christian theology, yet are very important for comprehensive reference purposes.

In addition to the wider background of materials, ECOLE has 12 built-in links to online libraries in its documents' page. These libraries have a very heterogeneous background, including sites by Evangelical christians, Roman Catholics, Eastern Church christians, Muslims and those purely academic in nature. Of the last category, there is an online library entirely devoted to "christian" documents which have been regarded as heretical.

Both CCEL and ECOLE can expand a student or a teacher's library greatly. Texts that previously accessible only by international inter-library loans are now at the fingertips of anyone who has access to the Internet. Historical theology courses can go beyond the mere reading of a few modern secondary works. One can directly tackle primary texts, without having to worry about text availability.

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## *Future Developments*

Will websites replace conventional academic libraries entirely? It looks like a daunting competition to any library of classics. In the USA, any book published before 1920 are in the public domain. The same applies to works published before 1964 whose copyrights are not renewed after 28 years.<sup>1</sup> The respective years will become 1921 and 1965 next year (1997), etc.. Many sites also explicitly permit reproduction of their contents (provided the acknowledgment and copyright notice are also copied) for personal and educational uses. Curiously, modern Internet technology may well revive interest in all aspects of history by much better improving the accessibility of historical documents.

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Parishioner of SKH Holy Trinity

## **Editorial Notes**

The review article by Lee has a helpful description though less than comprehensive investigation of the mentioned websites. Nevertheless Lee has shown a very promising avenue for historical research. As the article is published, many more other media formats have sprung up to provide inexpensive alternatives than CCEL and ECOLE for historical christian documents. The SAGE Digital Library Vol. 1-4 CD-ROM was just released in the latter part of 1996. This title contains Bible versions, commentaries, reference works as well as collections of several important theological thinkers, e.g., John Calvin, Martin Luther, Charles Finney, and etc. There is also a complete collection of Early Church Fathers' writings. Certainly a CD-ROM is much more easily accessible than a website. This title promises a powerful searching ability with Adobe Acrobat Reader. It runs on almost all popular platforms in the market, i.e., DOS, Windows, Mac, and Unix. We have not have the chance to review this CD-ROM as it has come in too late for evaluation. If anyone has used this same title, we welcome your review to be published. We look forward to provide better information on this matter. The future library is quickly evolving. We will soon witness many of the historical documents published inexpensively in various media formats and we should take advantage of them.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Halsall, *Medieval Sourcebook*, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/shook.html>