The Virtual Catalogue Theology and Church (*Virtueller Katalog Theologie und Kirche*; VThK) – a state-of-the-art report

By Siegfried Schmidt

In Germany, the academic libraries of the Catholic Church and of the protestant churches hold about 20 million books. About 50.000 periodicals are subscribed for the library-users, too. Beside their large scale the complexity is another characteristic feature of these holdings: large collections of very precious medieval manuscripts, considerable stocks of incunabula, rare books and books printed before 1800, numerous special collections within theology, philosophy, the arts, human sciences or about fields important for the parent institution of the library have also to be mentioned. Many religious orders possess very wide-ranging book collections regarding the history and spirituality of their communities. Diocesan libraries often call very good stocks about their region their own.

For the two associations of church libraries in Germany, the catholic *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Katholisch-Theologischen Bibliotheken, AKThB,* and its counterpart, the protestant *Verband kirchlich-wissenschaftlicher Bibliotheken, VKwB,* stock exploitation and improvement of access to the holdings have always been important topics of cooperation. For reaching this goal in the past the inter-library lending between the church libraries was organised, standards for cataloguing and indexing were set and the 250 members of both associations were supported by implementing data processing systems in their libraries.

In the middle of the 90ies, when more and more libraries had data records for at least part of their collections, the idea of an electronic union catalogue for these records was born. The result of the following considerations was a CD-ROM-product, the so-called *Kirchlicher Verbundkatalog, KiVK.* Between October 1996 and November 1998 three editions were published, the last edition contained the respectable amount of about 1.25 million records; 80 % books and 20 % articles. The first edition started with 35 libraries. This figure had doubled two years later, 71 libraries were involved in the third edition. Altogether the KiVK was rather successful. Beside its function as a useful database for the retrieval of theological literature, it was a good instrument for controlling the inter-library lending and an aid for retrospective cataloguing of books, because downloading of data records is possible. The CD-ROM was sold not only to church libraries but also to a lot of other academic libraries and single persons.

Nevertheless, it was not possible to produce the KiVK as a CD-ROM any longer. A fourth edition never was published, though between 1999 and 2001 it was announced for several times. The main reasons for this failure are: The KiVK used the technology of *Allegro*, a cheap and – at least in small libraries – very common library software. Data records of libraries using other software systems had to been converted to Allegro. With the increasing amount of data records and an increasing number of different software systems being used by the church libraries (even Allegro exists in several versions) it became more and more difficult to convert all the records into a homogenous data format. In addition to these problems this work was done only by a few, highly engaged librarians beside the regular work at their institutions.

As time went by it became obvious, that a new approach was necessary to realise the still fascinating idea of a union catalogue for the church libraries. Because of the enormous spreading of the internet all over the world since the middle of the 90ies and an fast increasing number of libraries offering their catalogue information even by an online public access catalogue (opac) in the web, in the beginning of 2002 the idea was born, to create a virtual catalogue for the church libraries in the web instead of the former KiVK.

It took about two years between the first theoretical considerations and the offer of a first version of the virtual catalogue in the web in April, 2004. Meanwhile, a lot of problems had to be solved and many different works had to be done by the *Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek Köln*, which took over on request of the *Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz* (Secretary of the German Episcopal Conference) the coordination and management of this project and realised it together with the members of the *Gemeinsame EDV-Kommission* (Joint Commission of Data Processing) of the library associations AKThB and VKwB.

The main topics were:
- Clearing up the readiness of the member libraries to join the VThK
- Looking for a suited partner, which offers the software for the search-engine
- Preparing a financing plan and working out the agreements for those libraries, which want to join the VThK
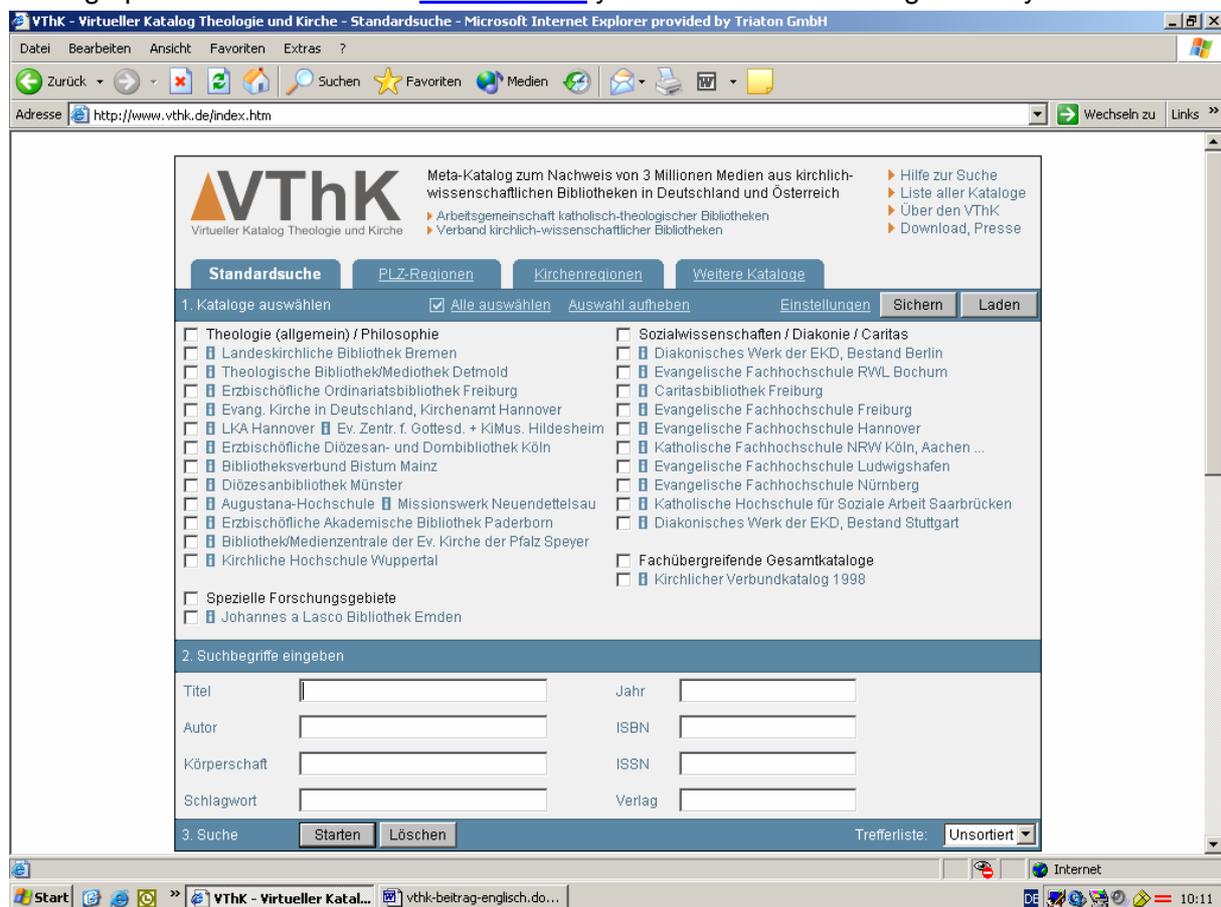- Designing a web-based user-interface for the Vthk

In detail, all member libraries got a questionnaire in winter 2002. After the evaluation of the answers of about 170 libraries, which sent back the forms in time, we got information about their equipment with data processing systems, their eventual plans to change the system in the next years and their readiness and their technical conditions for joining the VThK. This was a good basis for the further planning. Regarding the software for the search-engine we chose the technology of the *Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog, KVK,* after considering some alternatives, such as *Metalib* by *ExLibris.* This software had been developed by the university library of Karlsruhe some years ago and had been very successful in the past. In Germany, the KVK is the most frequented meta-catalogue in internet. It puts together the internet catalogues of the national libraries and the regional library networks of Germany, Switzerland and Austria and of a number of other countries. The advantage of the KVK-technology was – beside the fact, that the KVK proved functioning day by day - that the university of Karlsruhe offered the license for using their software to a rather low price, that the software runs at a server in Karlsruhe and that embedding of new library catalogues in the VThK is done by the university, too. What we had to do was designing the user-interface of the VThK.

Even if the KVK-technology (as I mentioned before) is cheap, money is needed. At the beginning of the project in 2002 we had the promise of the Secretary of the German Epispocal Conference to support the project by the amount of € 50.000,-, which they had got by an anonymous sponsor. With this promise we could start our project at all. Later we got the promise of half of that sum by the protestant churches, too. Of course, this is not enough money for running such a project for a longer time, even if many works within the project – such as designing the web-sites and managing the project - are done by church libraries without charging. We get further incomings by the libraries: A library, which wants to join the VThK, has to pay € 250,- for the first year and – depending on their size – between € 100,-

and € 250,- for the following years. In 2005, the charges will be € 300,- respectively € 120,- to € 300,-. Though our financial basis is still rather small, those incomings allowed us to start the project, which is limited to the end of 2007 by now. Perhaps we will need more money by sponsors at an earlier date. But we considered it is better to realise and start a good work with little money than to beg for much money without being able to show any results of our planning.

After some months of a test period we started the VThK under the domain www.vthk.de in April 2004. At that point we had 16 participants, among them four diocesan libraries and three central libraries of regional protestant churches, a lot of libraries of universities for applied sciences or theology by the church and some special libraries, for example the Caritas-library at Freiburg. In addition the third edition of the KiVK-CD-ROM had been integrated. By this, we had a representative start formation, even if the number of libraries was rather small in the beginning. Meanwhile the number of participants has increased to 23 libraries. We hope that at the end of 2004 about 30 libraries will be put together in the VThK.

Calling up the internet-address www.vthk.de you will find the following side at your screen:

(*The first page of the VThK in the web, August 2004*)

The mask of the standard search shows you all joining libraries. They are sorted to several groups by the main fields of their collections. You can search within all catalogues or within selected catalogues. So, if you search literature to a topic of theology, it is not necessary to search within the catalogues of the universities of applied sciences. If you click the options *PLZ-Regionen or Kirchenregionen,* the catalogues integrated in the VThK are offered in an

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other manner, sorted according to regions. This may be useful, if you want to limit your search to near-by libraries. Under the option *Weitere Kataloge* (further catalogues) you will find links to the opac's of those church libraries, which do not join the VThK up to now.

If you click the letter "i" before the name of a certain library, you get detailed information on it:

(*Information sheet of the Cologne Diocesan- and Cathedral-Library in the VthK*)

As in the KVK search is possible only in the main fields of the data records. Eight different fields are offered by the search mask: Title, author, corporate author, subject heading, year of publication, ISBN, ISSN and publisher. If you combine terms in more than one field, you use the Boolean operator "and". Although the mask is rather simple, it will fit the needs of most of the requests, because most of the users search literature only by using some words of the title or the name of an author.

Let me now explain, why we chose the word "VThK" for this catalogue:
-   "Theology" and "church": Of course, for many church libraries theology is the main area of collection. But it is not a catalogue *only* for theological literature, because we all know, that church libraries collect literature in many other fields related to theology or important for the role of the church in the society. Even for some specialised church libraries and some groups of church libraries theological literature only covers a small part of their stocks. For example, the universities of applied sciences by the churches mainly offer courses on the fields of social work and health sciences. Naturally, the holdings of their libraries correspond with these activities. So we think, "theology *and* church" expresses best, what a user can expect in this catalogue.

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- The word "virtual" means that a *real* union catalogue (with standardised data records within a single database) doesn't exist. Only by searching a kind of union catalogue is temporarily generated for this purpose. If you ask the VThK for literature of a certain author, to a certain subject etc., the search-engine based on the KVK-technology searches parallel all the opac's of the VThK-pool (or that part, you had chosen before) harvesting the records, which fulfil the conditions of your question. This search happens only within a few seconds. There is a time-out after 60 seconds. That means, if a catalogue couldn't reach within a minute or it didn't give an answer, it will not be considered for this time. The search-engine presents you a short-title list of relevant items and gives you information about the total number of relevant hits found in each catalogue. You can view the short-title list library by library but also as a sorted list. Checking duplications isn't possible. But if you want to see a full-record, the software automatically will connect you with the opac of the possessing library. The KVK-technology used by the VThK is able to search in the main fields of data records of all known library-software systems, as far as they are based on standard data formats such as the German *MAB-Format* or the international format *MARC*. The only condition for a participation of a library is the existence of an opac in the internet. If the number of accounts to that opac is small, another restriction can – at least temporarily – occur: the catalogue can't be reached at the moment, because the number of searches exceeds the number of accounts. But up to now this problem is not relevant, because the VThK is not as highly frequented as other virtual catalogues.

(*Results of a VThK-search, presented in a sorted short title-list: The question was author = "Joseph Wittig" and title = "Leben Jesu". The search had been limited to the first group of the libraries. As the result shows, several diocesan libraries and libraries of regional protestant churches possess that title in different editions.)*

To sum up, it can be said, that the VThK offers by one (or should I better say by a few) mouse-click(s) a complete and current sight to the literature held by church libraries in Germany. This is - compared to many library catalogues in the web - not only limited to books, because a lot of church libraries offer the records of the single articles of at least a selected number of journals, too. Being up-to-date and offering the option, to use the VThK, wherever you are and whenever you like, are the two main advantages of this catalogue compared to the former KIVK-CD-ROM. For the church libraries altogether this internet-catalogue is a good opportunity to maintain their role as an important group of the special libraries. If, for example, the well-known search-engine *Google* is fed with the terms *Theologie* and *Katalog* or *Katalog* and *Kirche*, the first hit, you will get, is always "VThK".

Even if with the start of the VThK the project has done an important step forwards, there is still a lot of work ahead. For that reason some remarks to future perspectives and unsolved questions of the VThK are given at the end of this report:

- First, at the moment only a small number of member libraries are represented directly by the VThK. From about 50 libraries, which are provided with an internet opac, 23 take part in the VThK. We hope, this number will increase rapidly, but even if all this libraries will be integrated soon and the number of libraries, which are able to provide an internet opac of their own for their users, will increase the next years, still a lot of member libraries remain, which are outside the catalogue. Among them there is a smaller part, which do not use data processing at the moment and – according to their answers in the questionnaire – are not going to do so the next years. A bigger part of them uses electronic data processing by some ways and has a computerized catalogue in their library, but there is no internet opac at the moment and for the future. Many important libraries of the religious orders are among this group and a lot of them delivered records to the former KiVK. We have to find a solution for this library group. The idea is, to collect their records from time to time, as far as the use Allegro, and to build up an internet-server with an opac. But this idea isn't realised so far.
- Second, the VThK has to become more popular. Between April and August we registrated about 17.000 accesses to the catalogue. That means, only about 120 accesses per day. This is not very much. We hope the number of daily accesses will increase the next months, because the number of participating libraries will grow and it needs time, until the catalogue is well-known and linked with other relevant web-sites. (It has to said, too, that we got some very positive and encouraging reactions by users, who found the catalogue by accident in the web.)
- Third, if the catalogue is much more popular, but another problem still remains: to find literature in a catalogue does not necessarily mean to get it. You might expect, that more literature will be demanded by inter-library lending from the church libraries. Some libraries fear it, because giving a book to inter-library lending costs money, not only for sending the book but also for handling the requests in the library. For this reason, some member libraries are not willing to join the VThK at the moment. So, I think we have to discuss the conditions and the fees of inter-library lending, even between the church libraries. Because finding literature is so easy today, it isn't possible any longer to provide everyone with every book or article requested without charging this service.
- Last but not least, some future developments may be outlined. The VThK is not intended being an exclusive arrangement of the church libraries. Many university and

state libraries possess large collections of theology, among them university library of Tübingen, which collects theology according to the special subject fields programme by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Society), and the university library of Eichstätt, the catholic university of Germany. We are interested to integrate at least the data records of the theological part collections of those libraries into the VThK. By this way, you might consider a (german) *virtual library* for theology in the web, too. Up to now, there are virtual libraries sponsored by the German Research Society on several fields, especially medicine, science and applied sciences. Because a virtual library doesn't exist so far, the idea was discussed between the university library of Tübingen and the Secretary of the German Episcopal Conference, some months ago. If a virtual library has a chance to be realised by Tübingen, we are highly interested to integrate the VThK in this project. And, according to this meeting of BETH, the question of an European perspective of the VThK might be discussed.

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