

Trends In Research Methodologies: Their Implications for Theological Librarians

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Dr Inglis, in the opening address of this conference, raised two salient issues: the sociological and philosophical framework of the 'eternal present', and theology in the congregation.

This 'eternal present' speaks of relevance, of dynamic immediacy - it demands a theology that is real. More fundamentally it demands an acquaintance with the immutable I AM who is at once both transcendent and immanent. The theological academy has not always met those demands and one of the outcomes of this is a move to theology in the congregation. This has immediate import for the theological librarian, for research at all levels is driven by the needs of the community of faith and shaped by the prevailing philosophies.

To aid us in our response this paper will delineate the prevailing trends in three distinct areas: (1) philosophical trends with their implicit methodologies and fields of research, particularly as they manifest in theology and ministry; (2) trends in the research community; and (3) trends in formal theological study. The paper will then address implications for theological libraries both in resources and services.

Philosophical Trends

We are living today in the Postmodern era and our philosophies are either a postscript to or a reaction against Modernity. Language rather than science is regarded as the key to truth and knowing and this has brought the methodologies of theology and the academy closer in recent decades for, since authority in all religions resides in the utterances of their God or gods, theology has always been preoccupied with language and text as the keys to truth and knowledge. What then are these trends?

The analytical methods of modern science have been applied rigorously to language and Language Analysis has become an exquisite scalpel to analyse and deconstruct language and text. It has refined the objective type of textual criticism, which studies the text as an entity in itself, considering the various levels of structure and meaning without reference to any external influence.

In concert with developments in sociology and linguistics it has developed Structuralism - where the text is studied in its sociological and cultural context, and its validity rests in the perceived level of accuracy of representation of that context.

It has also contributed to Deconstruction - where the meanings of the text are successively peeled back to discover even more underlying meanings, or the elements of the text are juggled to create new meanings. This has particular import for Old Testament or Rabbinic studies for it is seen to have its prototype in the writings of mediaeval Talmudic scholars.

Hermeneutics has become an integral part of Postmodern philosophy and has drawn heavily on theological method with this difference; that it is hermeneutic of suspicion rather than of discovery. The authority texts (political, judicial and religious) of a society are studied for their hidden agenda. Hermeneutics has become a tool to empower the oppressed and the minorities. Its most radical expression is to be found in Liberation Theology. However it is also being used constructively by communities of faith to reflect upon and evaluate their social ministries and missiological practices.

These then are the postscripts to Modernity. But what of the reactions against Modernity?

Following the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, the last two hundred years of civilisation have been characterised as Euro-centric, male dominated, individualistic, pursuing ecologically unsustainable development. To that list, the Judaeo-Christian ethic is sometimes added as a pervasive, ideological influence. The reactions are predictable.

Firstly there is a move away from Euro-centric to Afro-centric and Aboriginal cultures with an increasing interest in the religions of those cultures, comparative religious studies providing fertile ground for research. Concomitant with this, particularly in Christianity, is a move to separate the core tenets of the faith from cultural or traditional trappings. Contextualisation, as opposed to syncretism, is a global theological issue.

Feminism is not merely a reaction to male chauvinism. It is a powerful ideological force with particular attention in the academy focused on feminist literature and theology. It challenges many of the presuppositions of the major faiths and, whatever positions communities of faith take on these issues, there is a recognised need to interrogate and respond to the challenges. Green politics provides the most radical responses to the developmental juggernaut and Green Theology is increasingly providing a spiritual underpinning of the movement. Less radical theologians are researching humanity's stewardship role in the cosmos.

The response to rampant individualism has often been more rhetorical than practical, and the altruism of social justice and equity failing to materialise in the real world. The rhetoric has, however, given rise to a more definitive social gospel and a trend towards more social research within communities of faith outside the hallowed halls of seminaries.

Two other reactions which have relevance for theology need to be addressed. The first is the response of sociologists who, believing that philosophy has, in the sterility of analysis and structure, abdicated its right to speak into society, have turned to sociology to find the answers. This has, at one level, furnished the skills and resources for studying texts in their contexts. At another level it has moved right away from theoretical discourse and focused on case study as the paradigm for research. Action research (research *in situ*) has become a tool of trade. Whilst this may not impact on theology *per se*, it does impact on the research in ministry areas, particularly in the social and missiological arenas, and increasing numbers of our clientele are involved in 'applied theology'

The ultimate reaction is against the remaining absolutes of Modernity and it finds its justification in the philosophies discussed earlier. If there are no longer any absolutes, if the only certainty is change, truth becomes relative and socially constructed meaning takes precedence over it. The literary, historical and religious canons are no longer regarded as sacrosanct and we are vulnerable to radical decoding and reconstruction to fit the immediate social context, or else to extinction. This has struck at the very roots of traditional theology, questioning the validity of the sacred texts and other historical critical sources; it has also impacted heavily on the critical, textual methods.

The impact of these trends is that, including the methodologies traditionally practised in theological faculties, we can now expect to cater for the following:

- Historical research
- Textual Criticism
- New forms of Literary Criticism
- Postmodern Deconstruction
- Social Critical Theory
- Case Study
- Ethnographic research
- Action Research.

Fields of Research

Whilst philosophy impacts heavily on research methodology it has an equally significant impact on the fields of research and the following list, although not exhaustive, summarises current research areas:

- Theology
- Afro centric and aboriginal theologies
- Feminist theology
- Liberation theology
- Biblical studies
- Talmudic studies
- History
- Missiology
- Pastoral ministries
- Counselling
- Social responsibilities/Social justice
- Social issues
- Action research in local congregational; and community settings
- Contemporary religious scene.

Trends in the Research Community

In the introduction to this paper I made reference to 'theology in the congregation'. Whatever the reasons for this trend in the communities of faith it is impacting significantly on the clientele in our theological libraries and directly on our collection policies and client services.

As well as the traditional clientele preparing for a theological or pastoral vocation, an increasing number of lay persons are undertaking formal theological study. In fact, in some theological faculties the number of lay students far outstrips the clergy. Do our collections reflect this trend? Students are demanding resources which apply theology to life and particularly to their chosen profession, resources which have not always been a high priority in our libraries. The aggressive evangelism taking place in all the major world religions and the increasing multiculturalism of our societies have contributed to an increase in the number of students preparing for cross-cultural ministries and requiring resources which lie outside the parameters of traditional theology.

Another consequence of this trend towards theology in the congregation, coupled with the increasing concern for social relevance, is an increased call on our resources by local clergy and congregations undertaking less formal research relevant to their practical and social ministries.

A third consequence is the increase in the number of students studying by distance education, either individually or in local congregational groups. This will impact both on our acquisition and borrowing policies.

Trends in Formal Theological Study

The demand in society today is for formal accreditation for any course of study undertaken. In the professional world, an undergraduate degree is regarded as the absolute minimum requirement and there is increasing demand for postgraduate qualifications. Theology is not exempt from these demands. The proliferation of courses and modes of study for which our libraries have to cater is summarised below.

Types of Course

- Diploma and Certificate course (little research required)
- Undergraduate Degree: B.D., B.Th., B.Min., (course work + project/dissertation)
- Graduate Diplomas: (course work)
- Course Work Master's Degree: (includes a level of independent research)
- Research Master's degree
- Professional Doctorates: D.Min., D.Miss. (course work + research)
- PhD., D.Theol. or equivalent (research degrees)
- Post-doctoral research

Modes of Study

- Internal
- External through distance education
- External through an ANZTLA affiliated institution
- External through a local university
- External through an overseas institution with local residential schools.

Implications for Librarians

Finks (1989:356), in discussing the role of librarians, states:

We obviously owe our existence to the fact that society has a need for an institution that will store up facts and figures, the wisdom, inspiration and amusement that our fellow humans so often require. We have been invented by society and assigned the cultural role of serving those particular needs.

How then do we as theological librarians serve the particular needs of current theological research? What are the implications for resources?

Resources

Firstly we need to ensure that we have more broadly based collections both philosophically and theologically. Whatever the level of research, students need to be able to interrogate not only their particular position or theses but also to test its validity in the broader universe of discourse.

Our collections should accommodate the need to study in disciplines outside of the traditional theological parameters - sociological and anthropological texts which provide the contextual sources for students, texts which give a faith perspective on various professions - as well as providing for all the fields of research mentioned above. As stated earlier, our collections need also to reflect the balance of laity and clergy studying in our colleges or faculties.

The trend for higher degrees demands that we develop our collections at a postgraduate level. This will include not only the purchase of texts with appropriate content, but also a reassessment of purchasing policies to budget for the more expensive monographs required. We may need to consider the sharing of resources within a region if we are not already doing so. We also need to investigate possible borrowing agreements with appropriate faculty or university libraries.

The library budget will also have to include purchase of multiple copies of texts for distance education students and the accompanying mailing costs and wages for shipping of resources.

Resources should also include appropriate reference texts for research methodologies and databases for collating and processing data. Individual librarians need to consider what technology resources need to be integrated into the library to facilitate access between students and resources.

Services

But it is not enough merely to provide resources. We need to provide appropriate services for on-campus students and clergy, for external students and lay students. Engle (1986: 32), in a paper on the philosophy of College libraries stated:

I think most librarians would agree...that the Hebrew model of the personal agent, is preferred to the rational observer of ancient Greece. Our role is to intervene at the meeting place of users, book, access systems, and the ideas and information carried by those books. We intervene by verbally and physically interacting with the user and by the way we catalogue, classify...and otherwise make available the carriers of the metaphysical. We seek out those who require assistance and facilitate the contact between minds and ideas and information by the means at our disposal.

How can we facilitate that contact? Our first task is to demythologise the theological library and develop a user friendly library. There are practical issues which can make it user friendly but of prime importance is the personal service and encouragement of the librarian. It needs to be a welcoming place and, within the architectural constraints of the building, the resources need to be seen to be accessible. Library guides and clear instruction manuals need to be prepared and available in an open display. Copies of instructions for all programs and procedures should also be easily visible and unable to be removed from key places. Adequate library and information technology, both formal and incidental, is critical in the changing theological scene. Library orientation is essential. However it should not only be conducted for all new intakes of students, other more specific courses should be run when appropriate - e.g. conducting journal searches, accessing archival and other primary source materials, information technologies.

We need to ensure also that students receive adequate education in research methodologies. This is not to suggest that we ought to undertake such education ourselves but, if it is not addressed formally by faculty, the lot usually falls to the librarian to see the struggling student through. We need to establish reliable, speedy access to interlibrary loans and concomitant with that investigate the options for accessing overseas resources.

Internet access in the library, with a user-pays facility, can radically improve the researcher's access to current resources. It can also facilitate the search for elusive information. An increasing number of professional journals is now on the Internet and providing student access to these can reduce ILLs significantly. It also enables the serious researcher to chat with others working in the same field. The ever-increasing accessibility of resources to the student demands that the librarian keeps up to date with referencing and bibliographic trends, particularly of more obscure and electronic sources.

We also need to provide appropriate services for our distance education students. These could include provision of on-line access to the catalogue, reference and search services for users in remote areas, setting up regional resource centres.

One option to be considered with the move to theology in the congregation is combining the roles of diocesan and theological libraries. This would, of course, require the organisational structure to integrate the existing libraries and standardise the catalogue. However, there are the advantages of broadening the collection and of bringing the community of faith and the theologians into closer contact. There is also a pragmatic economic benefit in such an arrangement.

In conclusion, this paper has addressed briefly the current trends in philosophy and methodology, in theological education and in the research community. In concert with this it has considered the move of theology into the congregation, and ultimately has addressed the implications for theological librarians. Let us take up the role that Engle (1986: 32) has defined so succinctly:

...to intervene at the meeting place of users, books, access systems, and the ideas and information carried by those books.... [to] seek out those who require assistance and facilitate the contact between minds and ideas and information by the means at our disposal.

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