

# Mapping the Landscape

*Peter Bentley*

Changes in the Australian religious and church scene over the past twenty five years have been significant. I will mention three areas which have particular relevance for theological libraries and then will present a few thoughts on challenges facing theological libraries and the possibilities ahead.

## 1. The Religious and Church Scene

### 1.1 *Denominations and religions*

While there has been little overall change in the Christian make-up according to the Census, there has been a consistent decrease in the past three decades among the more established denominations, except for the Catholics. The most significant decrease came in the period 1971 - 1976, with the Christian affiliation falling from 86% to 79%. There was actually a slight growth in the 1991 Census record, but researchers point to the change in the mode of answering of the religious question as having influenced this growth, and as the 1996 Census showed it was not to be repeated. However, even with decline, just under three-quarters of the population still identified with a Christian religious denomination in 1996.

A key feature of these recent decades has been the emergence of larger communities of other faiths. Judaism has remained relatively stable, but Buddhism and Islam have grown rapidly mainly through immigration, but also reflecting their younger age and child bearing profiles. However, the percentage of people identifying with other faiths in Australia is still not very high, but then 3.5% is over three times the level of 1971 and some faiths are certainly significant in regional areas of capital cities. Also there are some distinct religious statistics pointing to inter-faith interaction especially in common areas of expertise. I noted that the Library of the Great Synagogue joined ANZLTA in 1996 so ANZTLA, along with a growing number of churches and religious bodies now has personal experience of being part of our multi-faith Australia.

Another interesting indicator of the changed position of the denominations has been the trend away from religious marriage ceremonies. During the last decade, the percentage of marriages conducted by religious celebrants has recorded a slow decline, with a period of slight improvement in 1990 and 1991. The significant factor, the introduction of a broader civil marriage option in 1973, began to have a major impact within two years. Previously, couples wishing a civil marriage were mainly confined to an official Registry Office. Authorised marriage celebrants could however conduct marriages in parks, homes and a variety of non-church settings, usually with a style that met the wishes of the couple. In 1973 nearly 84% of marriages were performed with a religious rite. By 1993 this figure had fallen to 58% and now it is closer to 50%.

The main groups according to the number of marriages conducted were: *Catholic, Anglican, Uniting, Orthodox, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Churches of Christ*. Until 1996 these eight churches were the largest, though there was an occasional shift in the order. A significant change happened in 1996 with Islam entering the top eight ahead of the Lutherans and Churches of Christ. Given its younger age profile, Islam could well become the fifth largest celebrant category within another decade.

### *1.2 Church attendance*

Overall most researchers conclude that church attendance has fallen in Australia during the last three decades, with currently between 8 and 12% of the adult population attending church on a regular or weekly basis. Overall attendance has not declined as rapidly as some people expected because of the increase in size of the older and newer Pentecostal groups at the same time as some of the established churches suffered declining attendances. Some CRA survey material used in our Religious Profiles series indicates that Pentecostal churches now have the second largest attendance after the Catholics, or at least a very similar attendance to the Anglican and Uniting churches.

One of the key findings of the National Social Science Survey in 1993 was that three quarters of the adult population remember a time when they went to church at least once a month. This compares with less than one quarter who indicated they still attended once a month. The percentage of the adult population who remember a time when they went to church at least once a month decreases swiftly with age, perhaps reflecting the decline of the Sunday School movement and the move away from a Christendom style culture during the last quarter of a century.

### *1.3 Theological Polarisation*

There has been growing unity between denominations, but there seems to be growing disunity within denominations. Some of this is related to changing theological patterns like the difference in theological education, the focus in some quarters on theological narrative (telling the personal story versus a systematic approach), but also important has been changing language patterns, especially the use of inclusive language. Interestingly a widespread area of language debate in theological circles concerns the language for God, while most of our church attenders are still coming to grips with inclusive language for hymns.

This polarisation is also a feature of the development or a search for a truly or more Christian Australia. While there have always been elements of religious separation, there is now more opportunity for defined Christian separation with established political parties and groups, and most importantly a growing educational system.

### *1.4 The Christian school movement*

There have always been religious schools in Australia, but the abolition of state aid in the 19th century severely limited growth and diversity. The Catholic church, with its established teaching orders and parish base maintained a substantial dual educational system (primary and secondary), while the established private secondary schools (greater public schools) of other denominations became their main religious

focus. The present-day religious school system developed significantly since the 1960s because of the provision of state aid and the opening up and provision of a variety of educational paths during the 1970s which allowed great freedom to establish alternative Christian schools. These schools are essentially non-denominational based and the majority belong to one of the two professional organisations, Christian Community Schools and Parent Controlled Schools. The Christian school movement increased its number substantially during the years 1976-1996 (by 113%) and it has now become an established group with in-service training and higher educational facilities and a growing academic focus. It is evident that the Catholic system is still the largest of the non-government school systems, but it has experienced a slight decrease in the overall picture (compared to the total non-government school population).

One of the next developments arising from the Christian school movement will be the formation of an independent Christian university and already several groups, mainly from a Pentecostal or Christian school background are exploring this possibility.

#### *1.5 Theological and Bible College Development*

Perhaps related to the development of the Christian schools movement has been the development of the bible college movement in the last two decades. Prior to 1970 most theological training was conducted in denominational colleges or in one of the capital city established missionary and bible colleges. In 1997 a CRA survey found there were at least 110 bible and theological colleges, with 55% being denominationally based. Of the denominational colleges 40% were Catholic, including the various male Catholic religious orders.

In August 1997 *On Being* magazine listed 137 Australian based training opportunities of which about one-third were primarily courses managed by para-church organisations (including correspondence based), one-third denominationally based and one-third independent and usually Pentecostal in orientation.

Over one-third of the colleges were based in NSW and the ACT and a further third were based in Queensland and Victoria (similar numbers). The larger number of training centres and institutions in the *On Being* survey reflects the inclusion of a number of training and ministry institutions related to individual churches which were not included in the CRA formal list as well as institutions providing shorter courses mainly by correspondence and specialised institutions usually educational (school) in orientation.

Why is the college development important for ANZTLA? Well, each college it seems also has to have a library and as members of ANZTLA know, the standard and functioning of these libraries can vary considerably. Overall very few libraries have anywhere near the number of books to sustain internal teaching of a wide curriculum. Since the majority of colleges are dependent on student fees or a denominational subsidy there also seems little scope for library development.

Another aspect to the development of the bible college movement is the polarisation I mentioned earlier. Some bible colleges have been founded as a reaction to trends witnessed in theological colleges and are in essence 'back to the bible places', rather than theological colleges.

## **2. Changes in overall book and reading habits**

As well as significant changes in our religious environment there have been major changes to our book culture, some of which are still being worked out. Yes, people are still reading or at least buying books and, in particular, magazines, though an issue for most publishers of magazines, particularly religious publishers is declining loyalty among their readers due to the difficulty of satisfying an increasingly broad market.

Are we people of the book anymore? Some of us are, but increasingly many of us aren't, and if overseas evidence is any guide, new generations in the church will be even less so. Certainly magazines will be read, but serious books will be explored less frequently and the main source of the written word for the new generation will be on the Internet, and this will become an increasingly spoken word. Perhaps we will go back to a type of oral history with an electronic bent.

Certainly the CRA surveys of Christian book sellers in 1994 and 1996 still show great evidence of the buying of religious books, but this is mainly devotional and popular with less than 5% of books bought classified as theological or historical. It is also difficult to gauge the effect or significance of our book buying in our churches. Little work has been done on the actual purchasers and their reading habits.

Colin Oliver has an interesting reflection in a short piece in *Zadok Perspectives* (Winter 1997, no.57) about the possible demise of the local Christian bookshop, but he is more optimistic than I am.

Books can now be readily ordered through the Internet from overseas at less than it costs to buy at a local shop here, even including airmail post from the USA. As more people use this facility, the local book market will shrink even further and the remaining stores may become more reliant on what were originally smaller items, like Christian souvenirs and cards. We may be left with a handful of Christian book sellers in Australia, perhaps even only the two largest ones who have established funding and mail-order networks and are best placed to withstand the changes I have mentioned.

## **3. The development of ANZTLA**

While all these two areas have been experiencing change, there has been a significant development in theological circles with moves toward establishing more professional theological libraries culminating in the eventual arrival of ANZTLA. ANZTLA strengths are its commitment to professionalism and dedication to development.

Many of the issues I touch on tonight are already on your agenda and taken up in your own publications, particularly the excellent in-house newsletter which I personally subscribe to. I have been made aware of the continuing range of theological librarian issues through readable articles and discussion pieces all related to the future. One feature of ANZTLA's professionalism I cannot neglect is the excellent collection of statistics which over time has built up an excellent profile of the libraries and the changes to date. One aspect I noted from the statistics is the increasing move toward electronic communication through Internet connection.

#### 4. Challenges for Theological Libraries

4.1 How can libraries provide for a growing theological diversity? How do you keep a collection of books for all interests and backgrounds given the range of students and the reasons for them attending a theological college. I have particular sympathy for Uniting Church librarians as they will face further difficulties in the future as they are called to cater for an impossibly broad range. Also of concern in at least the short term is the increase in printed publishing in religious circles, made possible by the advancements in computer technology, particularly that niche market *Vanity Publications*.

4.2 Electronic publishing will be a major growth area in the future. For example, I believe that the Christian Research Association publishing arm will move into the electronic area rather than continue with more printed books. Our current project, a review of the *Religious Community Profiles Series* will be produced on CD-Rom and will be marketed at probably a quarter of the cost of the present printed series. Actual costs for publications in these forms will be significantly less compared to similar printed material and that will eventually be a good thing for theological libraries, but the difficulty, and perhaps for some an impossible hurdle, will be the cost of the hardware to house and use the new forms.

4.3 A significant change for libraries will be the range and availability of published journals. One of the key features of a good theological library at present is its collection of journals. ANZTLA has been at the forefront here in terms of encouraging journal collections with the publication of important reference works like the *Australasian Union List of Theological Serials (AULOTS)*.

In the future a number of publications will simply cease in printed form and appear only on the screen. The first group to go will be the small niche market journals and magazines which rely on volunteers. A decreasing subscriber base, increasing costs of printing and decreasing availability of volunteer labour will mean that the easiest option will be the world wide web. I can see this happening for three journals I am associated with : *National Outlook*, *Lucas: an evangelical history review* and the *Australian Religion Studies Review*. The latter one has the majority of its members already connected on the Internet through academic institutions and it is far easier to maintain contact and update members through this mechanism.

#### 4.4 Looking further at the impact of the Internet

This will be a major challenge as church people, particularly from the younger generations use this resource rather than visit a library. Already there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that some clergy are using the ready made resources on the web as a substitute for preparation of their own sermons and services. It would be a dangerous and difficult survey to try find out the truth of this. There are also implications for students, the main clients of theological libraries as sample theses, essays and general studies appear with increasing frequency for people to use and change at their will. The challenge will steadily increase as new generations of students come through the colleges. These younger students (and you probably already know some of them) will be totally computer conscious. Some in the future may not have ever been to a physical theological library, but could have visited every theological site on the web.

### 5. Possibilities for Theological Libraries

#### 5.1 *Archival expansion*

I can see libraries moving toward a combined archival library function, providing material that cannot be accessed electronically in any adequate form (not at least for several decades). This is an area I would encourage people to think about. Already I know some are doing this, but perhaps some of the newer colleges could begin to develop this, especially to preserve early ephemera, and resource material from new Christian movements, particularly Pentecostal churches and house churches.

#### 5.2 *Ecumenical co-operation*

I believe there are more significant ecumenical possibilities likely in the future, for example the Adelaide College of Divinity combined campus, but this will only happen if we are prepared to trust each other more. I would like to see some joint ventures in regional areas among our theological colleges and exploration of new joint university and theological college developments like the Murdoch University Library Theology collection.

#### 5.3 *Specialist foundation*

I would like to see a network of specialist theological colleges with libraries which specialise in certain areas: Church History, New Testament etc. This would mean that valuable resources could be spread around. I believe it would be good to have a designated research centre in each region of each major city (which is where the majority of our theological colleges are). With increasing electronic connection and coverage researchers would then be able to examine the contents of each collection in order to maximise their time before they actually travel across town to a particular location.

#### 5.4 *Visual Age*

Some theological libraries may be in a position to become primarily visually based with hundreds of computer terminals, but this is an unrealistic project given the funding allocation of most libraries. Already some private schools are making it mandatory for their students to buy and use notebook computers. As computers increase in capability and portability it may be best to leave this aspect to theological students to develop, rather than force an immediate technological change.

### *5.5 Libraries will become better endowed.*

I have a vision that theological libraries will become much better funded because academics, clergy, students and researchers will all decide to give the amount of money that they spend annually on their personal book collection to theological libraries. Academics and researchers with large private collections would probably acknowledge that they rarely look at the majority of their books let alone have actually read them all. I suspect that many Christians actually treat theological books like works of art, they are to be admired from a distance, but one mustn't touch them in any way. Of course some academics, and they will remain nameless, but they are well known to most theological librarians, have already defaced too many library theological books through copious underlining and exclamation marks, so there will need to be vigilance and education to make them aware that other people have the right to form their own opinion on the written word.

Finally to finish with the obligatory joke and I present my apology at the start for a small amount of plagiarism, namely the context. Many of you have probably heard the story about the gathering of church groups when suddenly one person notices there is a fire and then there is a list of each of the responses from the different church groups. In the following case I have decided not to indicate the denomination, this is left to your own imagination. Well this time this was a fire in every theological library in the country. The librarians however were away at a theological librarians conference, so the main group left to deal with the problem were the students. How did they respond? One group of students did not do anything as they did not believe there was really any fire. Another group bravely went into the library, but they grabbed only the bibles as these were the only books they used anyhow. Another group of students took copies of their denominational textbooks which were safe in their rooms and brought them to add to the fire already raging. One group formed a committee to plan an appropriate response and this committee eventually become the permanent committee for the buying of a new library as they had lost all their books in the inferno that raged. Another group prayed that only the books which were not spiritually helpful would be burnt and that the truly worthy books would be saved by the refining fire. Other groups of students from the same denomination had diverse reactions, some only saved books dealing with the reformation, while another group saved only a particular period of 19th century history. Two other college student groups had a similar reaction, with one saving only the works of the early fathers, and the other books on health and devotions. Another student group immediately printed pamphlets telling their wider church community that there would be a fire sale of the remaining collection the next day and many bargains would be available. Another group made an historically pragmatic decision and took the first 95 books that they could carry. Some college students saved all the books written by members of their own faculty and in one case this was the majority of the library collection anyhow. Now having outlined all these responses I want to say that such a dilemma would never confront a theological librarian, since I know you would each try to save all the books.

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