

Publishing Theology in a Globalised Market

Audra Kunciunas

**Why are
theology books
so expensive?
And why
do we still keep
trying to sell
theology?**

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- She is currently doing a Bachelor of Theology at Yarra Theological Union.
- Her first degree was in agricultural science, so in a sense her career has moved from 'pastoral' to 'pastoral'.
- Audra is also part of the 'Future Directions' team in her parish.

[The pun is Audra's—not mine! Ed]

When the GST was introduced in Australia in 2001 and the Australian dollar was doing very poorly, especially against the US dollar and pound sterling, the book market was looking very grim. Most booksellers had their worst year for many years. Everyone in publishing and bookselling was affected, not just those in the religious and theological book market. The US dollar slipped to 48c during that financial year, and US book exports to Australia plummeted 43%. I remember saying to customers in answer to their enquiries that I had good news and bad news: the good news was that the book they were after was in stock, the bad news was the price.

The traditionally-published book faces a number of challenges, such as electronic books and publishing on demand (which may yet save academic publishing in general), but as I have just 10-15 minutes I won't go into these areas which demand at least a full session each. I'll discuss other challenges, such as rising costs and reduced demand.

First of all, rising costs are significantly affected by the size of the print run. Generally speaking in religious books, the days of the large print run have gone.

We know that theology titles, particular esoteric titles like:

- *The Armenian Adaptation of the 'Ecclesiastical History' of Socrates Scholasticus*; or
- *The Response of Discourse Ethics to the Moral Challenge of the Human Situation as Such and Especially Today*;
- and, finally, *Tatian and the Jewish Scriptures: A Textual and Philological Analysis of the Old Testament Citations in Tatian's 'Diatesseron'*

are expensive books because their audiences are small — although we always hope that a cheaper paperback edition will be available.

Theology publishers, even in the US, may only print 500 copies of a title for world-wide distribution. Try and make a profit out of a title in that sort of venture. The cost of publishing increases dramatically if the book has to be translated. A recent survey into Australian publishing showed that in tertiary publishing the average net profit margin was 1%!

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Publishers, such as US-based Liturgical Press, effectively subsidise their theological publishing programs by making sure their publishing mix is balanced. They put a lot of effort into more popular books, such as prayer & spirituality, church resources and magazine subscriptions. So that with a population of around 250 million and a healthy tertiary sector, even US publishers of theology are struggling to make books viable financially. No wonder that with our population of around 20 million, one thirteenth the size of the US population, there is not much theology being published here.

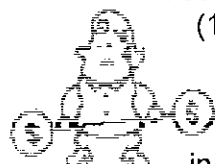
There are some Australian successes in publishing theology, but these are usually because deals are made with academic authors for books to be included on tertiary book lists.

Then there is reduced demand, and here I am speaking about two areas:

- the lack of a book-buying culture, that is the love of books, amongst Australian students, including theology students;
- the use of student readers for courses. I'm a theology student and for my last subject I paid only \$20 for a class reader from which I did all the required reading.

Despite the rising number of theology students, demand for books isn't increasing proportionally. I know from our book-room we get a smattering of theology students, but not many. Oh, that there were more George Q's who come in with their book list and order the lot!

Recently, I saw some figures that showed US marketing costs for university presses had increased from 17.4%



(1988) to 19.2% (2001), yet losses (probably due to a decrease in demand, together with an increase in remaindered stock – this is where the publisher takes all the risk and booksellers simply return unsold stock) grew from 10.8% to 19.7%. This kind of trend explains the movement towards more general publishing as a

means to ensure adequate profits, similar to what religious publishers, such as Liturgical Press, are doing to make ends meet. Publishers are spreading their risk.

Include declining library sales for monographs, because of budget cuts that you as librarians are only too keenly aware of, and the theology market starts to look very depressing. Theology librarians may experience loneliness in their profession but so do those in the theology book market. We never get to experience the globalised joy as do the publishers of Harry Potter books.

One thing I learnt very quickly about publishing and bookselling is that it is a very complicated world. Books go in and out of print, books are revised, and books are sold in territories which may be cut up, seemingly at will -- we can often get the same book (sometimes with different ISBNs) from a number of different sources. As booksellers we have to make a decision about which way to go to service our customers best. We chase up titles for customers all the time, and you would know that sometimes it literally is an electronic 'paper chase'.

You may already know that the book world is divided up into territories: publishers may only have the rights to sell books in specific markets eg. there are books published by the companies we represent for which they hold only regional rights eg. the US and Canada. If customers want that book, we have to buy through, say, a US distributor (which usually means it's going to cost a bit more). There are whole book fairs devoted to buying book rights.

There are advantages in having book territories. One way of providing theology titles at more competitive prices is to buy the rights for the Australian market and locally print, say, 1000 copies. Or we can piggy-back on the original publisher's print run, saving money that way. For example: *Invitation to the Gospels* (commentary on each of the four gospels by eminent biblical scholars published in the US by Paulist Press) The recommended retail price in the US is US\$19.95; we would have had to sell it for around AUD\$40—

compared to being printed for Australian market \$29.95.

Another example is a book by Michael Casey, a well-known author and Benedictine, being published by Liguori Press called *Fully Human, Fully Alive* (based on Jesus humanity as seen through Mark's Gospel). A paperback of 400 pages, it wouldn't be too bad value for \$59.95 but by piggy -backing on Liguori's print run we can retail the book for \$34.95.

With both books we've got the price down but we still have to be able to sell those 1000 odd copies per book to recoup our costs and pay the electricity bill. This may take 2-3 years. If this was your money you were risking, wouldn't you be tempted to put it into some other investment?

Once upon a time, as publishers and booksellers, we were only focused on the Australian market. Now we have to be keenly aware of what is happening in overseas markets: not only being aware of what theology titles are available, but from which companies the books are available and at what prices they are selling books; what freight they are charging, and what specials they are offering.

Once upon a time you were only able to buy overseas books from the Australian distributor. Now the distributor's contract is worth less (some might suggest 'worthless'), publishers are becoming booksellers and working directly into distributors' markets. In the US direct sales by publishers is usual rather than the exception.

A tough book market also means cutting costs. Booksellers can no longer afford the luxury of holding large amounts of stock. There are always trade-offs.

Not only do we in the book trade have to make decisions about which way to go,

but, as librarians, you also have the burden of choice in this globalised market as you decide from where you'll buy books.

So, why do we continue to work in theology?

As publishers and booksellers, the challenge is to create the right mix of books. Theology will always be an important part of that mix but we also have to stay healthy and active in the school, church and prayer & spirituality markets. We also recognise the importance of staying competitive through offering the best service we can while being mindful of costs.

Most importantly, we are excited about the amount of great theological writing being done, particularly by Australian authors such as: Mary Coloe, Frank Maloney, Tony Kelly, Patricia Fox, Kerry Hide, Dorothy Lee, Brendan Byrne, Frank Rees and so on.

There is also the hope that some of this innovative academic work will be translated into pastoral practice by courageous individuals and organisations.

A friend told me that the best description of 'globalisation' can be found in Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. This friend, ever the cynic, was suggesting that 'globalisation' is just a new name for 'capitalism' – with barriers to trade diminishing and markets opening up, money is not just prince but now king.

You don't publish or sell theology because it is going to make you a lot of money. Capitalists don't invest in theology. We publish and sell theology because in this world that is hungry for meaning but looking in all the wrong places, theology is important.

Audra Kuncianus

John Garratt Publishing & Bookroom

***Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed,
and some few to be chewed and digested.***

- "Of Studies". Essays II , Francis Bacon (1561-1626)