

Where Theology Meets the World' : Theological Publishing in Australasia, Ecumenically-based, Critically Engaged with Contemporary Culture.


*by Hilary Regan, Executive Officer,
Australasian Theological Forum*

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First, let me warmly congratulate all graduates, their families, fellow students and colleagues on the achievements we are publicly recognising and celebrating tonight. I realise that for all of you many sacrifices have been made along the way.

Where I am standing delivering this address tonight is almost directly underneath where my desk is, upstairs. For the last two years the Australasian Theological Forum has had its offices here at the Adelaide College of Divinity, for which we are very grateful. It provides many opportunities for closer collaboration between the ACD and the Australasian Theological Forum and vice versa, a collaboration which is quite strong and vibrant. The ATF, though an international body, is Adelaide-based for its administration. So, it is of great importance for us to have such a strong link with one of the theological campuses here in Adelaide. Thank you ACD and ATCC for making this possible.

The ATF is an independent ecumenical interdisciplinary organisation. It runs conferences (and we have run about 25 of those over the last fifteen years), has a membership all of whom receive our twice yearly journal, *Interface*, publishes books in about 15



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different series (including significantly to this group, perhaps, a PhD dissertation series), publishes other stand-alone books, has an online book review, and runs a book prize, and a postgraduate essay prize. We have a board, chaired at present by the Rev Dr Paul Babie of the Law School at the University of Adelaide. Our books are distributed and translated into different languages around the globe with the different publishing partners that we have. We publish books from other parts of Asia and the Pacific, so our name is the Austral-Asian Theological Forum.


Please do not get the impression with this that we are a big wealthy organization. The ATF has as its charter to run conferences and publish. Conferences do not necessarily make money and publishing academic theological books is not like publishing a Harry Potter book. No one in religious or theological publishing is in it to make vast sums of money. We do it because it is our mission. I am the Executive Officer. In terms of our publishing, the Board of Directors is the publisher. The Executive Officer is the representative of the publisher. I am accountable to, and report to, the Board of Directors. Thus I am accountable to at least two people in this room tonight who are directors!

Our vision

ATF Press wishes to be a quality publisher, a publisher of integrity, with people from all over the region choosing to publish with us. We wish to contribute to theological research and publishing in this part of the world and for authors in this part of the world to be able to contribute at an international level. While our books are published here in Australia, they are distributed both locally and internationally and with international publishers for co-editions and translations. (Among these are the following: Paulist, Eerdmans, SPCK, Liturgical Press, Le Cerf [France] and Loyola Press [Brazil]). Thus we see it is as important that our books are carefully assessed and produced and that they are of the best quality. So, we take time in getting books from assessment phase all the way through to printing. This is no different to any other international publisher of integrity

Theology

How do we go about defining theology? How do we explain this word to those outside of our network? In my other life, the one that actually pays money, I am a registered nurse. In the non-theological circles in which I mix, when people ask me what else I do and I say I am involved in publishing, that is fine. When they ask me what sort of books and I say theological books, there is a vacant and somewhat quizzical look. Some say, ‘oh geology’, others ask ‘theology, that is religion, isn’t it?’ I try and explain the difference between religion and theology - and a tall order that one is! But the issue is an important one. Theology is often understood as religion, which is of course partly true. In terms of publishing, I would argue that there is a difference between religious publishing and theological publishing.



“Theology relies on a knowledge of history, both that of the church and of society, of Old and New Testaments, of philosophy, of ethics and morals and of pastoral care.”

Whatever definition we use, it is often difficult to grasp the complexity and uniqueness of theology. If we say it is ‘words about God’, that leaves a sense of a certain loftiness for many people. Likewise, ‘faith seeking understanding’, while perhaps a little easier to comprehend, is not exactly self-explanatory. If we call it explaining what lies behind ‘faith and morals’, well that gives the impression that theology is only about a moral system, and then that gets us back to the difference between religion and theology.

For me, a more comprehensive definition could be one which goes something like this: ‘theology is the thinking the church does as it attends to the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ and as it considers how that Word may be faithfully proclaimed in the contemporary world.’ A bit long but I will unpack it here as I find it more useful than some of the others. To me it can incorporate an ecumenical understanding of Christian theology, and also be helpful when explaining theological publishing.

Theology is an activity of interpretation and response. It is not static. Theology is a combination of elements. Theology relies on a knowledge of history, both that of the church and of society, of Old and New Testaments, of philosophy, of ethics and morals and of pastoral care. As I am trained in systematic theology, it is important to speak of systematic theology in that equation. The ‘words about God’ has Christology (the person and work of Christ), ecclesiology (study of the church as church, and of the sacraments), and pneumatology (study of the Holy Spirit).

Theological publishing

Publishing in its most basic definition is ‘making public’. To quote Giles Clark, who has written various books on publishing, ‘the book is an enduring medium through which ideas and knowledge are communicated, and a society’s culture portrayed’. We could say the same of theological publishing: ‘the written theological word is an enduring medium through which ideas and knowledge are communicated, and the faith community’s reflections are portrayed’.

If we return to one of the shorter definitions of theology for a minute - ‘words about God’ or ‘faith seeking understanding’ - then to paraphrase or borrow one of the mottos of a Catholic religious order, what we are doing in theological publishing is ‘handing on the fruits of our thinking or reflections’. If theology is words about God, then theological publishing is handing on the fruits of that thinking, that thinking about God, about the church and God’s relationship to all of the created order.

Theological publishing is more than documenting ideas, data, biographies or history. It is more than collecting other people’s stories, or journalism, or putting together a series of quotations. Theological publishing is interpretation and response and from this, coming to new knowledge. Theological publishing is handing on the fruits of our thinking to bring about new understandings,



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insights and interpretations. It is an enduring medium, free for all to read and re-read.

The French Dominican A. D. Sertillanges, in his book written in the 1940s entitled *The Intellectual Life*, wrote on the intellectual vocation in the following way: ‘A vocation is not fulfilled by vague reading and a few scattered writings. It requires penetration and continuity and methodical effort, so as to attain a fullness of development which will correspond to the call of the Spirit, and to the resources that it has pleased God to bestow upon us’. In many ways what has been written about the intellectual vocation is applicable, I would suggest, to theological writing and publishing. It is based on penetration, continuity and methodical effort.

Penetration: of scripture, of development and interpretation, of the key issues of a topic, of interpretation, and of contemporary issues. Here I do not wish to enter into any dissection of the difference in interpretation between different groups within the Christian tradition, only to say historically there are differences and we need to accept that each tradition comes to its penetration with different emphases.

Continuity: continuity in terms of development within the tradition and its interpretation. While there is to some extent creativity, and differences in how one articulates the Christian message, there is a certain degree of continuity based on some commonly agreed basics.

Methodical effort and fullness of development: the writing must be good. Not every piece of writing that comes a publisher’s way is or should be published, while other things will not be published until they are sharpened in style and content. Good writing takes some time, whether that be for an essay or a PhD or a book. But writing for publishing a book is not the same as writing an essay or PhD: the audience is very different and so the style needs to be different. Not every piece of work that we receive will be published, some pieces may be shortened, others lengthened, and still others may find a publisher elsewhere. We believe that the processes we use these days in assessing manuscripts and working with authors are the right ones in giving this particular publishing house a good name and reputation. The listing of the Department of Education, Science and Training requires us, for everybody’s sake, to be careful and thorough. (Editorial note: in December 2008 this Australian Government Department was replaced by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.)

Corresponding to the call of the Spirit, and to the resources that it has pleased God to bestow upon us: writing is a gift, theological writing is a vocation. Not every piece of writing, whether by an undergraduate student, postgraduate student, lecturer, or church leader is publishable. As we know from scripture, there are various gifts that are bestowed upon each person. I believe in the same way that ministry is a call, so to be a teacher or writer is also a call. It can



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be learnt and it can be nurtured, it can be assisted, but, in the end, in many ways it is a gift of the Spirit and a vocation. I promise you I did not know what scripture text was going to be used tonight when I began thinking and writing this paper some weeks ago. The text we have just heard is fitting.

Where theology meets the world

In a very real sense publishing is where theology meets the world. It is where theology often concretely engages in debates and issues relating to the interaction between Church and world, society and culture, art, ethics in all its forms – business, social, medical, legal. Yes, it involves broadcasting, yes TV and other forms of the media have a role here. Publishing and broadcasting, television, radio, pod casts, etc. are making public in oral or in the written word new ideas, new thinking and new knowledge. When theological reflections are made public in broadcasting and publishing, that is where theology meets the world. Theology is not a private act, it is always to some extent reacting and interacting, interpreting and responding in the public arena. Theology meets other worlds in some form of dialogue and interaction, whether it be science, ethics, or the arts. What we are doing in bodies such as ATF Press is facilitating that interaction, that dialogue, by making it public for all, anyone, everywhere and anywhere to read and re-read. That is the case whether it be in books published in English or nowadays with various books of ours which are being translated into other languages (there are five of them now and two more in preparation). And, let’s face it, publishing is truly where theology meets the world when one talks of translations into other languages or material from other languages being translated into English (and we have four of these on the boil right now). Publishing is where theology and theological ideas meet various ‘new’ worlds, languages, and cultures and where various worlds interact and intersect.

There was a figure I read once that for every book published with a print run of 500 and all 500 are sold, then the ideas in those 500 copies can influence at least 5,000 people. The figure was not talking about theology but publishing in general. But let’s look at it from the theological publishing perspective and all the different ways a book can be passed on and influence others. It is an impressive figure. Publishing, once again, is where theology meets the world.

I do not wish to enter into the debate between electronic publishing and hard copy publishing, as it is very complex.

Academic theological publishing is fickle, as all publishing is a risk and there is often no way one can predict how well a book will sell. Books are not a necessity of life like food and water. Some books will sell and others will not. Most books are risks. To quote Giles Clark again: ‘risk taking is inherent in the business: while prepared for failures, a publisher, as an eternal optimist with a short memory, forever searches for and expects success – sure in the belief that future



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rewards will more than exceed past losses – the last mistake seemingly the worst.’ He concludes that ‘success depends on personal contacts with authors; illustrators, printers, customers and colleagues; and networking.’ Theological publishing once again is where theology meets the world.

The ATF has been publishing books for close on fifteen years. In that time we have published nearly 100 books if you include our twice-yearly journal *Interface*.

The challenges

I am sorry to say that where theology meets the world is not all rosy! Academic publishing is at the bottom end of publishing, say compared to children’s books, fiction books, and travel books. Religious publishing is at the bottom end of the bottom end of publishing and academic theological publishing is at the bottom end of the bottom end of the bottom end of publishing. It is hard work to meet the costs of production and printing. The actual printing of a book is only one cost that needs to be absorbed: there is copy editing, cover design, payout, and marketing, which are all equal to if not more expensive than the costs of printing a book.

The ATF is a small player. We employ six part-time staff and produce 10 to 12 new books per year. As a general rule of thumb publishers say 80% of the revenue will come from 20% of the titles. For us, that means if we do ten titles a year, two of them have to be hitting the market in a big way to bring in the cash that will sustain the other eight, and selling good numbers into the second, third, fourth and fifth years. Last year for the first time we had one book which fitted that category and two others that nearly did; this year it looks like we have found one such book thus far.

The future

It would be our hope that we are becoming a publisher of integrity. We have put in place a number of processes over the last few years to ensure the quality of work is constantly improving. Or so we believe. It would also be our hope that we keep on keeping on doing what we are doing so that we have a strong legacy of good quality books for many years to come.

Immediate future

Right now we are working on six different books for this year. One of these is from Taiwan, one is from an academic here at the ACD, while another is a dictionary of theological and biblical terms for indigenous students at Nungalinya College in Darwin. This is a book which we have been working on for over three years. The book will have pages illustrated with colour art work done by the students at Nungalinya and we have commissioned a well-known indigenous religious artist to do the art work for the front and back covers.



“I hope that some among you may be published by the ATF in the future, or decide to join us in some way in this important work of publishing.”

To finish

To finish, my heartiest congratulations to all who have graduated tonight. Some of you have shown through your undergraduate and postgraduate studies that you have something to offer the theological community. We, the ATF, want to help you to make that contribution. I hope that some among you may be published by the ATF in the future, or decide to join us in some way in this important work of publishing. I know of at least one person graduating here tonight who is working with us in translating a work from French to English which we will publish next year. I hope some postgraduate students may submit essays for the postgraduate essay prize this year, like there were some from the ACD last year. I hope academic staff here will keep on writing, and publishing, and with us of course or with us in combination with other international publishers, and will submit their publications for the ATF book prize. My invitation is to all people in this room, students, graduates, family and friends of graduates, and of course staff, to come and visit us and see where theology published in Australia meets the world from Brooklyn Park!