



Open Serial Content Supporting Theology & Religion - Update

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Summary

Within the scholarly publishing community, we have had an ongoing discussion about the level of rigor within open access (OA) publishing. In the course of my work as the Director of a team responsible for the quality of a leading bibliographic index supporting the discovery of academic articles, I have encountered a range of positions on this issue and the importance of OA publishing. I have met strong advocates for OA who offer the defense that, even in the exclusive days of print-based subscription journals, there have always been some higher quality and lesser quality journals being published in any field of scholarly thought. They believe concerns about quality can be addressed within the community through various governance initiatives. I have also encountered faculty who have shared quietly that they have been advised by members of their tenure and promotion committee that they should not publish in OA journals due to perceived quality concerns. Many of these individuals make it clear they don't have time to engage with the community to address underlying concerns about the quality of one publishing model over another.

My recent research is focused on the question of quality within the study of religion and theology. Has the ease of launching an OA journal introduced, exacerbated, or otherwise increased the publication of lesser quality research in the study of religion and theology?



Methodology

Most of the OA research has focused on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) publishers and titles. I have listed a few examples in the references section of this paper. My research is focused on the question of quality and sustainability within the humanities, with an emphasis on the study of religion and theology.

I want to acknowledge that some of my approach was shaped by the Feb 2021 article “Predatory publishing in Scopus: evidence on cross-country differences,” by Vit Macháček and Martin Srholec. Macháček and Srholec focused on understanding how predatory publishing is growing in various regions, finding that the most vulnerable regions are developing countries that have or are investing heavily in research without equal attention and investment in the publishing governance framework required to ensure high quality publications for the resulting research. Additionally troubling was the fact that Macháček and Srholec used the Scopus database as the basis for their study, finding titles that met their criteria for predatory. This helped redirect my research geographically.

Also, I drew on the work of Kelly Cobey, Manoj Lalu, Becky Skidmore, et al, “*What is a predatory journal? A scoping review.*” The authors undertook a scoping review of related literature to identify traits of to help identify predatory journals. Their research results in detailed lists of attributed of academic journals. They differentiate these attributes using descriptions that indicate how the characteristic helps identify a predatory journal. I found this useful given that most predatory or suspect titles are rather opaque about the true nature of the journal and the publishing practices.

Although I routinely refer to the whole list, I just want to highlight a few of their findings that I routinely reference.

Inferior quality standards and lack of transparency

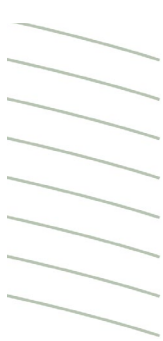
- Article Authors credentials are not cited
- Evidence of statistical method errors
- No article preparation instructions
- Poor Editorial oversight / review

Unethical Practices

- Evidence of plagiarism
- Editorial board is fake, lacks legitimacy, repeats on multiple journals

Deceptive / lack transparency

- Journal does not specific APCs (website or email solicitations)



Persuasive language

- Journal highlights easy methods of payment and / or offer special discounts
- Note high acceptance rates
- Aggressive email tactics

Typically, it isn't the case that all of these will be present or obvious. Increasingly predatory journals are becoming sophisticated enough to try to conform to the “window dressing” or more visual elements of high-quality journals, while keeping issues like the true nature of peer review in the shadows.

I would characterize this summary as a mid-point in my research process. I say this to caution that this is not yet an exhaustive study.

Language: My research so far has been limited to English-language content or sites that use English-language to promote the published research. I can reasonably assume that a high percentage of the content would be English language given the nature of academic publishing. Without at least a sampling of OA titles in other languages, I do not feel that this research paints a definitive picture.

Potential Titles: I have relied heavily on available lists of known OA titles for my research. I have spent limited time researching publishing in individual countries to identify titles beyond these lists. I reviewed titles from the following sources:

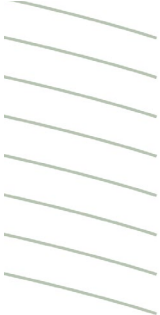
- Beall's list
- Atla Religion Database

Beall's List

University of Colorado librarian Jeffrey Beall founded a blog, *Scholarly Open Access*, in 2012 to monitor and track potentially predatory titles. The blog quickly established a following and a high degree of visibility as the only known “blacklist” for potentially predatory journals. The list vanished in early 2017. Two articles provide context for the sudden disappearance of the list.

Beall's own account, “What I learned from predatory publishers,” published in *Biochem Med* in 2017, characterizes the decision being brought on by pressure from his employer. In the article, Beal also shares thoughts about his experience and some direction for scholarly publishing. Beall's discussion of the corrupting influence of APCs and weaknesses of whitelists is compelling. Paul Basken's article, *Why Beall's List Died – and What it Left Unresolved about Open Access*, published on September 12, 2017 provides additional context for the demise of the blog and OA publishing.

An anonymous scholar has taken up the task of maintaining [Beall's original list](#). This helps illustrate that the problematic journals, at least ones that accept research related to religion and theology, rarely have a narrow editorial focus. Usually, they are broad in scope, accepting research in any discipline within the humanities or social sciences. I skimmed the 1,400+ stand-alone journals listed on the site. I have not yet



explored the publisher list. I easily found 50+ titles that accept articles on religion or theology. Of those, 24 are still active. The rest are dead links.

- [European Journal of Science and Theology](#) (Romania)
- [Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research](#) (Philippines)
- [European Academic Research](#) (Romania)
- [European Journal of Social Sciences](#) (Seychelles)
- [Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal](#) (India)
- [Indian Scholar](#) (India)
- [International Journal Advances in Social Science and Humanities](#) (India)
- [International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Management Studies](#) (India)
- [International Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences](#) (India)
- [International Journal of English Language, Literature & Humanities](#) (now Smart Moves Journal) (India)
- [International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies](#) (Tunisia)
- [International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies](#) (Ethiopia)
- [International Journal of Liberal Arts & Social Science](#) (UK)
- [International Journal of Social Science and Humanity](#) (Singapore)
- [International Journal Online of Humanities](#) (India)
- [Journal of Arts and Humanities](#) (United States)
- [Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies R&D](#) (Romania)
- [Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal](#) (India)
- [Academic Research International](#) (Pakistan)
- [World Wide Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development](#) (India)
- [American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research](#) (American Samoa)
- [International Journal of Eurasia Social Sciences](#) (Turkey)
- [International Review of Humanities and Scientific Research](#) (Pakistan)
- [Journal of Arts, Literature, Humanities and Social Sciences](#) (United Arab Emirates)

The [American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences](#) is a typical example of this type of broad scope journal. Few obvious areas of concern:

Title is misleading:

The journal is published in American Samoa. Not obvious anywhere on the website that the reference to America in the title is American Samoa, which is an unincorporated, unorganized territory of the United States. American Samoa has its own constitution and legislature. A more transparent title would be the *American Samoa Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*.



Other items from the journal's website:

- Prominently claim to be indexed in the Directory of Open Access Journals, the industry's leading whitelist of OA publications. The journal is not listed in DOAJ.
- Pace for acceptance, peer review and publication: Acceptance is within five to six days after submission, and publication is within two to three days of acceptance. This is reinforced by the information on the Call for Papers page of the website. This is simply too fast for proper peer review and editing.
- About Us page: The editorial scope of the journal is too extensive for realistic editorial oversight.
- Editorial Board: Virtually no institutional affiliation noted. Dr. Hazim Jabbar Shah Ali's country is listed as the USA. Extensive searches have not yielded anyone with that name as associated with any institution in the USA. Someone with this name is associated with a college of agriculture in Iraq. This name appears on multiple editorial boards of varied and obviously predatory journals.
- Publication Charges: Very affordable APCs. Too low to cover reasonable publishing charges.
- Copyright agreement: Authors transfer copyright to the journal
- Frequency of publication: The journal was founded in 2017. As of September 2021, they have already published 46 issues. Each complete issue contains 40 or more articles, many issues offer more than 60 articles on any number of topics.

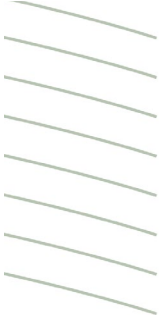
I found that this journal was typical of the type of journal that might contain articles related to the humanities.

Atla

As the Director of Production for Atla, my team is responsible for the editorial scope and quality of the Atla Religion Database, RDB, which is the premier index of articles, reviews, and essays in all fields of religion and theology. We routinely research new titles in the field. We also frequently receive requests from editors and publishers to consider their titles for inclusion in our index.

We've added over 500 new titles to RDB since 2015. Of those, 272 are OA. We've reviewed at least 750 titles over that period. We have rejected quite a few titles during this period; however, we have rejected fewer than 10 titles explicitly due to concerns that the title was predatory.

Between Beall's list and our experience, it seems that there are not many predatory OA titles that are laser focused on publishing research related to religion and theology. While I would like to think that the subject matter would cause some publishers to shy away from targeting these scholars, my guess is that it may have more to do with economic considerations.



I can offer an example of a recently considered title that is problematic. We will not be indexing this title:

[Metafizika](#) – Print ISSN: 2616-6879

The journal was established in 2017, with the first volume published in 2018. As of September 2021, the journal has published 15 issues. The most recent is volume 4, number 3. The place of publication is the Republic of Azerbaijan. The journal publishes articles in six languages, including Azerbaijani, Russian, English, Turkish, Persian, and Arabic.

The English-language version of the website does not clearly speak to whether the title is peer-reviewed. But the website uses a lot of visual aids to imply that the title is peer reviewed, for example, the journal posts a lengthy set of editors and international advisors.

Highlights from our due diligence (review completed on 9/1/2021):

Submit Manuscript

We try to be generous when we look at OA titles from the majority world / developing global south especially when English is not a primary language for the country. For example, the English language label for the section of the website for submitting a manuscript is currently labelled “Submit Manuscript.” Assuming everything else was sound and reliable, this is something we would normally forgive.

About Journal

Normally, we would expect to see detailed information about the journal’s editorial scope and history. None of this information is offered. The page provides some basic contact information, such as the address, phone numbers, email, and the journal’s ISSN. The page includes several links that lead nowhere. Most concerning is that we start seeing bank details prominently displayed.

Information to Contributors

There is no description of a peer reviewed process. The guidelines generally align with information found on other sites. However, some of the guidelines are somewhat duplicative suggesting that they were not closely edited. This leads to questions about the origin of the guidelines and how closely they are followed or enforced. For example:

6. At the beginning of the article should include a summary of 200-250 words and keywords in the original language of the article.
7. A summary of 200-250 words and 5-7 keywords in the original language should be added to the beginning of the article.

Although the APC information is not clearly stated on the website, the bank details are again prominently displayed.



International Advisors

The list of international advisors is rather lengthy and impressive. One of the listed advisors is Dr. Alison Tokita, Adjunct Associate Professor of Japanese Studies at Monash University in Australia. Dr. Tokita's subject area and language skills seem to be outside the scope of the journal. I contacted Dr. Tokita asking for her insights into the journal. She responded that she could not provide any details as she has no relationship with the journal.

As previously noted, given all of this, we have decided to forego including this title in RDB.

Conclusion

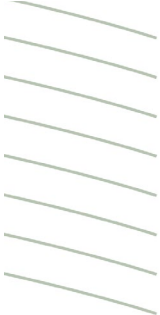
The reach of predatory or problematic OA titles into the academic disciplines and religion and theology appears to be limited at this time. We do need to continue to be vigilant in our review of titles to ensure quality academic content is promoted and discoverable by our scholars.

Despite the apparent limited reach into religion and theology, the OA business model came into a publishing governance structure that had not anticipated or provided guidelines to limit the opportunity for this type of intentional misconduct. By exploiting weaknesses in the system, these journals are taking advantage of scholars and doing harm to the academic community.

I have not undertaken this research to undermine the growth of OA. Clearly, we need to address the issues within scholarly communication to create governance structures so that bad actors are no longer able to publish and promote poorly reviewed and evaluated research.

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Additional reading on predatory publishing:

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