



A Reflection of My Time Away

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Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie (BETH) Conference : 18 – 21 September 2024

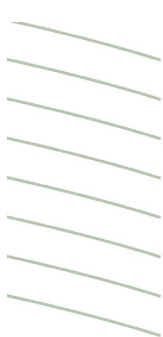


Figure 1: Hannie Riley (left), Vice-President of BETH
with Siong Ng

I was privileged to be able to attend the 52nd BETH conference in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. After more than 24 hours of travelling and two transit stops, I finally arrived at the city. The old town was where I spent most of my time as the conference venues and tours are all within walking distance. The local shops are cute and tiny, but I wonder how they manage during wintertime when it snows.

The theme of the conference was *Sustainability in European Theological Libraries*, and it was based on the 17 United Nations sustainable development goals. Do not be deceived by the title as we had presentations from countries outside Europe and the discussion during the conference was more than the environmental issues such as wastage we are facing in this decade.

The conference began with a tour of the town hall. The delegates were spoiled as we had a comprehensive tour including an explanation of the



tragedy that occurred during the Yugoslav Wars from 1992-1995. My personal highlight was the opportunity to wave from the town hall balcony. For a few seconds, it was spectacular as I felt like royalty.

The conference was held at the Gazi Husrev-bey's Library which was founded in 1537. It was significant as during the war some of the collection was savaged but a number of volunteers were dedicated and brave to move the books not only once but a few times in order to save them. This was documented in a video entitled [The Love of Books](#). Moreover, it was not a surprise that the library won the Best IFLA poster in 2022 that entitled [Gazi Husrev-bey Library Book Museum](#).

Presentations include how algorithmic systems work, the role of the library in promoting sustainability by collaboration with schools, and The [Relindial's Cartonera](#) project that aimed to embrace inclusion by creating unique books from recycled materials to a presentation on digitization project in Poland.

The presentations were not only inward looking but also featured projects that benefit the community. Jon Purcell from ABTAPL talked about how he managed to find a good home for two closed British Catholic seminaries' books. That included sending a collection to China. Hannie Riley shared on her initiative and reasons for setting up the Oxford Theology Resource Link which aims to send book donations to theological libraries in developing countries.

The conference ended with a half day hands-on EU funding applications by Maja Drobne from the Association for Culture and Education, Slovenia. The delegates all felt blessed by the number of things we have learnt from such diverse perspectives and backgrounds. As a 'foreigner' to the conference, I truly felt welcome and included, and therefore felt making the long trip was worthwhile. A big thank you to the board and Irena Pejić who spectacularly organised this memorable conference and gave me an opportunity to present a verbal report on behalf of ANZTLA which Philip Harvey had prepared.

Doha, Qatar

From Sarajevo, I decided to stop over at Doha and took the opportunity to visit the Qatar National Library. The design resembles two pieces of paper that are pulled apart and folded diagonally at the corners to create a shell-like structure and the innovative technologies that sorts book returns to the appropriate shelves were breathtaking. The timing allowed me to join a tour in which the guide explained the various collections, policies and spaces. I particularly noticed the different community spaces that are available, which included a special events area with two eating places. It is truly a space for the residents to embrace knowledge, a place to gather and a channel to preserve the rich history of the country.



IFLA Summit, Brisbane: 30 September to 2 October 2024

After a few days of hot weather, I headed over to Brisbane to attend IFLA summit. It was made possible as I was the recipient of the Angela Bersekowksi grant that sponsored my conference fee.

The opening presentation entitled [AI and the Rise of the Digital Minions](#) explained that algorithms are not just set of instructions to follow by machines but are also shaping our society. It outlined the challenges and opportunities for our profession. I have learnt about algorithms on websites and how there is a collaboration between human and machine.

The [trend report](#) was presented on the first day of the conference, followed by an open panel discussion which consisted of university librarians, academics and president of the library association. The highlight for me was the conversation session for which Carla Hayden and Kate Zwaard joined us live from Washington, D.C. They talked about how information looks from the perspective of the world's largest library, the Library of Congress. The summit ended with a closing presentation from Singapore's National Library Board which informed us about the work they have done with the assistance of Generative AI. I came out from the session aiming to make a trip to see the use of AI in Singaporean libraries.

It was also a privilege to be able to visit the vendor's stands inbetween the busy hectic sessions. There were less stands than usual, but I managed to establish connections with a couple of vendors and have since followed up with them upon returning to work.

The three-day conference was packed with presentations, and I came home with knowledge and ideas that I can use in my context. This has been beneficial as I am leading a major strategic change of my library in 2025. It was pleasing that six of the sessions were recorded and are available online for me to rewatch as it was a lot to comprehend in the tight schedules. Last but not least, I enjoyed the opportunity of networking with my colleagues from abroad as we learn and share ideas from one another.

I came home almost after 3 weeks away from my comfort zone feeling overwhelmed with new information and the complexity of it. However, I am feeling confident as the time away was a great learning and development opportunity.