
UK University Librarians in Theology & Religious Studies

Where Are They Now?

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ABSTRACT This paper explores the roles of Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) librarians in larger UK universities and their participation within the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Librarians (ABTAPL). Beginning by investigating the historical participation trends and current dynamics within TRS librarianship, it utilizes literature review, data analysis, and a bespoke survey targeting TRS librarians across the UK. This article identifies a disconnect between TRS university librarians and ABTAPL, contributing to limited event attendance and organizational engagement. The results indicate that this disengagement is influenced by a shift in librarian roles from subject specialists to more broad-based academic roles, compounded by a significant decline in TRS student enrollments and the shrinking presence of TRS departments within universities. The investigation recommends strategic changes for ABTAPL to increase relevancy and connection with university librarians.

BACKGROUND

Setting the Scene

In volume one of the *The Theological Librarian's Handbook* series, Carisse Berryhill sets out four contexts for defining a theological library. In her fourth and final definition, she states, "In large libraries associated with research universities, there will be many professional librarians, one of whom is designated the religion specialist who selects resources and assists readers with inquiries in religious studies" (Berryhill 2020, 9). I am one of these "religion specialist" librarians working in a large research university and have been so for most of my professional career. I am also a committee member of ABTAPL, the Association of British Theological and Philosophical

Librarians, and have had the pleasure and benefit of meeting theological librarians from all four of Berryhill's types of theological library at ABTAPL events. Gathered together by its purpose of helping those working in libraries containing theological, philosophical, and related materials, ABTAPL's members include theological college librarians, university librarians, cathedral librarians, booksellers, publishers and archivists.

My question for the investigation in this article is that very often when I'm attending an ABTAPL event, or seeing messages on the ABTAPL mailing list, I rarely find that religion specialist librarians like myself are in the room—often I am the only one. I wanted to find out why. Are these university librarians not present in ABTAPL because their roles make it no longer relevant for them? Or are university librarians not present in ABTAPL because they are not aware of ABTAPL as an organisation? Are other reasons to blame? To explore this, my investigation included a literature review, data analysis, and a small-scale survey of UK Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) librarians. As a religion specialist, this was very much a personal quest, and I set out to find my tribe.

Were Large Universities and ABTAPL Ever Together?

Before I began, I took a moment to ask the question, were large universities *ever* a significant part of ABTAPL? Unfortunately, ABTAPL's own membership data is limited to recent years. However, another useful data source is the ABTAPL *Bulletin*, which helpfully lists committee members and their institutions at the beginning of each issue. In its foundation years from 1956 to 1975, ABTAPL activity was focused in and around London, making the University of London a natural partner. Mr. K. Garside from Kings College Library and Reverend F. Courtney, S.J. from Heythrop College Library both took the role of ABTAPL Chairman twice.

In 1975, ABTAPL was reinvigorated under the leadership of John Howard from New College Library at the University of Edinburgh, and the dedicated work of the Honorary Secretary, Mary Elliott, from Kings College, University of London. Over the decades, other university librarians on the committee included Peter Larkin (University of Warwick), Evelyn Cornell (University of Leicester), Judith Shiel (University of Manchester), Honor Hania (University of Glasgow),

and Marion Smith, (University of Birmingham), to name just a few. The *Bulletin* also shows that there were some tensions around the involvement of university librarians. In 1974, John Howard wrote:

The number of university libraries has increased, more qualified staff are employed in all of them, and some have an element of subject specialization in their development of stock and staff. In 1956-66 there were few ABTAPL members from university libraries. I hope these libraries will now contribute an increasing number of members to the Association (Howard 1974).

In her farewell piece to ABTAPL in 2016, after forty years of involvement, Mary Elliott wrote:

I always felt that I was a bit of a fraud, being of necessity a generalist. At King's College London... I was responsible not only for classics, but Byzantine and Modern Greek, philosophy and music as well as theology... My fellow-attendees all worked in specialist theology libraries, so in no way did I feel that I was a true counterpart. I am very grateful for their acceptance of one not totally devoted to theological librarianship. (Elliott 2016).

This comment shows some of the aspects of ABTAPL's historical relationship with universities: key individuals from universities libraries serving on its committee, a wish for wider participation from the university sector, and something of a feeling of imposter syndrome in those university librarians who do engage with ABTAPL.

DEFINING UNIVERSITIES

When approaching the overall questions, I decided that the focus of my inquiry would be the 34 UK universities currently listed as members of the Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education group (TRS-UK 2025). TRS UK is the professional association for academic departments, units, and subject associations of the study of Religion and Theology in the UK. When I talk about TRS libraries, from now on I am referring to libraries from this group of universities. Often, these universities have large libraries with substantial and significant TRS collections. Frequently, these are integrated into the library as part of the main sequence of collections, usually in a central main library building. These library collections support TRS degrees offered by their university, as well as researchers. Such a library may have a large library staff but may or may not be organised in a way that enables librarians to directly identify themselves with TRS. The University of Glasgow is an example of this kind of library.

Within the membership of ABTAPL, there are many librarians who would identify themselves as librarians providing university education, although they do not work in universities. These are librarians from theological colleges which characteristically have a single purpose theological library and are often solo-staffed or with a very small team. Typically, this small library supports ministry education and plays an active part in the life of the theological college, enabling the librarians to closely identify themselves with TRS. The degree education is validated by another, larger institution. An example of this kind of library is the London School of Theology. Librarians from this kind of library form the majority of ABTAPL's membership and I expect to meet them at ABTAPL events. For this reason, they are not the focus of my inquiry. However, I am grateful to colleagues in this group who responded to my survey and provided data that proved very useful for comparison purposes. I will be identifying this data as from theological college libraries.

There is a third category of library which I would identify as hybrid, or a single purpose theological library on its own site which is a discrete part of a larger TRS university library. It supports TRS degrees for that university, including ministry education, and has some devolved operational responsibilities but relies on the university for some or all its financial, staffing, and infrastructure support. TRS collections may also be held in other libraries in the university. My own library, New College Library Edinburgh, is an example of a hybrid library, as are the theological college libraries of Oxford, Cambridge, and Durham Universities.

Whatever Happened to Theology and Religious Studies?

News stories from the last few years have highlighted the closures of departments or courses in TRS, such as at the University of Chester (Paveley 2021) and Cardiff University (Ferguson 2025). While local reasons for proposed closures differ, the underlying situation is that UK student enrollments in TRS are dropping. A report in 2019 by the British Academy exposed the overall downward trend in enrollments into TRS courses in UK higher education, noting, “[t]here were around 6,500 fewer students in Theology and Religious Studies courses in higher education institutions in 2017/18 than there were in 2011/12” (Kain and Clark 2019).

More recent research by the British Academy's SHAPE Project (2025) highlights a dramatic decrease in TRS student numbers between 2011 and 2022. This project aims to understand regional disparity in the provision of different subject areas in higher education and tracks subject areas that have seen an increase or decrease in provision. It focuses on provision for first year UG degree UK domiciled students aged 20 and under and excludes distance learning only courses. The latest data for 2022/23 shows that FTE students have decreased by 53% since 2011/12. Out of a total of 46 TRS providers in 2023/24, only two were showing an increase in numbers (Edinburgh and Durham), while 20 saw no change and 24 saw a decrease. Within the subject landscape, the latest data shows that possibly only Classics is doing worse (27 course providers), whereas Philosophy is doing slightly better (65 providers), and History is doing even better (99 providers). There are regional variations—a different student funding landscape in Scotland may be one reason. For example, “In Scotland, the number of students studying traditional Humanities subjects like History and English Literature and Language has increased or stayed constant. The opposite is true in England. Scotland also sees student numbers in Classics on the rise as of 2022/23” (British Academy 2025).

Against this backdrop of decline, it is also important to remember that at least thirteen UK universities remain centres of excellence for TRS, as evidenced by the QS World University Rankings (QS Top Universities 2025). In 2025, four UK universities—Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, and Edinburgh—featured in the world top ten ranking. You may remember that these four institutions also featured in my definition of hybrid libraries above. It is notable that these four institutions all have outstanding single site theological libraries, and all are members of ABTAPL. This world success is fueled by library power!

CHANGES TO THE UK HIGHER EDUCATION LIBRARY LANDSCAPE

Broader societal change, including the decline of historically dominant religious traditions, is also affecting students and the libraries that support them. For instance, the 2022 census in Scotland was the first in which 51.1% of respondents said they had “no religion,” up from 36.7% in 2011 (Cook 2024). This is just one of the broader

themes identified in the Atla Global Survey 2024 (Kutsko 2024), which also noted the increasing diversity of populations and cultures, the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of humanities and social science research, and the unstoppable advance of technologies as wider factors affecting theological libraries. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the existing pace of digital transformation in UK higher education libraries, with a rapid expansion of online services and e-source provision which are now here to stay.

For university librarians, the last ten years have also seen some specific changes in staffing structures and roles. Several large universities moved to functional staffing structures and away from a subject librarian model (Hoodless and Pinfield 2018). This change affected some ABTAPL member institutions, including Kings College London, University of Manchester, and University of Birmingham (Ashcroft et al. 2020). Typically, these new functional structures separated staff teams into “academic engagement” and “information literacy delivery,” meaning that there were no longer individual subject specialist contacts.

While there is a body of literature on the general impacts of both the new structures and the former subject librarian structures, I have struggled to find any literature at all that examines the specific impact of staffing structures on university library support for TRS. Nevertheless, it can be imagined that the double whammy of an academic subject area facing cuts and closures and a university library structure that has moved away from personal identification with TRS does not make engagement with a professional association focused on TRS libraries a high priority for university library staff.

METHODOLOGY

Data Analysis – TRS Library Websites and ABTAPL Data

As stated, my target group was the 34 institutions named in the TRS subject network Theology and Religious Studies UK. To understand more about the changes in the last ten years to librarians working in these universities, I visited the library websites of these institutions to see if I could identify a subject librarian for TRS. I was able to identify subject librarian contacts for TRS at 23 out of the 34 institutions, or at a rate of 67%. This meant that for 11 out

of 34 institutions, I could not identify a subject librarian by name. Frequently in this situation, inquirers were directed to a central library inquiries email or webform.

I then reviewed the Directory of Institutional Members (ABTAPL 2024) to identify which of the 34 TRS institutions were ABTAPL members. At this point in time, 12 of the 34 TRS universities were ABTAPL members. This means that only 35% of librarians in TRS universities are receiving the ABTAPL *Bulletin*, one of the key routes of ABTAPL communications.

Finally, I was able to review the membership data for the ABTAPL JISCMail list (JISCM@il 2025). This list is open not just to the UK academic community but worldwide. It is heavily used by ABTAPL members but is not restricted to them. I identified that 17 out of 34 TRS universities had librarians who were members of the ABTAPL JISCMail list. This means that 50% of TRS universities are not receiving ABTAPL communications via this important platform.

Atla 2024 Global Survey

In 2024, the Atla Global Survey reached librarians working in theological libraries across the United States, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. I was fortunate enough to be able to review the anonymised dataset collected from this survey to see if it illuminated my questions.

There were 12 UK respondents to this survey, which was circulated via BETH and ABTAPL mailing lists. The anonymised data gives me limited insight into who the respondents were. However, the text responses to question nineteen, “to whom does the person who is the head of the library at your institution report,” give some insights into the nature of their institutions. I would venture to judge that potentially seven out of 12 UK respondents were working in a higher education context.

Ultimately, although the ATLA survey is revealing of general trends for all librarians working in a TRS context, the Atla survey data did not give me enough granularity to know if any TRS university librarians replied. Given my earlier data analysis, I think it is likely that the Atla survey did not reach librarians in most TRS universities because the survey was distributed via ABTAPL networks, and we know that TRS university librarians are poorly represented on these

networks. Even if it did reach them, I would suggest that a further barrier to survey engagement from a TRS university library is the language and context of the survey. It assumes the respondent identifies their institution as a “theological library,” which a librarian in a large institution and/or multi-disciplinary role is less likely to do.

Survey Distribution (December 2024 – January 2025)

These preliminary investigations revealed gaps in the data that supported the development of my own small-scale survey for TRS librarians in the UK. To create the questions, I drew on the Atla 2024 Global Survey and created some thematic questions of my own. My work surveying library websites had enabled me to identify contact emails of TRS subject librarians, if available, and generic enquiry emails for TRS universities if there was no subject librarian evident. I distributed the survey in December 2024, writing directly to the TRS subject librarians and libraries I had identified. To ensure the maximum data collection, I also shared the survey on the ABTAPL list (206 recipients), the CILIP Academic and Research Libraries Group list (875 recipients) and other smaller forums.

Survey Response

I received 27 responses: 21 responses from 18 TRS universities and six responses from theological colleges. In the TRS universities, there were multiple respondents from Oxford and Cambridge, and the majority (14 out of 18) of TRS responses came from my direct emails to individual librarians.

SURVEY RESULTS – EXPERIENCE OF TRS LIBRARIANS

Job Titles and Time Spent on TRS Work

Of 26 responses, 17 respondents gave job titles which related to academic liaison roles. These titles rarely included the words Theology or Religious Studies. Respondents from theological colleges were more likely to be called just “Librarian.”

Again, out of 26 responses, 17 (66%) indicated they spent less than 25% of their time on theology and religious studies related work, with eight saying they spent less than 10% of their time on

this work. These 17 were almost all TRS university librarians. The seven respondents that indicated they spent more than 50% of their time on TRS were either in theological college or Oxford/Cambridge libraries.

What kind of tasks do you engage in?

The highest scoring tasks identified were academic liaison, inquiry work, information literacy, and collection development. With over 18 different types of tasks plus several ‘others’ receiving responses, there is an extremely diverse range of tasks across library roles. TRS university responses also included “co-ordinating online resource lists” or “supporting academic staff with reading list management,” and teaching tasks such as “subject specific LibGuides [and] video tutorials” and “developing interactive workshops.” Responses from theological colleges were more likely to include facilities and equipment management, shelving, managing volunteers, and organizing displays.

What kind of library materials do you work with?

This question aimed to explore what library work with a variety of faith traditions might look like. Responses show that Christianity remains the most dominant faith tradition in the library materials consulted, but responses made it clear that librarians are working with a wide variety of religious traditions.

EXPLORING THE PURPOSE OF TRS LIBRARY ROLES

I set out five statements about the impact and purpose of their role and asked librarians to respond with their level of agreement. The highest level of agreement was for the statement “my work supports University teaching in Theology and Religious Studies,” and all respondents strongly or slightly agreed with this statement. There was general agreement from the TRS university respondents about the statement “my work supports current research and scholarship in Theology and Religious Studies,” with 19 out of 21 responses strongly or slightly in agreement. More polarised was “my work supports students who are training for religious ministry.” While 21 responses strongly or slightly agreed, six responses which disagreed

or didn't know were all from the TRS group. In contrast, theological college responses strongly agreed with this purpose. "My work supports the spiritual wellbeing of my university community" was the statement that received the highest levels of disagreement. Seven responses that disagreed and four that didn't know were all TRS respondents, while respondents that strongly agreed were from theological colleges. Finally, "my work supports the religious cultural heritage of the United Kingdom" had 18 responses that slightly or strongly agreed. Four disagreements were from TRS universities, where the respondent held an academic liaison role that did not include special collections. Librarians who had replied with job titles that included special collections roles unsurprisingly strongly agreed with this statement.

Have there been changes in the last five years to your work with TRS?

Three respondents commented that they were only recently in post and found it hard to speak for the past five years. Notable changes were the increasing dominance of digital materials over print and academic program changes merging Religion and Philosophy. Respondents also felt their work had changed to deliver more research skills training and embedded information literacy workshops. Pressures included a steep rise of students with additional educational needs and financial threats to library collections in the humanities.

Do you expect that there will be changes in the next five years to your work with TRS?

Strikingly, four respondents to this question expected that the next five years would see cuts to TRS provision, or even that the subject may disappear from their university. Three theological college respondents expected to see fewer ministry students and ensuing changes to ministry programmes. Other predominant themes were the increasing use of AI and the impact of big publisher deals, including Open Access. Other changes reported were the use of the library as study space rather than for reading print resources and the development of new TRS programs.

SURVEY ANALYSIS – TRS LIBRARIANS AND ABTAPL

The next section of the survey explored respondents' understanding and experiences of ABTAPL. The survey asked if respondents were aware of ABTAPL. 17 respondents (63%) were aware of ABTAPL. However, all ten negative responses were from the TRS group. When asked if they had attended an ABTAPL event, 19 respondents, or 70%, had never attended an ABTAPL event. Only three respondents from the TRS group had ever attended an ABTAPL event.

Survey respondents were asked if they would be interested in the services and events that ABTAPL provides. Answers indicated most interest in the mailing list followed by CPD sessions and the *Bulletin*. There was least interest in the annual conference and visits to libraries and archives. A request for event topics of interest produced this range of fascinating comments and topics:

- Special collections and archives.
- The opportunity to talk and network with other colleagues supporting Theology in University Libraries.
- Ensuring the survival of theological, philosophical, and related libraries in the face of declining student numbers and declining religious belief.
- Theological and philosophical librarianship as a form of spiritual practice.
- Collaboration between theological and philosophical libraries and the University Chaplaincy.
- Theological and philosophical library outreach work with local places of worship, schools, and communities.
- Marketing of collections to bring wider awareness.
- I do not have a TRS background so growing my knowledge on the challenges facing TRS collections would be of interest.
- Religious libraries and diversity: what you need to know. An ABC of the key religious texts in world religions and how they are used by their communities. How to handle religious texts of all faiths respectfully.

Finally, respondents were invited to submit any further comments. Some of these comments included:

- I cover half the subject areas at the University. . .and whilst I have attended a few subject area events (History, Chinese, and Medicine), I couldn't possibly get involved with every area and continue to do my job.
- As I have only just started working with Theology and Religion this year and am also responsible for all the other subjects in the Arts and Humanities and Law, it is difficult for me to find time to increase my knowledge of specific subjects and their library provision/needs, but once I have found my feet more in this role, I intend to rectify that.
- I think ABTAPL is great and I've learned a lot from the events that I've attended. I'm grateful for their work and support.

In summary, responses indicated that librarians in TRS universities had a relatively low awareness of ABTAPL and its activities. However, they were interested in a range of activities and topics that ABTAPL provides.

CONCLUSIONS

This investigation began by noting the role of the “religion specialist” in a large library as one of the roles in theological librarianship, and the inclusion of this role within the spectrum of ABTAPL members. It is clear that the academic subject area of TRS and the roles of subject specialist librarians have faced significant changes in recent years. Where are the university librarians in TRS now? For the most part, right where they always were—specialist librarians are still present in some numbers. These librarians are under pressure, with TRS forming only a part of their wide-ranging roles. Heavily time-committed, they may not be able to attend ABTAPL events, even those crafted with a TRS university audience in mind. But TRS librarians both work with digital materials and work digitally. They may find online CPD more convenient to access. And, while they may not self-identify as theological librarians or as working in a theological library, they are interested in what ABTAPL provides or could provide—once they know about it. Rather than defining ourselves as working in theological libraries, I would define a theological librarian as one who

can say yes to any of the five statements of purpose in the survey: supporting TRS teaching, TRS research and scholarship, ministry education, spiritual well-being, and religious cultural heritage. A tick in any of these boxes means there is no need for imposter syndrome for any university librarian joining ABTAPL's activities.

For ABTAPL, I believe this investigation shows that TRS university librarians must not become a blind spot in planning and provision. In fact, changes in the higher education environment mean that TRS university librarians need a subject-based professional network more than ever, especially when navigating new roles or additional new responsibilities working with TRS. We should be alerted to the fact that existing ABTAPL networks may not reach them, and the print *Bulletin* may never be seen by them, and that to reach them we need to widen our promotional strategies. The traditional ABTAPL model of a representative from an institution who attends the spring conference each year may not apply here, as TRS university librarians will need to pick and choose from different subject-related or generic professional development events when allocating their professional development time. Membership and event models need to be flexible to accommodate non-member or other types of attendance. Events remain critical, as I believe TRS librarians must see relevancy and build a personal connection for them to decide to engage with ABTAPL. Events are a key place for this to happen.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I recommend that ABTAPL should:

- 1) Consider how we can increase our visibility to additionally appeal to TRS Universities and proactively reach out to them. For instance, our ABTAPL promotional leaflet could be revised to include a version targeted for TRS Universities and large libraries. Our communications plans for events could extend to academic library sector-wide and national mailing lists, as well as ABTAPL lists.
- 2) Consider what digital and/or open services we can provide to this group to connect them with ABTAPL. With Atla's support, we are producing an edited monograph volume in 2026, *Theological Libraries in the United Kingdom & Ireland*, which will be open access. The research outputs

from *Theological Libraries* may make potential web guide resources, which could be published as LibGuides using the Springshare platform already in use by many UK and US higher education librarians. We are also exploring the potential of producing the ABTAPL *Bulletin* as online open access.

- 3) Remember what ABTAPL has that is unique and TRS librarians want: ABTAPL knows about theology and religion resources! We are delivering a new series of online seminars in 2026, *Libraries of Faith*, spotlighting the libraries of ABTAPL members and sharing expertise about these unique resources. We are also exploring options for delivering our spring conference as a hybrid event.

Finally, I fully acknowledge that this survey was biased towards subject librarians when talking about TRS university librarians. Further work could explore interest in ABTAPL from other job roles within large university libraries such as Special Collections and metadata.

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