

2018

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Recommended Citation

Keck, Andrew J. "Theological Libraries and Scholarly Publishing in Religion and Theology." *Theological Librarianship* 11, no. 2 (2018): 27–37. <https://doi.org/10.31046/tl.v11i2.518>.

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Theological Libraries and Scholarly Publishing in Religion and Theology

by Andrew J. Keck

Abstract

Theological libraries and scholarly publishing in religion and theology operate within multiple overlapping contexts and economic markets: faith communities, theological education, scholars, libraries, and publishing. This paper will make an analysis of available religious publishing and theological library purchasing trends in order to create a thicker description of the system of scholarly communication. Even allowing for degrees of uncertainty in the data presented, there remains a significant disconnect in the rising collective costs for publishing versus the declining expenditures among theological libraries. The trend appears to be that the average theological library is purchasing a declining portion of the scholarship. The evidence may suggest an increasingly unsustainable market.

Introduction

Theological libraries and scholarly publishing in religion and theology operate within multiple overlapping contexts and economic markets: faith communities, theological education, scholars, academic libraries, and publishing. Each of these contexts has separate ecologies that are in the midst of transformative change — which increases the speed and complexity of change within the whole. A series of questions about the meaning and impact of these various changes may be illustrative:

- What might a reduction in the overall number of churches and religious communities mean for a library's role in maintaining their heritage and legacy? What does declining religious participation mean for the market of writers and readers within scholarly publishing in religion and theology? What does a potential shift from full-time clergy with graduate degrees to part-time clergy with alternative credentials mean for theological education?
- Within the growing financial strains of theological education, how are libraries supported and resourced? What do smaller seminaries employing fewer scholars mean for the market of scholarly publishing in religion and theology? What does it mean to be a theological library, concerned with stewardship of the scholarly record?
- What does it mean when the kinds of books needed for tenure and promotion are no longer considered economically viable within publishing, or when such books are considered economically viable if the price point is so high that only a tiny proportion of theological libraries and readers can afford to purchase them? What does it mean when your book is about the global faith experience, using data and stories from around the globe, but no one in the majority world can afford to purchase it?

These are not only practical questions but suggest significant moral and justice issues within the system of scholarly communication that implicates scholars, publishers, libraries, theological seminaries, and faith communities. They provide evidence of a broader system of scholarly communication in which changes in one sector can have broad effects throughout the entire system.

The dynamic and interconnected aspects of this system of scholarly communication make attempts at describing the current state both incomplete and immediately out-of-date. However, this paper will complete an analysis of available religious publishing and theological library purchasing trends in order to create a thicker description of the system of scholarly communication.

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Methodology

Publishing trend data was compiled from the *Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information* (1998-2008) that was continued by the *Library and Book Trade Almanac* (2009-). While containing some broader information about religion as a separate subject, the relevant academic book title and periodical data¹ include both religion and philosophy. While this article is attempting to demonstrate trends in religion and theology, the inclusion of philosophy is assumed not to be materially disruptive to the analysis. The data was transcribed as stated in these volumes and only updated with corrected data included in subsequent volumes.

Library purchasing data was compiled from library data submitted to the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in cooperation with the American Theological Library Association (ATLA). The library data collected extends only back to 2009 due to a significant change to the data questionnaire in that year. A significant challenge with analyzing library data relates to library structure and reporting methodologies. Some theological libraries and collections are fully integrated in a broader university library so that there is no easy way to break out statistical information specific to religion and theology collections. Inclusion of university-level data would skew data otherwise focused on religion and theology libraries. On the opposite end of the spectrum, some theological libraries are so small in terms of subscriptions and book spending that including their statistics would dampen trends overall.

In soliciting the data from the ATS, the author created a cohort of 34 theological libraries as a representative sample of the 268 (in 2015) libraries who annually submit data. This cohort² intentionally excluded libraries not reporting over the entire period (2009-2017), small libraries (based on expenditures for books and periodicals), and libraries clearly submitting university-level data. As the purpose of this study is to consider trends, the cohort approach provides an opportunity to study such trends through a sample of theological libraries while excluding some categories of libraries that might skew the results.

The data from publishing and library sources was put into a standard spreadsheet for further analysis with simple graphing functions accomplished through use of R programming.³

Publishing and Cost Trends

Periodical Costs

Within the publishing data, the available periodicals data is exclusively is about average cost per title over time. While helpful for identifying trends, some variation from year to year may also be attributed to changes in the selection of titles or the “price” selected in cases of complex or scaled pricing models. Journal subscriptions often feature a “library” price or set of scaled library prices typically based on the size of institutions. For comparison, the basic Consumer Price Index (a standard measure of inflation) is also shown (Figure 1).

This data shows a seven-fold increase in the price of journals from 1998 to 2016 and a relatively flat red line, at this scale, showing a measure of general inflation. There is a significant jump in 2011, and there remains a nearly 50% increase in prices over the last five years with the average journal subscription now costing over \$362 per year. While increases in journal price tend to exceed inflation, some of the more significant increases come from larger publishers purchasing and

¹ Periodicals and books provide two distinctive types of scholarly output and publishing business models. Periodicals generally contain short-form articles related to the topic of a journal and are almost exclusively sold by annual subscription. Books, in contrast, generally favor long-form content and are generally sold as individual titles. Exceptions to these generalizations abound, particularly with books, which may be comprised of short-form essays or may be purchased through various subscription models. E-books command an even greater variety of purchasing, licensing, rental, and subscription models for libraries. Periodical business models may also vary through “bundling” periodical subscriptions where a library can subscribe to a collection of a publisher’s titles (e.g., Sage) or from multiple publishers (e.g., JSTOR). In sum, the scholarly publishing industry contains a number of contradictions and complexities.

² A list of libraries included in the cohort can be found in Appendix A.

³ Data and R scripts can be found at <https://github.com/AndyKeck/scholcomm>.

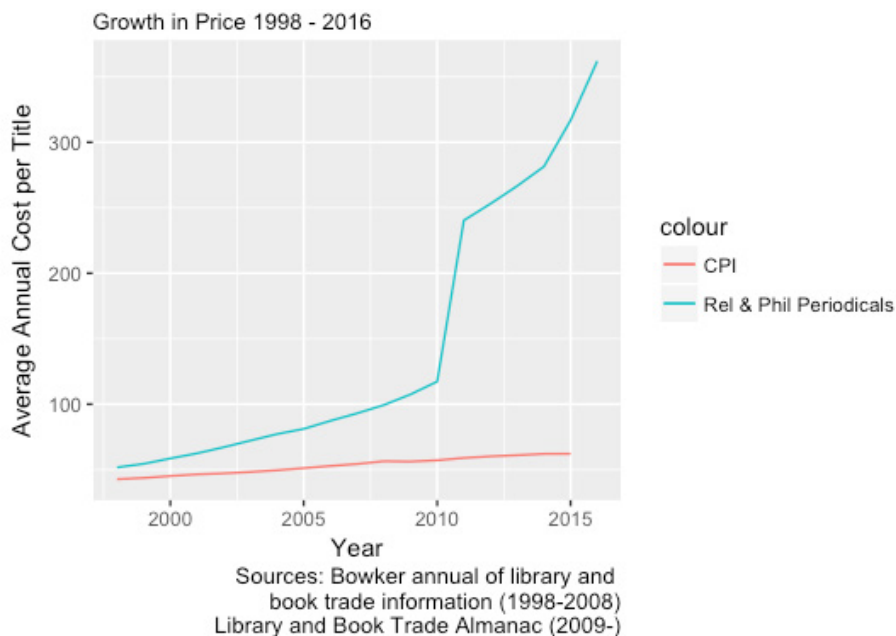


Figure 1: Religion and Philosophy Periodical Costs

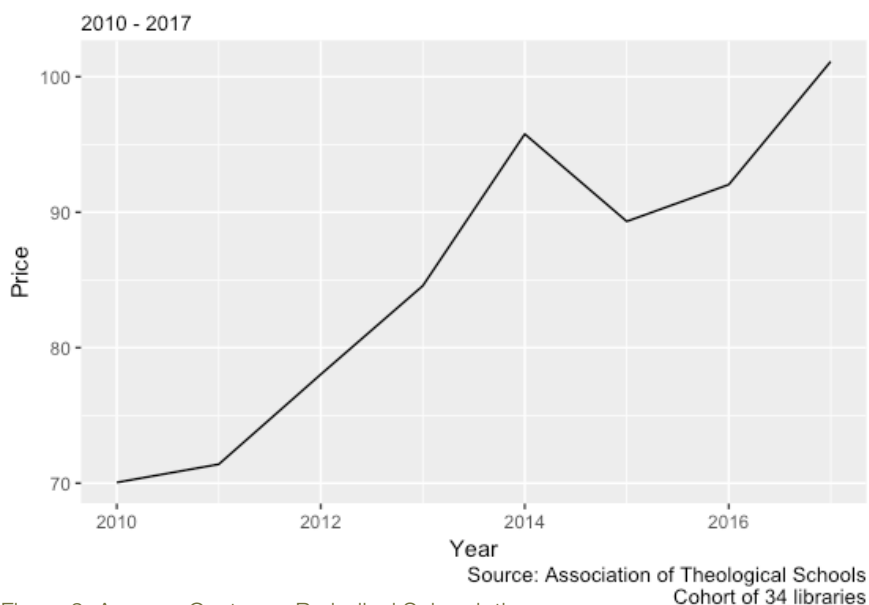


Figure 2: Average Costs per Periodical Subscription

significantly raising the costs of previously low or moderately priced independent journals.⁴

Looking at the cohort of libraries data from the ATS, one can approximate the average cost per journal by taking the stated total expenditures on print periodicals and dividing it by the number of print periodical subscriptions. The use of the word “print” in the statistical questionnaire can be problematic; some libraries attend to the description literally while others consider periodical subscriptions “print-like” if they are regular individual subscriptions and not bundled into more “database-like” packages of journals (Figure 2).

This eight-year period of data shows a 43% increase in the costs per title similar to the rate of increase indicated by the publisher data. However, the average cost-per-title calculated for libraries is less than a third of what was suggested by

⁴Gary F. Daught et al., “Open Access: Responding to a Looming ‘Serials Crisis’ in Theological and Religious Studies,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 68 (2014): 165–79.

the publisher's data. The difference in cost-per-title might partly be related to the movement of expensive "big publisher" journals to online platforms. Thus, the remaining "print" subscriptions of libraries are less costly than the more expensive e-journals that may be newly counted under "electronic resources."

Regardless of some inconsistencies between publisher and library data, clearly the average price of periodicals subscriptions continues to rise at a pace greater than inflation. Except perhaps for binding and storage costs, the move to electronic journals has not always provided significant savings. Particularly when discussing articles and the production of journals, it is worth noting that all the faculty or institutional labor contributed to research, writing, and reviewing journal articles is typically provided without compensation.

Book Costs

In the analysis of book publishing, this study monitors both average costs and scale (the number of new titles published). Some year-to-year variation may result from changes of book or price selection methodologies. Book pricing can change by format and over time. "New" titles may include "new" editions, formats, or publishers. The twenty years of data within a publishing annual continues to be useful in order to calculate trajectories (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Academic Books in Religion and Philosophy

For books published in the United States and constituting the academic market in religion and philosophy, the publisher's data indicates that the average price for each title has doubled in the last twenty years, going from an average of over \$40 per title to an average of over \$80 per title. While not as dramatic an increase as the cost of journal subscriptions, the average price still outpaces the growth in the Consumer Price Index over the same period (Figure 4).

The ATS cohort data includes data on the number of book volumes added to the collection and the amount spent on printed books. Basic calculation can thus determine an appropriate price per volume. While over a shorter period of time, this calculation demonstrates a lower rate of increase and lower average price, climbing to just \$50 per book in 2017. Some variance from the publisher data could be from considering the purchase of lower-priced editions (softcover, discounted, or the used book market) as well as counting "items" instead of "titles." Thus a \$500 ten-volume set would count as \$500 within the publisher data and \$50 within the library data. Finally, libraries could simply be more selective in acquiring more expensive volumes and purchasing a greater proportion of modestly-priced titles.

Overall, the analysis of academic book publishing shows slower price growth than that of periodicals. While the average price per book title has doubled according to the publisher data, the price increase appears more muted within the library data.

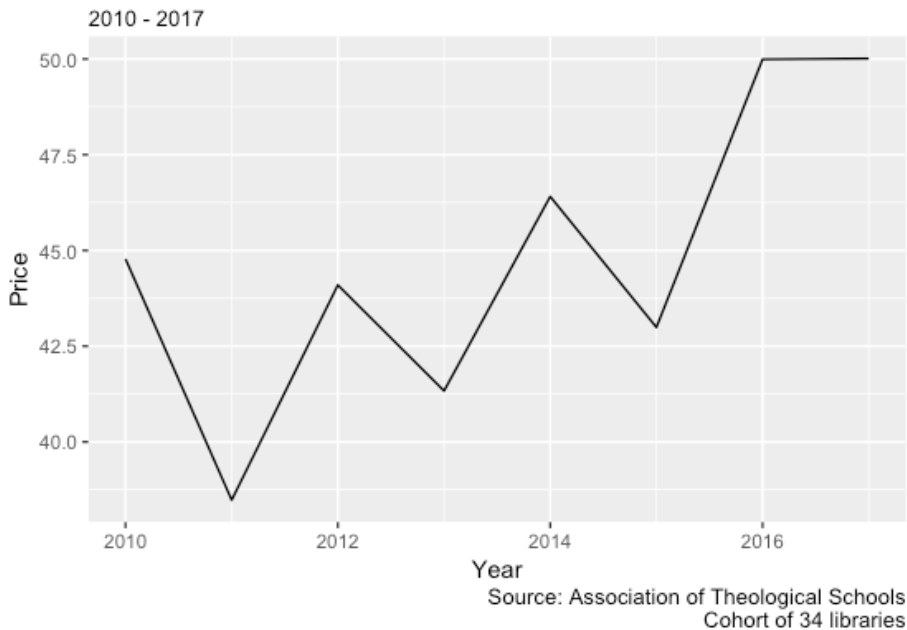


Figure 4: Average Cost per Books

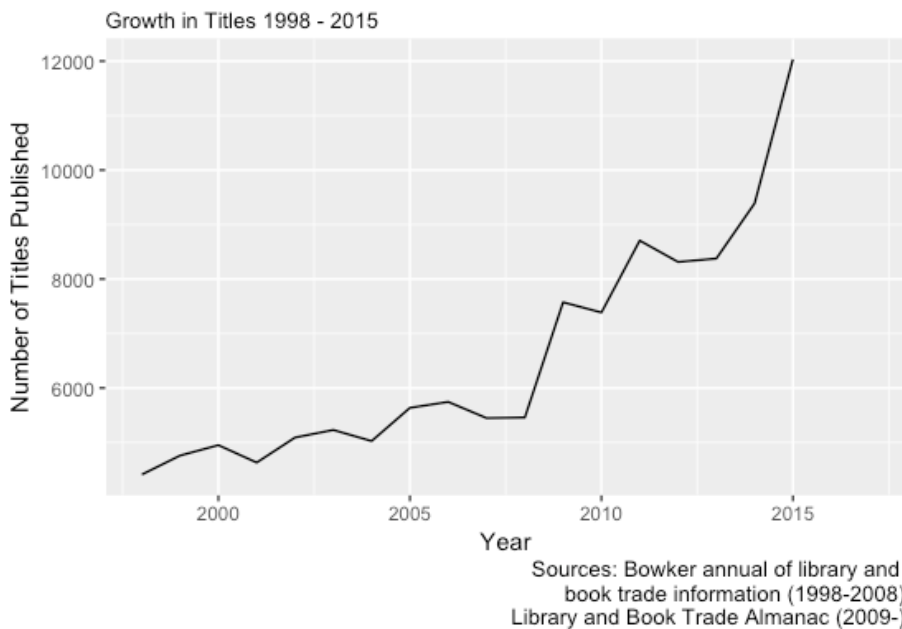


Figure 5: Academic Titles in Religion and Philosophy

Book Title Production

The scale of publishing tells a particularly interesting narrative. For academic titles in religion and philosophy, the quantity has almost tripled in the last 18 years, going from 4,411 new titles in 1998 to 12,035 new titles in 2015. To be fair, some of the growth of titles is likely due to changes in the scholarly publishing industry that allow for smaller print runs and a greater range of publishing options, many approximating self-publishing. The print-on-demand technology, by lowering the cost of production, allows publishers to place more bets on publishing projects that would not have been previously viable. Also, some of the growth of titles is likely related to growth of scholarly publishing in non-Christian traditions. The growth of immigrant communities and their diverse religious traditions as well as continuing expansion of academic interest into varied religious traditions has helped to accelerate the publishing market (Figure 5).

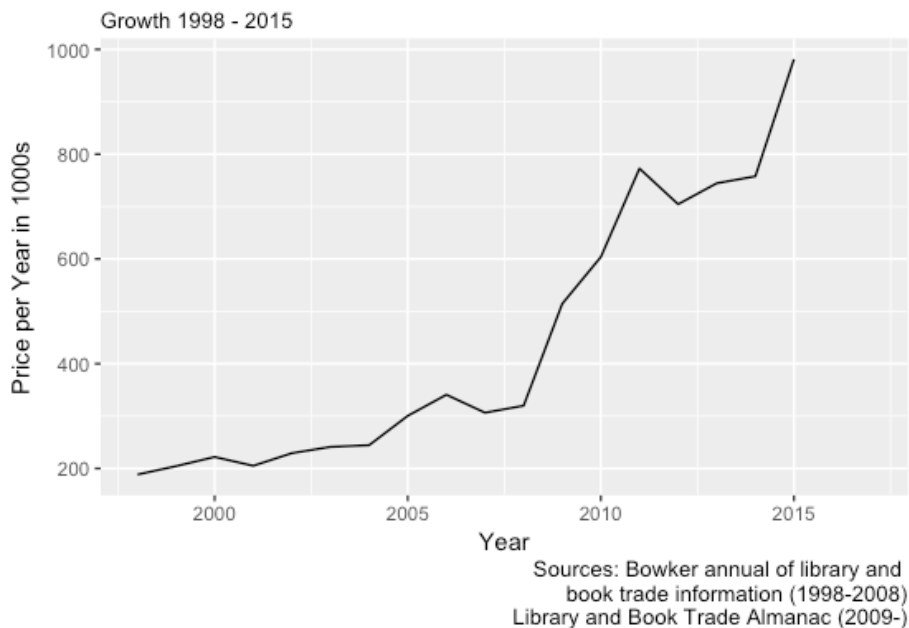


Figure 6: Total Cost of Academic Titles in Religion and Philosophy

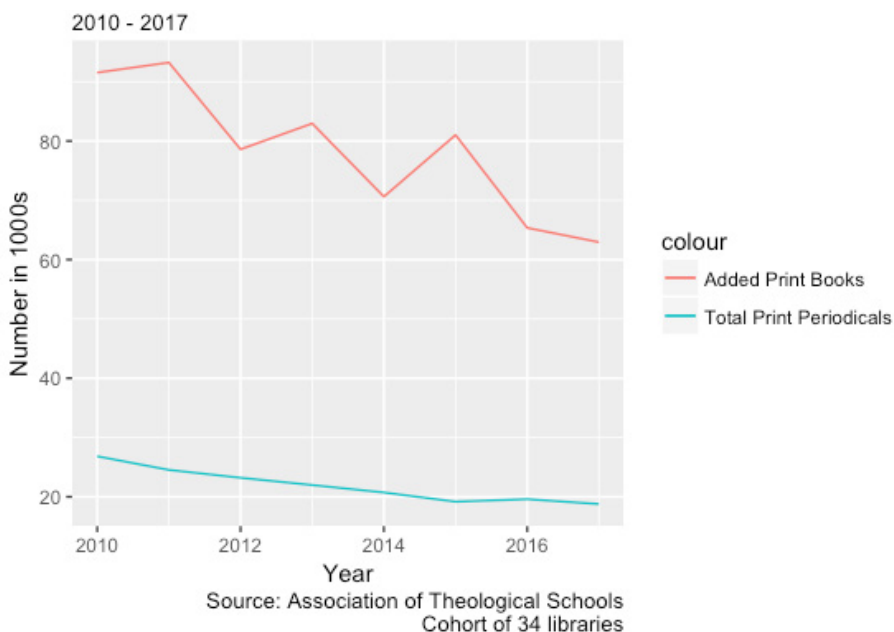


Figure 7: Print Books Added and Journals Subscribed

By multiplying the average costs per title with the number of titles published in a given year, one can estimate a total cost of all titles published in a given year. These again are just U.S. titles and exclude inflation, but if a library aspired to purchase every academic book in religion and philosophy published during 1998 at an average cost of \$42.70, the cost would have been \$188,000. The same comprehensive purchase during 2015 would have cost over \$981,000 or roughly five times as much to purchase three times as many titles. Unfortunately, there is no meaningful collective count of new unique titles purchased, as each library makes its own collection decisions (Figure 6).

Libraries and Expenditure Trends

Looking at the ATS data, library book budgets have not experienced the same rate of increase as are indicated in the publishing market. If there really is an academic market of over 12,000 U.S. titles in religion and philosophy

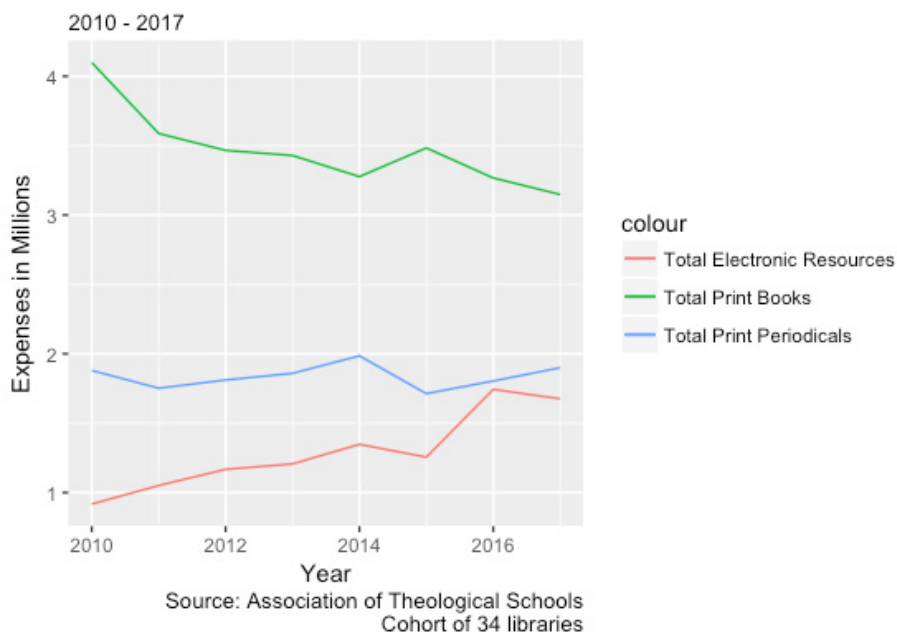


Figure 8: Total Library Materials Expenditures

today, theological libraries are able to purchase a declining proportion. Among the collective cohort of 34 libraries, the expenditures in books have decreased by nearly \$1M or about 25% over the last eight years. Looking at raw counts, the cohort of libraries have purchased fewer books and subscribed to fewer periodicals than they did eight years ago (Figure 7).

When looking specifically at expenditures, there is an increase in materials expenses related to electronic resources that seems to mirror some of the decline in book purchases. As noted above, some of this may be related to specificity of “print” in regards to books and likely there are some places where an e-book license would be chosen over the purchase of a print book. However, the bulk of the electronic resources are in the form of subscriptions, which often have the benefit of providing access to a wider array of resources but provide challenges to the library budget and mission for preservation. A library can be faced with the inevitable choice of paying for increased cost or removing access for patrons (although some — but not all — journals offer some post-cancellation access to subscribed titles). While difficult to measure discrete units of electronic resources or databases, there is certainly a growth of products and costs in this area as well (Figure 8).

Library and Seminary Expenditure Trends

Over the period of analysis, there has been an increase of over 10% in collective seminary expenditures (including and beyond libraries). Within that same period, there has been a slight decrease in the collective materials budgets for the cohort of ATS libraries (around 2.5%).

Thus, library materials budgets have been receiving a declining portion relative to overall seminary budgets and, as demonstrated above, they continue to lose significant purchasing power through the growth of publishing and increase in costs (Figure 9).

Discussion

On the publisher side, the trend appears to be that publishing projects remain increasingly viable despite declining purchases by theological libraries. For books, a recent study on the costs of publishing monographs⁵ analyzed 31 titles

⁵ Nancy L. Maron et al., “The Costs of Publishing Monographs,” in *Ithaca S+R*, accessed September 15, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.276785>.

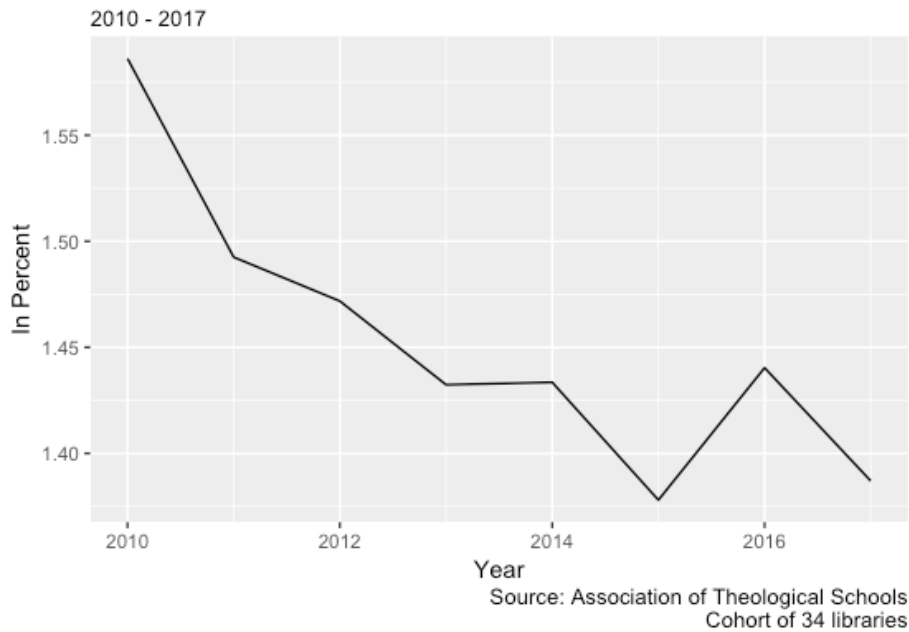


Figure 9: Total Library Materials Expenditures

in religion and found their average cost to produce a book in religion was slightly under \$20,000 per title. To break even, one would either have to sell 500 copies at \$40/book or 250 copies at \$80/book. If you reduce the number of theological libraries and if those remaining face flat or reduced budgets, there are fewer institutions who can subscribe to journals or purchase books. Publishers are likely to increase costs so that they can make the same revenue from 200 library subscriptions as they did from 300 subscriptions. Publishers may soon determine that certain journal titles or book projects are simply no longer economically viable.

Both religious publishers and theological libraries are carefully watching a general decline of religious affiliation in the United States. Recent work from the Public Religion Research Institute shows the growth of the religiously unaffiliated over the last 30 years. Cox and Jones's analysis shows a greater percentage of the unaffiliated belonging to younger generations.⁶ This appears to be a broad demographic trend in the United States.

One impact of the general decline in religious affiliation and participation is a significant shift in pastoral leadership needs. Fewer people means fewer churches and thus fewer pastors. Even large churches may need fewer ordained clergy on church staffs. To use one national mainline example, there has been a 20% decline in active elders in the United Methodist Church over the last ten years.⁷ This also coincides with growing dependence upon local pastors and lay ministers who do not require graduate theological education. Over one-third of United Methodist churches are served by a local pastor who serves without a graduate theological education.

The context of theological education is best represented by data from the Association of Theological Schools. According to the ATS's Annual Data Tables,⁸ the number of seminaries with fewer than 75 students has more than doubled over the last 10 years. Half of the ATS-accredited schools in the United States have a headcount of less than 150. Seminaries embedded within universities have some version of "allocated costs" to the university for building upkeep, IT network support, benefits, and hidden "coordination costs" in maintaining the university relationship. Freestanding seminaries have all the expenses required to sustain an accredited graduate degree. While lacking the "allocated costs" or hidden

⁶ Daniel Cox and Robert Jones, "America's Changing Religious Identity," *PRRI* (blog), accessed September 15, 2017. <https://www.prrri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

⁷ Lovett H. Weems, "2017 Clergy Age Report," *Lewis Center for Church Leadership*, September 19, 2017. <https://www.churchleadership.com/focus/2017-clergy-age-report/>.

⁸ "Annual Data Tables: The Association of Theological Schools," accessed January 29, 2018. <https://www.ats.edu/resources/institutional-data/annual-data-tables>.

“coordination costs” of being attached to a university, independent seminaries struggle with a lack of scale that would spread costs across a greater pool of students, grants, and/or donor revenue.

When one looks at higher education spending as a whole, one observes a tripling of what the United States has spent on higher education since 1998 — a change not reflected in most seminary budgets.⁹ With problems of inadequate scale and shrinking markets, one can imagine further closings, mergers, and reductions in theological education.

The overall reduction in theological education has naturally had an impact on libraries and publishing too. For some, the financial realities within theological education have resulted in flat or reduced library budgets and, in some cases, fewer theological libraries. While publishers have markets in addition to theological libraries (particularly coursebook, practitioner, and religious studies markets), this also shapes the market of books published and journals sustained. Publishing projects focusing on the Bible are going to tap multiple markets to a greater degree than publishing projects around ecclesiology. While this has perhaps already been the case for some time, publishing and library trends may exacerbate these trends.

Further Research

There is much space for further research in publishing trends. This study looked at the broad fields of religion and philosophy to identify aggregate trends across time. Using more granular classification data of new books, one could identify specific fields or areas among religion disciplines to calculate where specific fields or areas have followed or deviated from the broader trends. For instance, it could be that Biblical Studies (the BS classification) is a major driver in the number of new titles published while Theology (BT and BV) is a major driver in cost. Similarly, one could follow a cohort of journal titles within a certain classification to see more granular trends in periodical publishing.

Within libraries, this study looked specifically at a library cohort among members of the Association of Theological Schools. While helpful to identify some possible trends, the library and broader market for books and journals is more complicated. One could take the opposite approach, identifying a cohort of new books or journal titles and then identify and analyze the libraries who are purchasers/subscribers. For instance, it could be that a number of theological journals have a larger number of college or university subscribers — either due to the interest within their departments of religion or due to the journal’s placement with a subscription package. Similarly, there could be other significant library markets (public libraries, parochial school libraries, or purchasing consortiums).

Conclusion

Even allowing for degrees of uncertainty in the data presented, there remains a significant disconnect in the rising collective costs for publishing versus the declining expenditures among theological libraries. Few libraries could ever afford or desire to be comprehensive in collecting the scholarship of religion and theology. The trend appears to be that the average theological library is purchasing a declining portion of the scholarship. Some of this may be a natural part of collection development and publishing trends, where the larger number of publications may be increasingly narrow in scope, unviable in a previous publishing era, and falling outside the normal collecting parameters of libraries. However, the evidence also may suggest an increasingly unsustainable market.

Given the sobering challenges of publishing and the trends in the various contexts in which libraries operate, this is a critical opportunity for further cooperative leadership among libraries and scholars.

First, cooperative collection development among theological libraries remains critical so that access to and preservation of the scholarly record is maintained. Limited, and in many cases shrinking, library budgets could go further if not spent purchasing the same materials collected by other neighboring or cooperating libraries. Also, cooperative collection development would allow individual libraries to develop significant strengths and collectively to hold a greater diversity of the scholarly record.

⁹ B. E. A. US Department of Commerce, “Bureau of Economic Analysis,” accessed January 29, 2018. <https://www.bea.gov/iTable/iTable.cfm?reqid=19&step=2#reqid=19&step=3&isuri=1&1921=survey&1903=74>.

Second, the growth and impact of open access publishing should also be more fully considered. Open access refers simply to free and unrestricted availability of a journal, journal article, essay, paper, thesis, book, or other media. Rather than the costs being borne by the reader, any costs related to the production are subvented in other ways. Projects like UnGlueIT and Knowledge Unlatched allow individuals and/or libraries to pool funds together in order to make a traditionally published book open access. These campaigns make a cash payment to publishers toward anticipated revenue and profits from sales. Publishers can continue to make money through selling print copies but the content is also now freely available digitally. Also, individual articles of subscription journals or entire monographs can be made open access through self-archiving within an institutional or disciplinary repository. Self-archiving is a way of providing access to the intellectual content while allowing for the subscription journals to maintain the publication of record. The impact of both “born” open access materials as well as materials which are “made” open access also continues to shape the publishing and library markets.

Cooperative collection development, open access publishing, and other efforts of libraries to work more closely with one another and within the scholarly communication ecosystem are critical ways to address some of the challenges noted in this article.

Appendix A – Cohort of Theological Libraries Included in Analysis

- Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary
- Bethel Seminary of Bethel University
- Boston University School of Theology
- Brite Divinity School
- Candler School of Theology of Emory University
- Concordia Theological Seminary (IN)
- Dallas Theological Seminary
- Denver Seminary
- Duke University Divinity School
- Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary
- Graduate Theological Union
- Harding School of Theology
- Harvard University Divinity School
- Iliff School of Theology
- Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary
- Luther Seminary
- McCormick Theological Seminary
- Methodist Theological School in Ohio
- Multnomah Biblical Seminary
- Nashotah House
- New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary
- Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
- Pontifical College Josephinum
- Saint Meinrad School of Theology
- Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
- Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
- Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
- St. Patrick's Seminary and University
- University of Dubuque Theological Seminary
- University of St. Mary of the Lake Mundelein Seminary
- Vanderbilt University Divinity School
- Virginia Theological Seminary
- Wesley Theological Seminary
- Yale University Divinity School