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A Survey of Religious Book Publishing with Implications for Collection Development in Christian College Libraries

Gregory A. Smith

Introduction

“And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written [. . .]” (John 21:25 KJV). Some nineteen centuries ago, the apostle John concluded his account of the life and ministry of Christ with this unusual epilogue. In recent decades, his words have been fulfilled in a remarkable manner. Every year, thousands of Christian books are written and disseminated to a growing audience--a reality which John could scarcely have imagined in his wildest dreams. Yet such activity is merely a part of the whole of religious book publishing.

It is the purpose of the present essay to survey the field of religious book publishing, drawing practical applications for collection development in the Christian college library. Such a discussion necessitates the definition of several terms. First, it is necessary to explain what is meant by “religious book publishing.” Formally speaking, a book is a “a non-periodical printed publication” of substantive length (“Book” 33). Publishing involves, at the least, securing copyright from the author of a work and making suitable arrangements to produce and market it (Feather 34). Therefore, book publishing is the complex of processes involved in making a substantive, non-serial printed work available for public consumption.

Rather obviously, religious book publishing denotes the application of these processes to religious works. But what constitutes a religious book? More fundamentally, what constitutes religion? The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion gives the following insight: “One may clarify the term religion by defining it as a system of beliefs and practices that are relative to superhuman beings” (Smith 893). It is not to be concluded, however, that all religious books have for their subject matter such beliefs and practices; indeed, as Marty notes, it is impossible to define them “by reference to a specific object or content” (565). Rather, a religious book is one that reflects a religious view of a given area of life. “You cannot sort religious books out from history, literature, philosophy in the humanities. Nor will they stand in lonely isolation from anthropological, sociological or psychological texts” (565).

Several decades ago, the Religious Publishing Division of the Association of American Publishers created a poster with the following words: “Religious books are also about love, sex, politics, war, peace, ecology, theology, philosophy, drugs, race, dissent, ethics, technology, morality, revolution, rock, God, beauty, psychology, dogma, the underground, the establishment, death, and [. . .] life” (qtd. in Gentz 63). In accord with the above, a work which assesses religious belief or practice from an external, non-religious perspective is not truly a religious book, but a book about religion. In sum, religious book publishing is the process by which religious perspectives are offered to the public in the form of non-periodical printed works.

A second concept which merits clarification is that of “collection development.” The International Encyclopedia of Information and Library Science relates this phrase to “the building of library collections, ideally following guidelines already established and articulated in the library’s written collection development policy [. . .]. Although this term is sometimes used synonymously with the term collection management, the two are not identical” (Jenkins 61). Collection management is a broader term, encompassing not only collection development but also technical processing, preservation, and other collection-related activities (61). In sum, for the purposes of this paper, collection development is understood to denote the selection and acquisition of book materials for systematic addition to a library’s holdings.

The third concept which necessitates explanation is that of the “Christian college.” It is evident to the informed reader that the term “Christian” is applied--whether justifiably so or not--to a rather wide variety of theological persuasions. In the context of this essay, the Christian college is understood as “a *postsecondary institution of learning that takes seriously an evangelical doctrinal statement, classes in Bible and Christian ministry, a distinctively Christian philosophy of education and life, and the quality of spiritual life on campus*” (Gangel 333). Evangelicalism is a Christian movement that spans various denominations; its central tenets, not unanimously agreed on, include the necessity of personal conversion, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the mission of sharing the gospel message with others (Pierard 311; Fackre 191). To clarify: This paper is most

applicable to collection development personnel at institutions that adhere to the essential evangelical commitments listed above.

The scope of the present study is limited on several fronts. First, because it is written for academic librarians at evangelical institutions, it focuses primarily on the publication of Christian books, especially those which express the views of evangelicalism. Second, it focuses on religious materials published in the United States. While this may seem to be quite narrow, it should be noted that American publishers account for a majority of the Christian materials published worldwide: “63% of the world’s supply of Christian books is American. That is, 63% is conceptualized here, edited here, even printed and bound here” (Tickle “CBA” 16). In addition, American publishers are responsible for publishing a growing number of books which express the views of various non-Protestant faiths. There is an emphasis on the part of publishers--as well as a demand on the part of readers--for materials which reflect the views of Judaism, Catholicism, and various Eastern religions (Carrigan 38, 40). Third, this essay is not concerned with sacred texts *per se*, but with the thousands of books that are written in the tradition of such texts. This is significant because Bibles and related materials account for half of the Christian publishing industry’s revenue (Duke 15). One would assume the same is true of religious publishing at large.

Sources of Religious Books

In order to assess the present conditions and future directions of religious book publishing, it is imperative to understand where religious books come from. This section of the essay will provide a basic description of the five kinds of publishing houses which produce religious books.

Historically, American religious book publishing has been dominated by denominational presses (Miller 139). As implied by their name, such presses are commissioned to carry out the publishing work of a denomination, which includes the production of “both scholarly works and general readings for the religious community” (Pullen 360). Most of these presses are connected to mainline Protestant churches, and are theologically liberal, *i.e.*, non-evangelical (Ostling 46). Because of their church affiliation, they enjoy the privilege of tax-exemption (Ferré 105). Active denominational imprints include Broadman & Holman (Southern Baptist), Abingdon (Methodist), Westminster/John Knox (Presbyterian), Augsburg Fortress (Lutheran), and several others.

Traditionally, denominational presses have felt the influence of accountability to their respective

constituencies. As Rowell notes in regard to scholarly publishing, “denominational publishing houses are restricted to scholarly studies that fulfill purposes more or less delimited by the programs of specific denominational institutions” (78-79). This does not imply that they never publish a dissenting voice, but that their authors’ freedom of expression is limited to a certain degree by political realities (Pullen 364-67). The extent to which opinions are curtailed may vary over time, or from one press to another. Nevertheless, some authors believe denominational presses’ contribution to theological publishing is essential to the enterprise of theology. Wheeler comments: “[T]hough independent firms currently play an important role in serious theological publishing, there is no assurance that they would fill the gap if denominational publishers were to abandon the field. Nor are university presses in a position to take over the responsibilities of strictly religious publishers” (“In Need” 1068).

According to several authors, denominational publishing has been experiencing a crisis for some twenty years. The problems include rising production costs (Pullen 361); lack of support for publishing on the part of denomination officials (Wheeler, “In Need” 1068; Carlson 138); an industry-wide emphasis on financial solvency, coupled with denomination-wide revenue losses (Wheeler, “Theological Education” 60-63); and a hesitancy to subsidize publishing “as a form of ministry” (Carlson 138). Such conditions combine to produce negative results: an emphasis on publishing popular materials, which sell to a wider audience, thus yielding more consistent profits; escalating prices, designed to ensure profitability; lower physical quality of books, designed to keep prices from rising; and shorter in-print periods, which maximize the publisher’s efficiency but hinder the availability of materials to everyone in academia--faculty, librarians, and students (Wheeler, “Theological Education” 64-65). In response to these realities, Wheeler offers the following exhortation: “At a time when these denominations feel that their social impact has declined, publishing is an important channel for their continued participation in the pluralistic conversation about intellectual, cultural and social values. Rather than begrudge their presses the support and resources they require, mainline denominations should promote them with enthusiasm” (“In Need” 1070).

In recent decades, independent religious houses (which have no denominational ties) have garnered a sizable share of the religious book market. These publishers boomed in the 1980s (Miller 139; Ostling 47; Shattuck 128), and are still profitable. While most “started as small, privately held Christian companies,” some are now publicly held (Ferré 102; Buss, “The Problems” 60). A decade ago, a discussion about the

independent religious presses inevitably led to references to the “Big Three,” namely, The Zondervan Corporation, Thomas Nelson Publishers, and Word, Inc. (60). However, Zondervan was acquired by Harper & Row in 1988 (Ferré 102), and is thus part of mainstream publishing. Other non-affiliated religious publishers include William B. Eerdmans, Baker Book House, Tyndale House, Moody Press, Multnomah, Servant Publications, Paulist Press, and many others.

Many of the independent religious houses are broadly evangelical. For the most part, they “have shown a knack for appealing to the mass market, which is evident in both individual titles and overall retail sales” (Ostling 47). Though they offer some academic and scholarly titles (and even entire academic product lines), their emphasis is largely on popular materials. As for-profit, and in some cases publicly-owned businesses, they are concerned with the economic aspects of religious publishing as much as with preserving cultural heritage and propagating theological truth. Their business activities have largely mirrored those of the book publishing industry at large. Ferré describes a shift in their management goals from “ministry” to “marketing” (104). He further notes that “[r]egardless of the size or ownership of evangelical publishers, they are widely criticized within evangelicalism for their growing business mentality” (105). In one academic’s opinion, “religious publishers are usually more interested in whether a book will sell than in whether the book is worth selling in the first place” (105).

Rowell notes, perhaps more objectively, that “so-called ‘religious publishing houses’ [. . .] are more or less restricted to areas that will ‘sell’” (79). They simply do not have the luxury--as might some not-for-profit or subsidized presses--of publishing without regard for the bottom line. Nevertheless, despite these weaknesses, the religious trade publishers have enriched the bibliographic realm with numerous worthy contributions over the last several decades. Academic libraries at evangelical institutions stand to enhance their collections significantly by acquiring selected titles produced by these presses.

A third kind of religious book publisher is the university press. University presses publish materials on a broad spectrum of topics, depending on their editorial guidelines, geographic location, curricular emphases, and religious affiliation (if any). Not all books published by such presses are necessarily academic or scholarly, though it is likely that the proportion of “thinking” books produced by university presses is generally higher than that produced by most denominational or commercial houses. University presses are of great importance to scholars in the humanities, due in part to the fact that they tend to be concerned with broad-scoped, multi-faceted topics that are hard to deal with in

the brevity of a journal article (Budd).

Books that express religious perspectives, and especially books on the subject of religion, are published by denominational school presses (*e.g.*, Mercer, Baylor) as well as by secular university presses (*e.g.*, University of Washington Press, University of Texas Press). However, as Miller points out, “[f]ew would characterize this area of publishing as robust” (140). The weakness of religious publishing in the university press can be attributed to several factors: First, in the secular setting, there are many subjects--not just religion--which demand the attention of the press. Second, there are not many university presses at religiously-affiliated institutions. Third, secular university presses tend to have editorial guidelines which hinder them from producing works on narrow religious disciplines (140) or laden with heavy theological content (Wheeler, “In Need” 1068). Furthermore, university presses are facing the same economic pressures as other publishers (Wheeler, “Theological Education” 63; Budd).

While these comments may seem pessimistic, they illustrate the realities that prevent university presses from publishing more religious books. Nevertheless, there are useful works being published in such settings every year. Therefore, while Christian academic libraries cannot afford to rely solely on the religious materials published by university presses (Wheeler, “In Need” 1068), they ought not to ignore them, for to do so would be detrimental to collection development.

A fourth category of religious publisher is the mainstream (*i.e.*, non-religious) trade house. Contrary to what one might think, mainstream publishers account for a significant portion of the religious book industry, as Ferré observes: “General trade houses and university presses publish about one-fifth of all religious titles in the United States [. . .]” (102). The general publisher most active in the field of religion is Harper & Row, including the HarperSanFrancisco and Zondervan imprints. Harper & Row’s acquisition of Zondervan in 1988 made it “the largest publisher of religious books in the United States, and perhaps the world” (104). Indeed, as of 1990, Harper & Row was the only major press of its kind to publish aggressively in the religious field (102). In 1994, the Ballantine Publishing Group (a subunit of Random House) established a Christian imprint by the name of Moorings (Carrigan 40). Moorings closed in 1996 because of adverse conditions in the marketplace (“News Briefs” 75).

Wheeler argues that the volatility of the market does not favor the production of “modestly profitable [product] lines--good fiction, poetry, and serious non-fiction, including academic books” (“Theological Education” 58). On the contrary, it encourages the publication of “the stuff that pays--bestsellers, textbooks,

mass market books, and a few standard reference works” (58). The industry has undergone a shift: No longer is the production of books viewed as a cultural activity (56-57); instead, it is perceived as an opportunity to make wide profit margins.

As demonstrated by the experience of Moorings, it is difficult for a new religious house or imprint to survive in the mainstream of the book trade. It may not be quite so difficult for the established company, Harper & Row, to maintain a profitable business. Harper & Row has an inroad with general bookstores (B. Dalton) as well as Christian retailers (Zondervan’s Family Bookstores). This stability should allow for the assumption of risk through the publication of marginally profitable titles--a situation that can benefit libraries and other sectors of the academic community.

The four principal producers of religious books--denominational presses, independent religious publishers, university presses, and general publishers--have each been introduced. However, there remain two less prolific publisher types to describe: local church presses and subsidy publishers. Some religious publishing is undertaken by a local church, a group of local churches, or a board closely associated with one or more churches. These entities view publishing as a ministry rather than a profit-making venture; in fact, some presses price their books modestly in protest of what they consider a lucrative industry (Wolver). Capitalization, typesetting, production, and marketing vary widely among local church presses. They are united in their desire to disseminate information that furthers their unique purposes and views. All things considered, local church publishing can be scandalous or exemplary. Much depends on the talent, effort, dedication, and financial investment of those most closely involved in the publishing process. Clearly, editing and production quality can vary widely in this arena. But such ventures may produce a number of volumes that fill an informational niche in a Christian academic library’s collection.

The final producer of religious books is the subsidy publisher, sometimes referred to as a vanity press. Such presses generally have a negative reputation, and for good reason: Some are often engaged in publishing items which are intellectually or editorially unfit for the commercial and not-for-profit sectors of the industry. Subsidy presses are essentially companies which provide various publishing services for a fee. Because they are profit-driven businesses, they are often less concerned with a book’s intellectual quality--which reflects primarily on its author--than they are with its production quality--which reflects on them.

Subsidy publishers may offer a range of services, including “providing an imprint name, ISBN, editorial

support, text and cover design, page layout and proofreading, formal business address, warehousing, promotion, order processing, [and] shipping” (Miller 142). Additional services offered may include barcoding, Library of Congress and copyright filing, marketing, and distribution (142; Morris Publishing). Miller observes that “[s]ome subsidy publishers do these tasks more aggressively than others. Those that do little or nothing in this area are vanity publishers, [while] those that do them well develop a reputation as a quality subsidy publisher” (142).

As with local church publications, the quality of subsidy publications can vary widely. There are credible subsidy presses and others to be avoided. It is possible, given the economics of the industry, that increasing numbers of print-worthy manuscripts and proposals will be rejected by editors at traditional houses. Subsidy publishing offers a reasonable alternative for producing books that have a limited geographical, professional, or denominational appeal (142). In sum, Christian academic librarians should be open-minded toward further developments in the subsidy publishing arena; at the same time, they should exercise caution to maintain the quality of their collections.

A Profile of the Religious Book Publishing Industry

As emphasized in the previous section, the religious book publishing industry is fairly diversified and quite profit-conscious. In the section that follows, information will be set forth so as to enable the reader to gain a grasp of the industry’s vital statistics--its market share, annual volume, and readership.

How large is the religious book publishing industry in relation to book publishing as a whole? According to a 1981 publication by Judith Duke, “[r]eligious book publishing constitutes a small sector of the total book publishing industry, for since 1971 it has accounted for only 4% to 5% of total industry sales” (1). Almost a decade later, Ferré made a more comprehensive observation: “Throughout the twentieth century, religious titles have accounted for about 5 percent of all books published in the United States. Despite the recent cooling of sales, this figure still holds true, indicating an enduring industry” (115). The fact that religious book sales have remained constant in relation to the overall industry suggests that, to a large extent, trends in religious book publishing are not significantly isolated from market forces in the industry at large.

If religious book publishing accounts for five percent of the market, it seems reasonable to ask what such a percentage represents in terms of sales and book titles. Any answer to such queries must be qualified with the condition that there are many ways to interpret the

available data, and thus there are many possible answers to the questions. Some of the ambiguity may lie in defining what is meant by a religious book. Many statistics focus only on Christian books, overlooking the growing field of non-Christian religious publishing. Some data represent the combined sales of given stores (e.g., members of the Christian Booksellers Association), yet such figures are skewed on three counts: first, they include non-book purchases, such as music and clothing; second, they exclude non-Christian religious stores as well as non-CBA Christian stores; third, they ignore religious book sales made through general retailers. The bottom line is that it is impossible to know exactly how much money is spent on religious books in America in a given period of time. Nevertheless, some quantifying efforts are necessary. Following are some estimates that have been published since 1981.

According to one study, religious books accounted for \$273.8 million in sales in 1978 (Duke 15). Another study indicated a much higher figure for the same year: \$425 million, representing 6.5% of the total book industry (21). 1986 sales of Christian books were estimated at \$685 million (Ferré 100). Only one year later, Christian book sales were reputed to be a \$1.3 billion industry (Buss, "The Problems" 60). CBA member store sales (not limited to books) reportedly totaled \$2.7 billion in 1990 (Griffin, "CBA in Orlando" 19). A 1992 article accorded Christian bookstores \$2 billion in annual sales, including non-book materials (Board 26). Finally, a 1993 article described the CBA as "a billion-dollar part of America's publishing industry" (Tickle, "CBA" 16). Quite clearly, there is no consensus concerning a definition of religious books, nor is there any means of making exact sales calculations. In addition, inflation must be accounted for in cross-year comparisons.

What can be learned from the above statistics? First, it is clear that the religious book industry is growing. While it has not grown at a consistent rate over time, it is obvious that it is not stagnant. Second, the data suggest that the industry is large enough and multi-faceted enough to defy quantification.

The difficulties of estimating religious book sales apply, predictably, to the counting of religious book titles as well. According to Judith Duke's study, the number of religious titles published annually rose from 1,104 in 1960 to 2,180 in 1978 (17). During the same period, the relation of the religious book industry to the total industry fluctuated between 4.2% and 7.4% (17). Based on Ferré's observation that the proportion has hovered around 5% for several decades (115), and given that over 50,000 new books are acknowledged in Books in Print annually (Franklyn 363), it would seem logical to conclude that at least 2,500 new religious titles are

published in the United States each year.

Despite the fact that the rate of growth is reportedly slowing (Buss, "Christian Book Publishers" 60), it is evident that the amount of available literature is still expanding. In one author's terms, "the sheer multiplicity of new titles in the religious field is dizzying [. . .]" (Shattuck 129). Another author comments: "The current state of theological publishing as a whole is not quite so dismal as these beleaguered voices would claim. [. . .] [At] the annual [meeting of] the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature [. . .] over fifty publishers are present with thousands of recent new titles for sale on every imaginable aspect of religion. No end is in sight to the making of books" (Franklyn 367).

How do these realities impact collection development? In most academic library settings, acquisitions budgets are not keeping pace with inflation, much less the growth of the bibliographic base. Present conditions and future directions necessitate, first, the application of more clearly articulated selection principles than were formerly needed. Second, they argue for a greater emphasis on access to--as opposed to ownership of--information sources. This involves participation in consortia and the development of cooperative relationships with other institutions.

What sort of people read religious books? What segments of the population can be identified as consumers of religious information? These are issues of demand, fundamentally different from the supply side of the book trade discussed in this paper until now.

Some analysts estimate that Christian book readers in America number as many as 40 or 50 million (Tickle, "CBA" 16). However, there is evidence to suggest that this figure is inflated. Ferré comments: "At the very most, only 15 percent of adults [some 25-30 million people] regularly read religious books" (114). Indeed, "there is still a very large percentage of active Christians who never visit a Christian bookstore. [. . .] CBA reports that the number of Christians shopping at CBA stores has increased from 12 to 15 percent a decade or two ago to 25 percent or more in 1994" (Anderson et al 23). It is apparent to this author that the number of religious book readers in America is as elusive as are accurate sales figures and title counts.

Quantitative analysis of the readership is complex, yielding only approximate answers; a qualitative assessment is in order. Duke's 1981 study described the typical religious book buyer as a married woman between the ages of 26 and 48, a high school graduate, not necessarily active in a local church (13). Several years later, the scenario remains largely the same: "The typical reader is a married evangelical woman, twenty-five to forty-nine, who lives in the Sun Belt from California to Georgia. She earns a moderate income, is at

least high school educated, and attends church regularly” (Ferré 114).

Of course, there are many exceptions to this general characterization. One of the possible weaknesses of the above data is that they are based, at least in part, on point-of-sale statistics. But the buyer is not necessarily the reader. Some argue that women purchase more books because they are less likely to work during the day, when most retail stores are open (Duke 13). One would suspect that the typical readers of scholarly and academic materials do not fit the above description. Given the demographics of religious academia and the clergy, such readers would likely be predominantly male, highly educated, and active church members.

In an essay entitled, “Who Are the Readers?,” Gentz notes that there is a great diversity to the religious readership (55). Religious readers are, in essence, a society in miniature. The religious market is not a single market, but a complex of sub-markets. A number of populations can be targeted, including a variety of age groups, both sexes, a diversity of faiths, and a wealth of groups sharing common interests (55-63).

Readers of religious materials tend to be identified to a certain extent with the religious--predominantly evangelical--subculture (Ferré 115). For example, they must be willing to shop for books at religious stores, because the materials that interest them are not consistently available at general bookstores (Shattuck 129) or public libraries (Avallone 1892). They may find it necessary to read book reviews in religious periodicals, because religious titles are seldom reviewed in the mainstream media (1892; Shattuck 129). They cannot rely on bestseller lists to make them aware of popular religious books, for such lists are based on sales at general interest stores (Ferré 111-13; Ostling 47). They tend to buy books recommended by ministers and other acquaintances (Duke 13). They commonly buy books from publishers that are identifiably religious (Nelson 464). Indeed, they trust such presses (rather implicitly) to publish works marked by quality and accuracy (464; Board 26). Religious identity may be, therefore, the most common characteristic of the religious readership.

How can collection development librarians benefit from an understanding of the religious readership? First, they should be aware of the existence of the various sub-markets, and should select titles which not only provide useful content, but present it in a manner conducive to use in an academic setting. Second, they should be prepared to do their work in the religious subculture, including reading reviews in religious periodicals, becoming familiar with the characteristics of the religious publishers, developing relationships with members of the religious community, and ordering from

religious publishers or distributors. In short, because the religious readership is a unique community, religious books are marketed and distributed in unique ways, necessitating unconventional means of collection development.

A Delicate Balance Between Ministry and Industry

“In a sense, contemporary religious publishing is a schizophrenic industry. Its employees and trade magazines speak of the industry as a ministry, but the major publishers are now owned by public corporations whose primary ‘mission’ is to generate profits for stockholders” (Ferré 102). As noted in this revealing quote, religious publishing is torn between its “ministerial” and “industrial” roles. Is its primary mission to communicate distinctively religious perspectives on the issues of life, or to ensure profitability? Without the philosophy of the former, it loses its *raison d’être*; without the financial solvency of the latter, the *raison d’être* does not matter anyway.

Perhaps one of the greatest evidences of religious book publishing’s ministerial role is its relatedness to religious journalism and religious broadcasting. In fact, the three are often discussed in the same context (Ostling 46-55; Duke 1-29). Avery refers to “the link between Christian broadcasters and Christian publishers, one which does not exist between [their] secular counterparts” (12). She later states: “There is a great synergism between radio, print, and video. Each feeds the other. [. . .] We must remember that as broadcasters and publishers, we’re in the communication business” (13).

Many individuals and organizations that are involved in religious broadcasting are also involved in religious publishing. In fact, as noted by Avery, the two reinforce each other regularly. Such relationships accrue benefits to the publishing realm:

The religious electronic media, Christian publishers, and Christian retail stores need to partner in every way possible to make Christians and the general public more aware that there are excellent Christian books available. [. . .]

Publishers partnering with the broadcast media is an idea that is not only viable but mandatory for success. Book reviews and author interviews make up a significant portion of the programming aired by top programs [. . .]. (Anderson et al 23)

Religious broadcasters and publishers are united by their desire to impact society with a distinctive message. Ostling notes that “evangelical Protestants [. . .] have put

together a quite remarkable network of denominational and parachurch agencies to promote their beliefs and programs. The communications media [. . .] have been at the core of this successful effort” (47). However, one issue divides broadcasters from publishers. Whereas the former are mostly not-for-profit, the latter are largely commercial enterprises (Board 26). Commenting on the business emphasis among both groups, one author states that “[t]here is something both fitting and unsettling about the idea that evangelical religion [. . .] has seen the desert bloom and now conducts its strategic planning, on the fly, at commercial trade shows” (Ostling 55).

There is evidence to support the claim that religious publishing has a ministry focus; there is perhaps greater proof that it is quite business-oriented. Religious book publishing is, first, a subset of what might be termed religious capitalism. Board explains: “Since World War II, the growth of Christian ‘business’ has paralleled the growth of independent Christian ministries. These business enterprises, says Allan Fisher, a chronicler of Christian publishing, are ‘predominantly undenominational, parachurch, lay-oriented, and profit-making’” (26). Religious businesses include producers of music, clothing, curriculum, videos, and computer software, as well as other goods and services. Religious book publishing is a part of this realm.

Second, religious book publishing is a subset of the publishing industry as a whole. The trends that impact secular publishers usually affect religious publishers as well. Hoffert observes: “Like publishing generally, religious publishing is facing hard times. Notes Paulist’s Donald Brophy, ‘All religious publishers are having difficulties now. They have the same problems as other publishers’” (63). Wheeler contends that publishing has undergone a fundamental change in the last 50 years: “In the 1940s and 1950s publishing was chiefly a cultural activity, driven by editorial and educational considerations; now it is first of all a business, in which ‘product lines’ [. . .] are ‘developed’ and marketed” (“In Need” 1067). Inasmuch as publishing at large is a commercial endeavor, so is religious publishing.

Third, religious book publishing is simply a subset of the whole national (and international) marketplace. As Christian publisher Kip Jordon noted, “The financial constraints that corporate America is feeling are going to affect us also [. . .] We’re going to have to become wiser about the use of the resources we have--financial as well as people resources” (qtd. in Griffin, “Decatrends” 25). In the last 20 years, and particularly in the last ten, religious publishers have experienced the same trends as other businesses: acquisitions and mergers (Wheeler, “Theological Education” 58, 60; Griffin, “New Lineup” 29; Ferré 104); downsizing (103-04; Buss, “Christian Book Publishers” 62; “Re-Drawing” 45; Sidey and Giles 67); and forced resignations (Ferré 103; Griffin,

“Christian Publishers” 42).

Thus it is clear that religious publishing is run like a business--and with good reason. Today’s market is very competitive (Buss, “Mass Marketing” 58), and organizations that lack good management fall by the wayside very quickly. Religious publishers have had to become more professional in the last two decades, at the risk of losing their voice completely. Nevertheless, the tension between ministry and industry--a delicate balance--remains, and will probably not go away.

Collection development is impacted by business trends in publishing. Overall, an increased emphasis on professionalism and quality should result in better service to the customer--including the collection development librarian who orders directly from publishers. However, efforts to streamline and downsize companies may yield the opposite effect: poor customer service, slow response time, errors in order fulfillment, etc. Frequent acquisitions, mergers, and sales may be confusing for the librarian who deals more with publishers than with distributors. In addition, the commercial mindset may have a negative effect on the content of the books that are published; quality and diversity are jeopardized by the tyrannies of competition and popular taste. This allusion to the relationship between popular demand and publishing judgment leads directly into the theme of the following section.

Religious Book Publishing in Cultural Context

“Have religious publishers forsaken their mission and ministry in the pursuit of mammon” (Franklyn 367)? This question is very important to all who are concerned for the long-term health of religious book publishing. And there is no easy answer to it. On the one hand, an industry executive states flatly: “Our publishing company is not driven by trends [. . .] We do what we feel needs to be published” (Griffin, “Decatrends” 25). Another corroborates: “A publishing program can’t go overboard chasing trends. We all need to be aware of what is going on in the market, but we also have to keep firmly in mind our identity as a publishing house, our mission statement, and the kinds of books we do well” (Anderson et al 22).

On the other hand, there are those who claim that the industry is substantially driven by such trends. A writer explains: “[A]n overwhelming reality has developed, one that sends signals into the wings of the entire church: a symbiotic relationship between popular buying tastes and publishing judgments” (Nelson 464). A reference librarian--also a writer--agrees: “To be sure, as long as the demand for religion books manifests itself in increased sales, publishers will look for new ways to capture the market to which religion books appeal”

(Carrigan 40).

Clearly, there is an “inescapable tension” between ministry and money, as noted earlier in the essay (Tickle, “CBA” 16). Which side is right? There is probably an element of truth to both points of view. Some publishers are more market-oriented than mission-oriented, and vice versa. Carlson describes the prevailing dualism in the following terms:

[B]ook publishing today operates on two very distinct levels: first, the kind of publishing that is essentially an extension [sic] of the entertainment and therapy industries, that is, books that cater to and reinforce trendy values and obvious ongoing needs in the culture. And the second, books that are distinctive originals: fresh and genuine insights that genuinely contribute to the knowledge of the discipline and hence ultimately to individuals and in some cases even the welfare of society. (135)

Wheeler contends rather forcefully that such conditions jeopardize the future of serious theological books, because such items have relatively little popular demand (“Theological Education” 56-65). Carlson argues that publishers ought to have two publishing tracks: a popular one to generate income and a serious one to make a difference (135-37). But such a scenario depends on the willingness of publishers to publish some items which are unlikely to break even. Increasingly, it appears that presses are under growing pressures to avoid such risks. Nelson refers to “a cyclical chain of supply and demand in which publishers, distributors and stores vigorously promote what readers are already buying” (465).

A 1991 *Publishers Weekly* article reported the “good news” that general bookstores were making better selection decisions, enabling them to turn much higher profits while stocking less religious titles (“The Good News” 20). But is such news really good? A prime example of trend-sensitive publishing occurred around the time of the Gulf War in 1991. Anticipating an interest in prophecy books, various publishers issued new and updated titles and netted some significant revenues (Maxwell 60). Is such activity harmful? In the opinion of this author, it certainly can be. Harm or benefit are ultimately a function of the quality of an individual book.

Carlson opines that “ours is a culture more comfortable with glossy packaging than with genuine substance, with proven formulas than with the risks inherent in original thinking” (136). Under such conditions, it seems difficult to expect anything other than a mass of trendy publishing.

For better or for worse, the religious publishing industry is heavily influenced by cultural trends (Duke 35-56). Historically, religious book sales have fluctuated in accord with the common cultural perception of religion. Thus, in the 1940s and 50s, when religion was fairly popular in the United States, denominational presses were growing (Wheeler, “In Need” 1067). In the 60s and early 70s, the theology and culture of the “death of God” had a negative impact on institutionalized religion, including religious publishing (Carlson 124-31). With the resurgence of evangelical Christianity in the late 70s and early 80s, religious book publishing attained its highest rate of growth (Ferré 99-101). More recently, a number of additional factors, such as multiculturalism and religious pluralism, have burst on the scene and found expression in the literature (Hoffert 58-59, 62; Carrigan 36, 40; Tickle, “Virtue” 32; White 34-35). The 90s have witnessed heavy reader interest in angels (Bachleda 31-33; “Publishers Weekly” 34), as well as numerous other trends: ecumenical perspectives (Griffin, “Decatrends” 28), women’s studies (Tickle, “Virtue” 32; Myers 227-33), men’s interests (Anderson et al 22; Griffin, “Christian Publishers” 43), environmental studies (43; Griffin “New Lineup” 30), and recovery books (Shattuck 127-28; Jones 42-43, 45; LeBlanc 70-71). As for the future of the industry, there are almost as many opinions as prognosticators, and it is too voluminous a topic to cover in this paper.

How does cultural contextualization affect collection development in the Christian academic library? It can have a significant impact. At times when religion’s popularity is low (as in the 60s, early 70s, and to a degree, parts of the 80s), the availability and variety of books may decrease. At times when there is a cultural interest in spiritual things, there may be a flurry of publishing--but the books may be aimed at such a popular audience as to be of marginal value in the academic realm. In keeping with cultural trends, there may be times when it is difficult to obtain good materials in the standard fields of theology and biblical studies. Conversely, there will tend to be heavy publishing in areas of popular interest. Perhaps most dangerously, popular writing may suffocate scholarly publishing. Librarians and other academic leaders should seize every available opportunity to ensure that present and future students and scholars will have access to necessary bibliographic resources (Wheeler, “Theological Education” 65-70).

Conclusion

Carlson’s words lead to a fitting conclusion: “I doubt that there is any other discipline in which the passions run higher or the discomfort deeper than in religion. The reason for this is, I think, that the

traditional purpose for serious religious reflection is in the end still thought to be directly related somehow to the living of quite ordinary lives" (124). Religion does not--cannot--exist in isolation from culture. The developments in religious book publishing over the last several decades should come as no surprise to the student of religion. Religious book publishing will continue to reflect culture and industry at large. Librarians can have their greatest impact on book publishing when they view it as a cultural product and seek to impact it as such.

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