

My reflections on my trip to the Atla Annual, June 15-18, Baltimore

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Atla is a membership organisation of librarians and information professionals in the United States with over 800 individuals and libraries at academic institutions from diverse religious traditions and backgrounds represented for over 75 years. It is also a producer of premier research tools in the study of religion and theology.¹

Atla members have met annually since 1947 in their annual conference but past two years it was held online only. This year conference was in a hybrid event, and I had a privilege to attend it to represent BETH (European Theological Libraries Association).

This year's invitation to their conference was particularly special as their executive director, Brenda Bailey-Hainer is retiring in August. To celebrate her work and contribution, Atla kindly supported me to represent BETH in their commemorative celebration. This released a place for ABTAPL to send another delegate to represent ABTAPL, so Marni Thurm from Union School of Theology also came with me. Furthermore, our training co-ordinator, Winette Field, from William Booth College participated online. As they are going to write about their experiences, I would like to share my personal observation and thoughts on the overall event rather than discussing individual sessions I attended.

After being grounded for the last 3 years due to COVID, it was surreal to fly long haul to the States. I was thrilled with excitement as it was my first time to an Atla conference, but I was also nervous as Omicron was spreading fast.

The conference schedule was packed with over 40 sessions with plenty of choice. There were many opportunities to mingle and talk to participants during breaks to exchange thoughts which was a great way to learn their practices.

Atla conference is normally attended by about 300 participants, but this year there were about 100 on site and 150 online. Atla was wondering whether this trend would continue and adapt accordingly if so. Witnessing a successful hybrid conference and change in attendance format, ABTAPL might consider this option for our future conferences.

One puzzling thing was that out of more than 40 sessions, there wasn't any session about copyright. I am not sure whether this is a random coincidence, or it might be that the States have a more lenient approach to copyright, so librarians are not concerned about this issue.

Secondly, it was more common to find in America an academic librarian as a professor through the tenure track, engaging in teaching and research activities in the classroom. Their professionalism in information literacy was appreciated and institutes recognise the importance of the librarian role in the digital era rewarding accordingly. I met a few of librarian associate professors in the event and they work closely with their institute writing centres. Many institutes have a writing centre and often librarians refer students there. This holistic service was well established in the US. I wonder how they market themselves in this position which could be replicated by us here.

The next point of interest was that the librarians were not yet aware of the development Perlego,² so called "Spotify for textbooks" by the *Evening Standard*, and its popularity this side of the world. When I watched a librarian introducing his main role as building an e-text book library collection,

¹ https://www.atla.com/atla_career/executive-director/

² <https://www.perlego.com/>

which can be easily done by a Perlego subscription, I felt that I ought to warn them what was coming over from across the Atlantic shortly.

Pleasantly surprising, the main speaker Tony Zanders claimed that the libraries in USA were not ahead of the game in terms of new digital development trends in librarianship. In fact, Europe, Australia and New Zealand are more advanced, which made me proud. He reinforced the importance of our [digital capabilities](#)³ being enhanced to still be current and desired for the new digital world, in order to survive and thrive. He claimed,

“With the right attitude, I believe that we can become a unique partner within our institutional environment. Because the library is the only institution that sits in between academia, but also the support services, no one else has to engage with the facilities and security department and as a faculty member, and to have the code switch at the drop of a hat is a very unique skill.”⁴

I totally agree with his statement and believe ABTAPL will enable our members to achieve new skills to succeed by offering many online trainings free of charge, ebooks, matching scheme and annual conferences.

What I was most shocked about was that EBSCO sponsored the conference with a generous sum of \$20,000 which enabled them to host the conference in a wonderful setting. This is not going to be an easy task for us to achieve, but something to be inspired by. As many of our members have subscriptions with EBSCO we need to approach them to show the same generosity they showered to our counterparts in the States.

Atla expressed their continuous support to us, and the strength of the connection between us. I hope that with the new President, Jérémie LeBlanc from Jean Leon Allie Library, Saint Paul University, the bond between us will be tighter to share experiences, skills, and resources. I am sure that their search for a new executive director will bring the right person to expand their mission and vision even further.

³ <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/building-digital-capability>

⁴ Tony Anders, ‘Culture or Collections? Navigating the Next Chapter in Libraries’, in Atla annual on 16th June 2022