

The Association of Theological Schools, Accreditation, and Graduate Education for Non-Christian Religious Professionals

Soren M. Hessler

This essay traces the development of interfaith/interreligious education in graduate professional education and of graduate education for non-Christian religious professionals in the United States. It concludes that multireligious diversity and cooperative formation across religious traditions may be the future of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). The last two decades have seen an emergence of training and degree programs for Muslim and Buddhist religious professionals. Many have sought or are seeking accreditation through regional accrediting bodies, often primarily in order to secure federal aid for their students. Religious tradition related accreditation for these programs does not yet exist. The election of the Academy for Jewish Religion (AJR) in New York in 2020 to membership in the previously entirely Christian ATS signals a broadening of the Association's engagement with formation for religious leadership and opens questions about the future of accreditation for graduate programs for religious professionals in other religious traditions.

Keywords: Association of Theological Schools, ATS, accreditation, graduate education

Eboo Patel, President of Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), has spent nearly the last 20 years advocating for interfaith education as a necessary component of training for business leaders, civil servants, medical professionals, and virtually anyone with a leadership role in a multireligious world. Within student affairs circles of higher education, Patel's argument is gaining traction. *Educating about Religious Diversity and Interfaith Engagement: A Handbook for Student Affairs* was published in 2019 with forewords from the presidents of the two student affairs professional organizations in the United States, ACPA-College Student Educators International and NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.¹ Published by Stylus, one of the major publishers in student affairs literature, the volume is noteworthy because it indicates how conversations about religious literacy education have entered the mainstream of university student affairs practitioners across the nation. Articles include "Developing Courses that Engage Spirituality, Religion, and Secularity in Student Affairs Preparation Programs" and "Adding Spirituality, Religious Diversity, and Interfaith Engagement to Student Affairs Courses."

The interfaith movement in collegiate education spearheaded by IFYC, but also shepherded by many individual schools and institutions across the country, has resulted in the emergence of dozens of academic undergraduate programs in interfaith or interreligious studies over the last twenty years.² That movement is now penetrating the student affairs divisions of colleges and universities, many of them without religious affiliation, and also beginning to shape

¹ Kathleen M. Goodman, Mary Ellen Giess, and Eboo Patel, *Educating about Religious Diversity and Interfaith Engagement: A Handbook for Student Affairs* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2019).

² Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman, "Introduction," in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, ed. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), xiv. For an early accounting of what Diana L. Eck describes as the "interfaith revolution" of the early twenty-first century, see Diana L. Eck, "Preface," in ed. Eboo Patel and Patrice Brodeur, *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), ix. Hans Gustafson helpfully identifies relationality among the interfaith movement, interfaith studies, and interreligious studies in Hans Gustafson, "Introduction," in ed. Hans Gustafson, *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from an Emerging Field* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 1-14.

the curricula of graduate education programs which train higher education professionals.³ Patel argues that basic religious literacy and the ability to successfully navigate the differences of beliefs and philosophies among people in a democratic society is a necessary component of a quality liberal arts education and an increasingly important aspect of graduate professional education.

The Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has held a similar view for the past decade.⁴ In 2012, the Commission adopted a MDiv degree program standard that required some form of interreligious education as part of the primary professional degree in theological education for the first time:

MDiv education shall engage students with the global character of the church as well as ministry in the multifaith and multicultural context of contemporary society. This should include attention to the wide diversity of religious traditions present in potential ministry settings, as well as expressions of social justice and respect congruent with the institution’s mission and purpose.⁵

ATS is the primary institutional membership organization for Christian theological schools in the United States and Canada, representing more than 270 Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox institutions.⁶ Its Commission on Accrediting serves as the Association’s accrediting agency, providing quality assurance in theological education, and is recognized by the United States Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. The standards developed by the Association’s Commission on Accrediting have far-reaching impact on graduate theological education for Christian religious professionals. In addition to holding accreditation through ATS, several member schools in the United States also elect to pursue accreditation by one of six regional accrediting agencies for higher education, in order to demonstrate educational parity with other degree granting institutions.

In an issue of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* in 2014, faculty from several theological institutions made a case for the need for intentional interreligious education in graduate professional religious formation in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim contexts.⁷ That issue of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* followed a special issue of *Teaching Theology & Religion* in 2013

³ For a fulsome commentary on the emergence of the disciplinary field of interfaith/interreligious studies, see Patel, et al., eds., *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies*.

⁴ Karla R. Suomala, “In the Absence of the Religious Other: Interreligious Encounter through Text Study in Theological Education,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 18 (2016): 21.

⁵ The Association of Theological Schools Commission on Accrediting, *Degree Program Standards*, June 2012 [Posted January 21, 2015], <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/standards-of-accreditation-161130.pdf>, Standard A.2.3.2 (page 3).

⁶ For discussion of the interpretation and implementation of the ATS standard on engagement with other religious traditions across Evangelical theological schools, see Douglas McConnell, “Evangelicals, Mission, and Multifaith Education,” in ed. Barbara G. Wheeler, *Disruption and Hope: Religious Traditions and the Future of Theological Education*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 99–109.

⁷ See Or N. Rose, “Interreligious Education & US Rabbinical Schools,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 15 (2014): 4–13; Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, “Interreligious Education and US Rabbinical Schools Response to Or N. Rose,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 15 (2014): 14–16; Yael Shy and Yehuda Sarna, “Essential Ingredients for Multifaith Education in a University Setting: Response to Interfaith Education & the American Jewish Seminary,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 15 (2014): 17–20; Celene Ibrahim-Lizzio, “Interreligious Leadership Education for Muslims in the United States,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 15 (2014): 21–24; and Jennifer Howe Peace, “Why Christian Seminaries Need Interreligious Education,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 15 (2014): 25–28.

dedicated to multifaith education that also provided a succinct summary of the state of multifaith education across American theological schools.⁸ The special issue of *Teaching Theology & Religion* was itself the product of a working group of scholars, led by Lucinda Mosher and Justus Baird, convened to “mull over pedagogical concerns when forming religious leaders for a religiously diverse milieu and about teaching other faith traditions in a seminary context.”⁹ During this same period, the Interfaith and Interreligious Studies program unit of the American Academy of Religion was emerging, and the field of interfaith/interreligious studies began to explode. While several member schools had courses on offer about other faith traditions prior to the adoption of this standard, required courses focused on developing interfaith/interreligious competency through interreligious engagement are becoming increasingly common and valued.¹⁰ Developing knowledge of other religious traditions and cultivation of professional relationships across lines of religious difference is increasingly a core component of clergy professional formation.¹¹ While these values had been infused into the MDiv curriculum at a few seminaries, like Claremont School of Theology and Hartford International University (formerly Hartford Seminary), for decades, broader adoption across the ATS membership is very recent.¹² This approach is not simply limited to the Christian institutions accredited by the Commission on Accrediting of ATS; since 2018, for example, Hebrew College has required its rabbinical school students to take courses in religious pluralism, Christianity, and Islam.¹³

Some university-related divinity schools have been experimenting with models of professional training for students in multiple religious traditions for well-more than a decade. Muslim student enrollment at ATS member schools has grown from 38 in 2000 to 203 in 2019, and Buddhist enrollment has grown from 36 in 2009 (the first year such data is available) to 115 in 2019.¹⁴ Harvard Divinity School revised its MDiv curriculum in 2004 to make it “possible for

⁸ Justus Baird, “Multifaith Education in American Theological Schools: Looking Back, Looking Ahead,” *Teaching Theology & Religion* 16, no. 4 (October 2013): 309–21.

⁹ Lucinda Mosher, “Editor’s Note [Guest Editor’s Preface],” *Teaching Theology & Religion* 16, no. 4 (October 2013): 306.

¹⁰ For a reflection on the evolution of courses about other religious traditions in the context of Christian seminaries, see Deanna Ferree Womack, “From the History of Religions to Interfaith Studies: A Theological Educator’s Exercise in Adaptation,” in eds. Patel, et al., *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies*, 16–25. In 2019, Drew Theological School received an award for interfaith engagement from the Islamic Center of Passaic County for its core course, “Global Faiths and the Earth,” through which students have engaged with the Islamic Center’s 25,000-person community (Drew University, “Drew Theological School Honored for Interfaith Engagement,” Drew University News, May 2019, <http://www.drew.edu/stories/2019/06/04/drew-theological-school-honored-for-interfaith-engagement/>).

¹¹ See Lucinda Mosher, “Beyond World Religions: Pedagogical Principles and Practices for the Encouragement of Interfaith Hospitality and Collaboration,” in ed. Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Teaching for a Multifaith World* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 75–89.

¹² For further discussion of the development of interreligious professional education at Christian theological institutions, see Heidi Hadsell, “Why Seminaries and the Churches Should Welcome Religious Diversity in the USA,” in ed. Benjamin Valentín, *Looking Forward with Hope: Reflections on the Present State and Future of Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 138–50.

¹³ Soren M. Hessler, “‘Nothing Off Limits’: Pedagogical Reflections by a Christian Teaching Christianity at Rabbinical School,” in eds. Mosher, et al., *Deep Understanding for Divisive Times*, 110.

¹⁴ Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, “Student religious and denominational affiliation trends in ATS schools,” *Colloquy Online*, Holiday 2019, <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/student-religious-and-denominational-affiliation-trends.pdf>; Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, “Further findings on religious affiliation trends in ATS schools,” *Colloquy Online*, January 2020, <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/further-findings-on-religious-affiliation-trends.pdf>.

students to prepare for ministry and careers as leaders in diverse religious traditions.”¹⁵ The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation’s gift to Harvard in 2011 to establish the Buddhist Ministry Initiative helped create a permanent pathway in the MDiv for professional religious formation for Buddhist students.¹⁶ The University of Chicago Divinity School’s MDiv is now billed as a program “for students from all religious backgrounds who are interested in careers in public religious leadership, whether in traditional ministerial professions or in new and emerging forms of leadership.”¹⁷ Textual language study options now include Qur’anic Arabic, Sanskrit, and Tibetan alongside koine Greek and biblical Hebrew. Viraj Patel, a Hindu 2018 MDiv graduate of the program, has described how the faculty and administration of the Divinity School co-revised the Christian-based MDiv curriculum with the school’s first Hindu MDiv students, receiving input from students about the academic and co-curricular needs emerging Hindu religious leaders.¹⁸ This process is ongoing and is taking place with students from other religious traditions as well. Similarly, since 2001, Hartford International University’s Islamic Chaplaincy Program has prepared Muslim students for chaplaincy positions through various MA degree programs while also continuing to provide training and formation for Christian students through its non-MDiv master’s programs and cooperative MDiv program arrangements with other seminaries.¹⁹

At Harvard and the University of Chicago and a limited number of other schools, MDiv students are being formed for religious leadership alongside students from religious traditions other than their own. Religious literacy and religious diversity are core educational values. These institutions represent a leading edge of a new diversity in the ATS membership. Frank Yamada, the current executive director of ATS, asserts that “diversities lead change.”²⁰ He writes,

It is well-established in higher education that diverse institutions are more effective institutions. Moreover, diverse institutions are, in my experience, also able to lean more adaptively into the changing environments that schools are facing in the twenty-first century.²¹

While in writing Yamada was addressing ethnic and cultural diversity rather than the kind of religious diversity found at Harvard and the University of Chicago, the multireligious diversity of

¹⁵ Jonathan Beasley, “Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Gift Will Support Groundbreaking Buddhist Ministry Initiative at Harvard Divinity School,” Harvard Divinity School, October 3, 2011, <https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2011/10/03/robert-h-n-ho-family-foundation-gift-will-support-groundbreaking-buddhist-ministry>.

¹⁶ Beasley, “Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation.”

¹⁷ University of Chicago Divinity School, “Academics,” accessed April 2, 2021, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/academics>.

¹⁸ Viraj Patel, “Is Theological Education Entering a Post-Christian Future?,” panel presentation at the Theological Education Committee Unit, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, San Diego, November 23, 2019; Viraj Patel, “Interfaith Education in the Voice of Emerging Scholars,” panel presentation at the Typologies of Interfaith Education Symposium, hosted by the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School and Interfaith Youth Core, January 21, 2021.

¹⁹ Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, “Islamic Chaplaincy Pathway,” accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.hartfordinternational.edu/interreligious-peace-studies-programs/degree-programs/ma-chaplaincy/islamic-chaplaincy-pathway>.

²⁰ Frank M. Yamada, “Afterword: Diversities. Lead. Change,” in ed. Shonda R. Jones and Pamela R. Lightsey, *Transforming Service: Reflections of Student Services Professionals in Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), 251.

²¹ Yamada, “Afterword,” 251.

some institutional members might well be the future of ATS, especially in a time of structural change in higher education.

Writing of the increase in “racial/ethnic minority students seeking graduate ministry degrees, Shonda Jones argues that theological educators and their respective institutions must critically engage the needs of the breadth of applicants to graduate theological education without generalizing student experience as demographically monolithic in order to envision service models and educational infrastructure that best serve students of color.²² Similar deep engagement with individuals of varied backgrounds across multiple expressions of multiple religious traditions would be necessary for schools to adapt to the needs of non-Christian students. Harvard, the University of Chicago, and others are beginning this work, but the socio-economic backgrounds of non-Christian students and prospective students engaging these elite educational institutions continue to be largely comparable to the backgrounds of the well-educated, upwardly mobile Anglo-Saxon Protestant Christians who founded those institutions and who have been the primary recipients of their education. Working-class Indian American Hindus are not regularly applying to the University of Chicago, nor any other historically Christian seminary, for a Master of Divinity in the way that working-class African American and Latin American Christians are increasingly accessing theological education. Some Hindus are seeking professional training and formation in other venues. The professional and disciplinary diversity of the backgrounds of contributors to the recent volume *Hindu Approaches to Spiritual Care* provides a window for evaluating how Hindus in the United States are preparing for leadership within Hindu communities, and it may point to how historically Christian theological schools may helpfully equip Hindus for religious service.²³ Theological schools will need to continue to re-evaluate curricular objectives while also actively soliciting input from Hindus and other non-Christians of increasingly diverse backgrounds seeking graduate professional training for religious leadership.²⁴

Rachel Heath’s recent scholarship observes that paradigms of graduate education for religious leadership continue to prepare students for service and leadership within a single religious tradition, without taking into account the growing demographic of people who have multiple religious belonging.²⁵ Scholarship on multiple religious belonging and the ways in which religious communities interact with individuals who claim identity in multiple communities

²² Shonda R. Jones, “Graduate Theological School Choice: A Case for Multiplicity,” in ed. Shonda R. Jones and Pamela R. Lightsey, *Transforming Service*, 3.

²³ Vineet Chander and Lucinda Mosher, *Hindu Approaches to Spiritual Care: Chaplaincy in Theory and Practice* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2020).

²⁴ For further discussion of the challenges of implementing teaching about and with other religious traditions in theological education contents, see Judith A. Berling, “What About Other Religions? Opportunities and Challenges in Mainline Theological Education,” in *Disruption and Hope: Religious Traditions and the Future of Theological Education*, ed. Barbara G. Wheeler (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 111–27.

²⁵ Rachel A. Heath, “Lessons in Multifaith Chaplaincy and Feminist Thought: Making Room for Multiple Religious Belonging in Interfaith Praxis,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 20 (2017): 71–29; Rachel A. Heath, “Multiple Religious Belonging and Theologies of Multiplicity: Confluences of Oneness and Porosity,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 21 (2017): 23–36. For analysis of demographics of Americans identifying with multiple religious traditions, see Michael Lipka, “Few Americans identify with more than one religion,” Pew Research Center, October 26, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/26/few-americans-identify-with-more-than-one-religion/>.

across religious traditions is in its infancy.²⁶ However, Heath’s work raises the question of where and how a Christian Buddhist ought to seek training and formation, especially if they are not fully welcomed in many explicitly Christian and Buddhist communities.

For some member institutions of ATS and their constituents, the models of graduate professional education at Harvard Divinity School and the University of Chicago draw the circle of inclusion in graduate theological education too wide. For Christian communities that celebrate the vision of these institutions in partnering across lines of religious difference, endorsing religious hybridity may draw the circle of inclusion too wide. Nevertheless, new models of formation for religious leadership are going to continue to grow and multiply as the world becomes ever more interconnected.²⁷ ATS and its member institutions are going to need to determine how they engage these models in the future.

²⁶ Unlike interreligious/interfaith studies, there is no dedicated program unit within the American Academy of Religion for the study of multiple religious belonging; however, significant academic explorations of multiple religious belonging have emerged over the last two decades, often with groundings in comparative, constructive, and feminist theology. Many of these conversations have unfolded among scholars within particular academic subdisciplines, and broader engagement by religious studies scholars (including many scholars of interreligious studies) with this topic and the emerging body of scholarship on multiple religious belonging is relatively new. Noteworthy scholarship from the past two decades includes: John Berthrong, *The Divine Deli: Religious Identity in the North American Cultural Mosaic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999); Jacques Scheuer and Denis Gira, *Vivre de Plusieurs Religions: Promesse ou Illusion?* (Paris: Les Éditions de l’Atelier, 2000); Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002); Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007); Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Reinhold Bernhardt, eds., *Multiple religiöse Identität* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 2008); Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009); Michelle Voss Roberts, “Religious Belonging and the Multiple,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 43-62; Monica A. Coleman, “The Womb Circle: Womanist Practice of Multi-Religious Belonging,” *Practical Matters* 4 (Spring 2011): 1-9; Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider, *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2011); Gideon Goosen, *Hyphenated Christians: Toward a Better Understanding of Dual Religious Belonging* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011); Kwok Pui-Lan, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding: The Future of Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012); Catherine Cornille, “Multiple Religious Belonging,” in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, ed. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 324-40; Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar and Joseph Prabhakar Dayam, *Many Yet One? Multiple Religious Belonging* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2016); Gavin D’Costa and Ross Thompson, *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging: Affirmations, Objections, Explorations* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Paul Hedges, “Multiple Religious Belonging after Religion: Theorizing Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape as a Chinese Model,” *Open Theology* 3 (2017): 48-72; and Duane R. Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn’t Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018); Felix Wilfred, *Religious Identities and the Global South: Porous Borders and Novel Paths* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); and John Barnett, *Christian and Sikh: A Practical Theology of Multiple Religious Participation* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2021). The publication of *Many Yet One?* in 2016 by the World Council of Churches marked a turning point in Christian communities collectively and substantively engaging with the matter of multiple religious belonging and is described as “the initial fruits of the World Council of Churches’ ongoing work on multiple religious belonging” (Rajkumar and Dayam, *Many Yet One?*, 2).

²⁷ One useful metric for identifying leading edge models for formation for religious leadership is the Religious Education Association’s book series *Horizons in Religious Education*, which is dedicated to publishing manuscripts defining what the Religious Education Association believes to be key directions in the field of religious education. In the series inaugural volume, Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook makes a case for interreligious learning as an essential modality of engagement for faith communities and their leaders. See Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, *God Beyond Borders:*

Daniel O. Aleshire, executive director of ATS from 1998 to 2017, proposes that “the next future” of theological education is what he describes as “formational theological education,” a model which he asserts requires the cultivation of individual and institutional relational integrity and engagement with new partners, among other things.²⁸ The discipline of interreligious studies offers a pragmatic approach forward for engaging this educational model and for thinking about professional formation for religious leadership more broadly.²⁹ A recent edited volume, *Deep Understanding for Divisive Times*, which celebrates a decade of the publication of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, poses the question of whether theological education must necessarily be interreligious.³⁰ In the foreword, Eboo Patel suggests that the United States is entering a new chapter, what he describes as “Interfaith America.”³¹ He notes that there are now almost as many Muslims in the United States as there are Jews and that there are more Muslims than Episcopalians. The thrust of his argument is that, in order for a religious leader in the United States to be effective in broader publics, they must interact with and be able to work with people of other religious traditions. In order to do that, their professional formation must necessarily expose them to people of other religious traditions and equip them to cooperate. Patel and other authors in the volume suggest that failing to train Christian or other religious leaders to work alongside religious leaders of other traditions in pursuit of justice is a disservice both to the prospective leaders and the communities they will serve.³² Several leaders in graduate professional religious education echoed that sentiment at a conference on interfaith education hosted by the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School and the Interfaith Youth Core in January 2021.³³

Jennifer Peace, one of the co-founders of the interfaith and interreligious studies program unit of the American Academy of Religion, continues to raise the question of how graduate theological education can “move from a model of religious formation to a model of interreligious conformation.”³⁴ In *Deep Understanding for Divisive Times*, Mary Elizabeth Moore suggests practices

Interreligious Learning Among Faith Communities, Horizons in Religious Education 1 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

²⁸ Daniel O. Aleshire, *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education*, Theological Education Between the Times (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), particularly chapters 3 and 4.

²⁹ Axel Marc Oaks Takacs’s positioning of the field particularly is helpful. Takacs, editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, writes that interreligious studies is

situated between and within various disciplinary boundaries. It is neither only comparative religion nor only theology of religion, neither only interreligious dialogue nor only interreligious or comparative theology, neither only sociology of religion nor only practical theology for interfaith leaders (and more can be adumbrated). Interreligious studies draws from the theories and methods of these other disciplines, but also extends beyond their boundaries in creative ways. (Axel Marc Oaks Takacs, “Introduction,” in *Deep Understanding for Divisive Times*, xi).

³⁰ Mosher, et al., eds., *Deep Understanding for Divisive Times*.

³¹ Eboo Patel, “Foreword: Interreligious/Interfaith Studies and Interfaith America,” in *Deep Understanding for Divisive Times*, ix.

³² Patel lays out this argument more robustly in Eboo Patel, *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016).

³³ See especially, contributions of Elías Ortega and Or N. Rose to “Where do we go from here?”—A Reflection on the Future of Seminary and Divinity School Education in a post-COVID World,” panel presentation at the Typologies of Interfaith Education Symposium, hosted by the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School and Interfaith Youth Core, January 20, 2021.

³⁴ Jennifer Peace, “Religious Self, Religious Other: Coformation as a Model for Interreligious Education,” in ed. Fernandez, *Teaching for a Multifaith World*, 56–74; Jennifer Peace, “Coformation Through Interreligious Learning,” *Colloquy* 20:1 (Fall 2011): 24–27, <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/colloquy-2011-fall.pdf>.

of “opening structural and existential borders” in graduate professional education facilitate religious literacy and professional competency.³⁵ A similar opening of the structural and existential borders of ATS may also strengthen the quality of education of member schools. Celene Ibrahim has written of the need for Muslims in the United States to balance the value of being faithfully Muslim and that of dispelling ignorance about the tradition.³⁶ This perspective pervades many of the emerging graduate programs developed by Muslim communities for the training of Muslim religious leaders. Similar commitments are present at many Buddhist programs. Christian theological institutions could learn much from the experience of Muslim and Buddhist institutions about balancing formation within a religious tradition alongside the equipping of students to communicate about the tradition to others.³⁷

The last two decades have seen an emergence of training and degree programs for Muslim religious professionals across the United States. Many have sought or are seeking accreditation through regional accrediting bodies, often primarily in order to secure federal aid for their students. The American Islamic College, founded in Chicago in 1981, was approved by the Illinois State Board of Higher Education to grant degrees in 2013 and was granted candidacy status for accreditation in 2020 with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the regional accrediting agency for the north central portion of the United States.³⁸ Zaytuna College, founded in 2009 in Berkeley, California, as an undergraduate institution “grounding students in the Islamic scholarly tradition,” was institutionally accredited by the Accrediting Commission for Schools of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) in 2015. At that time, it became the nation’s first Muslim accredited college. Zaytuna’s sole graduate degree program, an MA in Islamic texts was accredited by WASC in 2018.³⁹ The Boston Islamic Seminary, founded in 2015 with support from the Muslim American Society of Boston and the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center, is in its nascent years of offering Islamic graduate professional education in the hopes of becoming the first free-standing, regionally-accredited, graduate degree-granting institution for the training of Muslim religious professionals in America. The Boston Islamic Seminary expects it could gain full regional accreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges as early as 2023.⁴⁰ The school is also exploring the desirability and possibility of recognition by a theological accrediting body. Bayan Islamic Graduate School, founded in 2011, began offering degree programs in partnership with Chicago Theological Seminary in the fall of 2019, after previously partnering with the Claremont School of Theology to offer degree programs. Bayan’s programs have constituted concentrations within the regionally- and ATS-accredited degree programs of its host institutions. As of early 2021, Bayan intends to apply for independent accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission but has not yet done so.⁴¹ Other training programs for aspiring Muslim religious professionals have

³⁵ Mary Elizabeth Moore, “Afterword: Opening Borders: Stretching Human Compassion,” in ed. Mosher, et a, *Deep Understanding for Divisive Times*, 192.

³⁶ Celene Ibrahim, *One Nation, Indivisible: Seeking Liberty and Justice from the Pulpit to the Streets* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019), 188.

³⁷ For suggestions on curricular approaches see Mary E. Hess, “Designing Curricular Approaches for Interfaith Competency or Why Does Learning How to Live in a ‘Community of Communities’ Matter,” in ed. Fernandez *Teaching for a Multifaith World*, 34–55.

³⁸ American Islamic College, “Accreditation,” accessed February 5, 2021, <https://aicusa.edu/about/accreditation>.

³⁹ Zaytuna College, “Accreditation,” accessed February 5, 2021, <https://zaytuna.edu/about/accreditation>.

⁴⁰ Boston Islamic Seminary, “Accreditation,” accessed January 18, 2021, <https://www.bostonislamicseminary.org/accreditation/>.

⁴¹ Bayan, “About Bayan,” accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.bayanonline.org/about>.

elected not to seek accreditation at all, with students financing education without federal financial support.⁴²

Buddhist programs for religious leadership training have also emerged in the United States in recent decades, and again several have sought or are seeking accreditation in one form or another. Naropa University, founded as Naropa Institute in 1974, was initially accredited in 1986 by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and became the first Buddhist-inspired, accredited degree-granting institution in the United States.⁴³ University of the West, founded in 1990 outside of Los Angeles, as Hsi Lai University, to provide liberal arts education integrated with Buddhist wisdom, received initial accreditation from WASC in 2015.⁴⁴ The school offers a MDiv in Buddhist chaplaincy, a Doctor of Buddhist Ministry degree, and a PhD in Religious studies, among other degrees. The Institute of Buddhist Studies (IBS) in Berkeley, California, an affiliate of the Graduate Theological Union, was founded in 1949 as the Buddhist Study Center to provide education and training for those seeking Buddhist ordination. IBS began the process to seek accreditation from WASC in 2015 and received initial accreditation in 2020.⁴⁵ Among its program offerings are a MDiv and a certificate in Buddhist chaplaincy. In addition to Harvard, Naropa, University of the West, and the Institute of Buddhist Studies, the only other accredited graduate program offering training and formation for Buddhist religious leaders in North America is at Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto.⁴⁶ Maitripa College, founded in Portland, Oregon, in 2005, and offering degree programs in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, including a MDiv, is not pursuing accreditation but publicizes that its MDiv has been recognized by the Association of Professional Chaplains as having “the educational theological equivalency of an accredited degree.”⁴⁷

Whether graduate educational programs for religious professionals emerging out of Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu communities in the United States will ever be welcome to participate fully in the Association of Theological Schools or the Commission on Accrediting remains to be seen. Currently, “organizations with a substantial interest in theological education but not involved in educational programs leading to a degree” and “schools offering graduate theological degrees . . . related to identifiable communities of faith other than the Christian and Jewish faiths” are able to pursue affiliate status with ATS, which provides eligibility for appointment to Association committees and voice without vote in Association meetings. American Islamic College; Dharma Realm Buddhist University, which offers a MA in Buddhist Classics accredited by WASC; and University of the West have all pursued and been granted

⁴² Nancy Khalil and Celene Ibrahim, “From the Madrassa to the Seminary: Programs for Aspiring American Muslim Professionals,” *Maydan*, August 8, 2018, <https://themaydan.com/2018/08/madrassa-seminary-training-programs-aspiring-american-muslim-professionals/>. See also Nancy A. Khalil, “Without a Profession: The Politics of Being and Becoming and American Imam” (PhD Diss., Harvard University, 2017).

⁴³ Naropa University, “History of Naropa,” accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.naropa.edu/about-naropa/history/index.php>.

⁴⁴ University of the West, “Accreditation,” accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.uwest.edu/about-uwest/accreditation/>.

⁴⁵ Institute of Buddhist Studies, “Accreditation & Effectiveness,” accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.shin-ibs.edu/about/accreditation-effectiveness/>.

⁴⁶ Monica Sanford, “Preparing Buddhist Chaplains to Serve in Higher Education,” Conference on Buddhist Chaplaincy and Faith-Based Social Service, Columbia University, New York, May 5, 2019 [revised August 15, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/40374151/Preparing_Buddhist_Chaplains_to_Serve_In_Higher_Education].

⁴⁷ Maitripa College, “FAQs for Prospective Students,” accessed February 5, 2021, <https://maitripa.org/faqs/>.

affiliate status with ATS in recent years.⁴⁸ Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu institutions also are entering into cooperative agreements with ATS member schools, and students and faculty in these institutions are regularly interacting with peers at ATS member schools. Students from different religious traditions preparing for professional religious leadership are encountering one another more regularly as part of their formation and will continue to do so.

Cooperative formation across religious traditions is not new. For example, Union Theological Seminary in New York and Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) have had cooperative agreements since the 1960s. JTS and Hebrew Union College’s Jewish Institute of Religion are member institutions of the New York Theological Group Cross Registration Agreement along with Fordham University, General Theological Seminary, New York Theological Seminary, St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, and Union Theological Seminary. In Boston, Hebrew College similarly participates in the cross-registration agreement with members of the Boston Theological Interreligious Consortium. Even while Jewish institutions have maintained close ties with ATS member schools and ATS has permitted Jewish member institutions since 1970, nearly all Jewish schools have elected not to become members of ATS.⁴⁹ Prior to the adoption of the 2020 standards, which shifted accreditation to a “principles of quality” approach enabling greater freedom in the implementation of standards based upon institutional context, mission, and clientele, many Jewish schools simply found ATS’s standards inconsistent with their own operating practices and financially burdensome without clear benefits or justification.⁵⁰

Orthodox rabbinical schools founded the Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools (AARTS). The Accrediting Commission of AARTS is the only non-Christian religious tradition related accrediting organization recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.⁵¹ Alternatively, Conservative, Reform, and Renewal rabbinical schools are accredited only by regional accreditors and have no formal educational institution membership organization.

The election of the Academy for Jewish Religion (AJR) in New York to membership in ATS in 2020 may signal a change in the prevailing view among Jewish rabbinical school leaders about ATS’s standards, but it is still too early to know if this is the case. The AJR has been a center for pluralistic Jewish leadership formation since its founding, and its participation in ATS is seen as a broadening of its commitment to pluralism.⁵² Kerry Olitzky argues for a kind of “Big Tent Judaism” in the United States where the “Jewish communal tent should be big enough to contain those who disagree with one another and yet are also willing to advocate for the right of

⁴⁸ Association of Theological Schools, “Affiliates,” accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.ats.edu/Affiliates>.

⁴⁹ Glenn T. Miller, *A Community of Conversation: A Retrospective of The Association of Theological Schools and Ninety Years of North American Theological Education* (Pittsburgh: Association of Theological Schools, 2008), 21.

⁵⁰ Association of Theological Schools Commission on Accrediting, *2020 Standards of Accreditation*, June 2020, <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/standards-of-accreditation.pdf>.

⁵¹ Institutions supporting Buddhist ministry informally gather on a regular basis, facilitated in part by a generous grant from the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation, but there is no formal membership organization, and the varieties of educational practice vary widely among institutions.

⁵² Why AJR is not a member of the New York Theological Group Cross Registration Agreement is unclear; however, another New York area theological institution, Drew University Theological School, elects to maintain individual cross registration agreements with Union and New York Theological Seminary but not other members of the broader cross registration agreement.

one another to remain inside the tent.”⁵³ The AJR has advocated a philosophy similar to Olitzky’s in its institutional educational model, and now as a member of ATS may be best positioned to help the ATS grapple with what it may mean for ATS itself to be a multireligious “big tent.”

Founded as a conference of predominately white, Protestant seminaries in 1918, ATS has a history of opening various structural and existential borders. Gammon Theological Seminary, a historically black theological school, joined the conference in 1930.⁵⁴ Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian schools were elected to membership in 1966, and women joined the Association’s leadership that same year.⁵⁵ While criteria for institutional membership were expanded to include Jewish institutions in 1970, five decades passed before a Jewish institution was elected to full membership in 2020. While some institutional members are enthusiastically supportive of the admission of emerging institutions for the training of Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist leaders, there is no agreement among a majority of the Association’s current institutional members to admit institutions grounded in religious traditions beyond Christianity and Judaism. Some institutional members have been openly opposed to the admission of institutions primarily engaged in the formation of leaders for other religious traditions. Prior to the implementation of the 2020 revision to the Association’s standards, some institutions suggested that the practices of formation for religious leadership in other religious traditions were so substantively different from the mechanisms of education in seminaries and rabbinical schools that the standards of the Association would not make sense for those institutions. Others argue that educational training institutions for other religious traditions should not need to submit to the authority of a majority Christian organization as it would amount to ongoing subjugation of non-Christian traditions within the accreditation space.

Tradition-specific gatherings of non-Christian institutions training religious professionals have taken on the look and feel of the early meetings of the Conference of Theological Seminaries and Colleges, the predecessor of the contemporary Association of Theological Schools. The Buddhist Ministry Initiative’s conferences on Buddhist ministry, in particular, have this flavor, taking place at Harvard Divinity School, which convened the first Conference of Theological Seminaries and Colleges in 1918. At the 2017 BMI conference, institutional representatives began discussions about potential standards for the training of Buddhist leaders throughout the United States; however, no separate organization representing or supporting Buddhist professional formation programs has emerged. It remains to be seen whether non-Christian religious communities in the United States will see value in tradition-specific accreditation and related standardization of degree programs for professional religious training.

If non-Christian institutions for religious leadership formation are not going to be part of the Association of Theological Schools and instead form their own membership and accreditation bodies, a study of ATS’s early history may be valuable as those bodies organize, not to reinscribe Christian hegemonic systems on newly emerging self-regulating bodies but to help contextualize the history from which an accrediting body for schools training religious leaders in

⁵³ Kerry M. Olitzky, *Playlist Judaism: Making Choices for a Vital Future* (Herdon, Virginia: Alban Institute, 2013), 117.

⁵⁴ Soren M. Hessler, “Adjudicating Orthopraxy: A History of Accreditation Practices in Theological Education in the United States, 1918–1968” (PhD Dissertation, Boston University, 2021), 187.

⁵⁵ Hessler, “Adjudicating Orthopraxy,” 173–74, 190–91.

the United States emerges. The Association served as both designer and arbiter of institutional orthopraxy; in its original manifestation, this system of right institutional practices was idealized as a single, one-size-fits-all system designed to bring institutional members into functional parity with one another. In practice, the system discouraged innovation and was often problematically applied to nonconforming institutions.⁵⁶ As ATS member institutions now focus increasingly on decolonization as an imperative theological ethic and consider the necessity of reparations with historically victimized and minoritized communities and institutions, the Association has a responsibility to assist non-Christian religious tradition related associations of schools in their integration into the American higher education accreditation apparatus, if such associations should seek the support of ATS.⁵⁷



Soren M. Hessler is a practical theologian, United Methodist pastor, and higher education administrator. He is Coordinator of Assessment for the Faculty of Theology at Huron University College and Instructor of Christian and Interreligious Studies at Hebrew College. Hessler holds a PhD in practical theology and master's degrees in higher education administration, church administration, and divinity from Boston University. He is a member of the Board of Advisors of the Journal of Interreligious Studies and has been professionally connected with the journal since 2014.

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⁵⁶ See Hessler, “Adjudicating Orthopraxy,” Chapters 2 and 3.

⁵⁷ Several volumes in Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company's *Theological Education Between the Times* series explore decolonization of theological education and are instructive for future directions in theological education: Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020); Chloe T. Sun, *Attempt Great Things for God: Theological Education in Diaspora* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020); Keri Day, *Notes of a Native Daughter: Testifying in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021); and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Atando Cabos: Latinx Contributions to Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021).