

New media partnership seeks ATS scholarly writers

BY DEBORAH H. C. GIN

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) is pleased to announce a new program for faculty and scholars to write timely articles on current religion and/or theology issues alongside editors from The Conversation US to be posted in a variety of media venues (e.g., The Washington Post, Time, Scientific American, Quartz) via organizations such as the Associated Press and the Religion News Service. While not a competitive monetary program, the program will attend to faculty research and scholarship in terms of public relevancy.



Who is The Conversation US?

The Conversation US (TCUS) is an independent nonprofit organization committed to bridging the “knowledge gap” between the academy and broader publics. Launched in 2011 in Australia as a network of news sources, TCUS got underway in the US in 2014. Touting the tagline “Academic rigor, journalistic flair,” TCUS pairs scholars in the academy with experienced journalists to provide the public with accessible information on important societal and global topics. The Conversation US is funded in part by organizations long familiar to ATS, such as Lilly Endowment Inc. and the Henry Luce Foundation.

One of The Conversation’s departments is the religion desk. Through a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. to expand its list of religion experts, TCUS approached ATS, recognizing the Association’s “convening power” and capacity to connect quickly to more than 3,500 faculty in the various disciplines of religion and theology. The Association has vetted the work and product of TCUS,

and—while relatively new—TCUS has established partnerships with a wide range of important foundations and institutions of higher education.

According to its website, TCUS “articles were read over 99 million times in 2019, a figure surpassed in the first seven months of 2020.” Readership and reach are growing quickly for TCUS. Indeed, faculty at several ATS schools have already published with TCUS:

- Howard University School of Divinity:
[John Lewis and the masks Black preachers wear on the public stage](#)
- Graduate Theological Union/
Jesuit School of Theology:
[As coronavirus curtails travel, backyard pilgrimages become the way to a spiritual journey](#)
- Vanderbilt University Divinity School:
[Why Joe Biden was denied communion at a church](#)
- Jesuit School of Theology/
Union Presbyterian Seminary:
[Different faiths, same pain: How to grieve a death in the coronavirus pandemic](#)

- Yale University Divinity School:
How American anti-Semitism reflects the centuries-long struggle over the meaning of religious liberty

Why this partnership now?

An ATS study of faculty showed that only about 1 out of 10 (11%) saw the needs of the public as their top influencers when considering research projects. Pew Research Center also famously reported on the rise of the religiously unaffiliated. It is not difficult to see how a gap can widen between scholarly religious information and the general public, in a context where a growing public does not affiliate with trusted religious bodies and where a faculty only minimally focuses on the needs of the public for their research.

The Association’s Faculty Development Advisory Committee has been discussing these findings and possible responses for a couple years, encouraging ATS staff to consider focusing on public engagement more directly. For the committee, it is an issue of relevancy, even defending the value of theological education. And, while certain pockets have long been engaged in the public square, our various constituencies would benefit from wider engagement by faculty at ATS schools.

Schools in the Association recruit and hire quality faculty, experts in their disciplinary fields. However, not all have been trained to write for broader publics. In addition, schools’ professional advancement systems vary in their valuing of public engagement. Critical scholarship is birthed and refined in rigorous guild spaces, but the

scholarship often remains in those spaces, inaccessible to “lay” communities. Yet, public audiences need information that ATS faculty have thoroughly researched. The Conversation’s machinery works to bridge this gap. In its aim to provide “evidence-based content about religion, faith, and ethics,” TCUS connects faculty with editors for close coaching, both at the “pitch” stage and at the writing stage.

What to watch for?

The program is still developing, but here are a few pieces to look forward to:

- **Weekly posts in the ATS Open Forum on Engage ATS**—we’ll post The Conversation’s latest expert requests; interested scholars can contact Debbie Gin or Monica Laughery for more information. Examples of requests open at the time of this writing include: “A new ‘Christian bloc’ in Europe?”, “History of religion in American elections”, “Open caskets”, “Government relief to religious organizations”, “Nonprofit severance packages”, “What is hypocrisy and is it wrong?”
- **Introductory webinar later next month**—featuring staff from The Conversation and from ATS to discuss the purpose and high-level components of the program
- **Smaller webinar workshops throughout the year**—on pitching an idea and other topics, as well as school-type based webinars



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