

# A COMMUNITY OF CONVERSATION

A Retrospective  
*of*  
The Association of Theological Schools  
and Ninety Years of  
North American Theological Education

GLENN T. MILLER

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The Association of Theological Schools  
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## Foreword

The first meeting of what was to become The Association of Theological Schools was convened in 1918, ninety years ago. In recognition of this anniversary, I asked Glenn Miller to write a brief history of ATS.

Glenn Miller is uniquely qualified for the task. He has written two volumes of the history of Protestant theological education. The first, *Piety and Intellect*, is the history from the colonial period to the Civil War and the second, *Piety and Profession*, covers the period of 1870 to 1970. He was educated at the University of Richmond, Andover Newton Theological School, and Union Theological Seminary, and he has served as faculty member and dean at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and currently as academic dean and Waldo Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Bangor Theological Seminary. Glenn was involved in the Basic Issues Research program of the Association in the 1980s, chaired the Editorial Board of the ATS journal, *Theological Education*, in the 1990s, and has been a frequent accreditation evaluation committee member. He understands both the broad ecclesial communities represented by the schools of the Association (main-line Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Catholic/Orthodox) and the similarities and differences of theological education in Canada and the United States.

A historian could approach an assignment like this in one of two ways. The first is to write a history of the organization's activity and use that activity as a lens on a broader range of influences in the lives of member schools. The second is to write a history that begins with the influences and lives of member schools, and use that broader perspective as a lens on the work of the organization. Fortunately, Glenn has chosen the second approach. ATS is an organization of the schools, and the story of its work is the story of movements and influences among an increasingly wide community of schools. The best way to understand the Association is as the invention of the schools. Its work has been their work.

An organization could commission a history like this one in one of two ways. It could give the historian the freedom to look at the information, use a historian's tools, and come to a historian's conclusions. Or, it could ask the historian to write what the organization—or persons within it—would like to read about itself. On this choice, ATS could only take the first approach. This is a historian's assessment

of the history of an organization, not the organization's assessment. It names the religious contexts and contests that have influenced theological schools and how these influences manifested themselves in the life of the Association.

Throughout these past ninety years, ATS has sought both to serve and to lead the schools. It has been an interesting and emerging partnership. It is a story worth telling, and Glenn tells it winsomely.

Daniel O. Aleshire  
Executive Director

A casual observer of American religious life visiting an Association of Theological Schools (ATS) Biennial Meeting might be perplexed. In the large meeting room, he or she would encounter a wide diversity of religious perspectives and educational philosophies. In addition to the degrees of difference, the observer would be struck by the spirit of cooperation and sharing found in the group. An evangelical, a Roman Catholic, and a mainstream Protestant might be exchanging information on how their schools responded to new accounting procedures mandated by Sarbanes-Oxley and describing the shocked expressions on board members' faces when they received the first management letter from their auditors after the government extended the new standards to nonprofits. In another part of the room, three academic deans might be discussing strategies for helping older, tenured faculty to retire. At some point, the whole group might listen as the executive director describes the state of North America's theological schools. Despite deep differences, our observer would be sure that he or she had found a place of comparative calm in the highly competitive North American religious marketplace. Although the attendance is overwhelmingly male and white, women and people of color are better represented than in past years. The observer might notice presidents and deans who are eagerly working on strategies to incorporate Latino/a voices in their schools' faculties and student bodies, while others are seeking to interest Asian-American faculty in their schools.

This organization was not built in a day. Its present sense of unity and purpose took ninety years to grow, develop, and prosper. The beginnings of the Association were with a handful of seminary presidents and deans of larger seminaries who were all male and who represented schools that were, by and large, Protestant and theologically liberal. There was little racial diversity. Among African-American schools, Gammon, a Methodist seminary in Atlanta, was a charter member. It was joined by Howard University Divinity School in 1939. The few African-American students in Euro-American schools were often treated as second-class citizens, subject to both formal and informal discrimination. Women were most often educated in separate institutions for deaconesses and/or for religious educators, although a few were in religious education programs in seminaries and a smaller group in Bachelor of Divinity programs.

## The Crisis of the First World War

The First World War arguably marked the end of the nineteenth century. The European nations and their colonies clashed in an epic battle that exhausted them culturally and politically. Although not as severely worn down, the United States, which emerged from the War as the dominant economic power, was also changed. While the loss of a generation of young men was itself very serious, the end of the War also marked a deep and profound cultural crisis. The confidence in European civilization that had supported three centuries of European cultural and political expansion was seriously weakened, and, as time passed, would wane yet further. Older cultural standards—literary, musical, sexual, educational, and religious—were in disarray, and even the foundation of the modern world, Newton’s brilliant synthesis, was under assault from a new physics, based on relativity and the quanta. Political revolution was also in the air, as radical Marxists came to power in Russia and seemed on the verge of similar victories elsewhere. In far-off India, Gandhi’s victory in Champaran (1918) marked the beginning of the end of British occupation. The great missionary meeting at Edinburgh in 1910 marked the high point of confidence in the Western missionary movement, but the International Missionary Council in Jerusalem in 1928 was more sober-minded. Despite the confident affirmation of an earlier generation of young missionaries, the evangelization of the world would take more than a generation. Nor was the work at home any more invigorated. The World War marked the beginning of a religious depression that would hold America in its grasp until the revival that followed the Second World War, and according to some commentators convinced of the shallowness of the 1950s, continued for the remainder of the century.

The organization that became The American Association of Theological Schools (AATS), later The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), was born in the shadow of this crisis. In some ways, the original motive was pragmatic. Wars are not good for children or theological schools, and the schools were struggling to stay afloat in the midst of the struggle. President George Horr of Newton Theological Seminary invited the leaders of other Baptist seminaries to confer on the wartime crisis, and President Abbott Lowell of Harvard then invited the assembled Baptists to form the nucleus of a larger group to meet in Cambridge in 1918. What happened next would be a theme throughout the history of the Association: conversation. When the presidents of the seminaries got together, they talked, and,



as they did, they discovered that they had some of the same problems and dilemmas. In many ways, they did not have an agenda or a program. Instead, they had common questions, including some that were basic, such as what is a theological seminary, how are people (mainly men) admitted to it, how does a theological school relate to the broader world, to the academy, to the church?

These questions had been posed by the turmoil and chaos of the nineteenth century. During that period, the United States had gone from colony to industrial powerhouse, from a nation with only a few rudimentary academies and colleges to a nation studded with high schools and universities. Above all, it had gone from a nation in which the enterprising and ambitious young man could find his way into any profession, with a short period of study or on-the-job training, to a nation that increasingly honored the marks of professionalization: degrees, associations of practitioners, social status, and financial rewards. How did the theological schools fit into this mix? Should they become like the new (and very successful) University of Chicago and embrace the new professionalism and its standards? Or perhaps, should they follow the more democratic way of a Moody Bible Institute and rush as many eager young men and women onto the field as quickly as possible? And, on a more basic level, what should they teach? Although theology had as definite a curricular tradition as any of the professions and, perhaps, more formed than the tradition in medicine, the inherited curriculum of Hebrew and Greek, dogmatic theology, and preaching had been corroded by the acids of modernity. Higher criticism had challenged the historical and scientific truth of the Bible. And when the new biblical studies were joined with modern science, the new insights weakened received theological affirmations or, as the more radical theologians affirmed, rendered those affirmations unbelievable. Even those who insisted that the traditional faith was nonetheless still intact did so in ways that separated the wheat from the chaff, the “fundamentals” from the rest of sacred doctrine.

### **Information, Please**

Whether it was the cleverness of the original members of the predecessor of ATS, the Conference of Theological Schools, or only a sign of the depths of their confusion, they decided not to proceed directly to solutions but to try first, at least modestly, to assess their situation. Their first attempt was a survey by Robert Kelly, published in 1924 as *Theological Education: A Study of One Hundred and*

*Sixty-One Theological Schools in the United States and Canada*. In some ways, Kelly modeled his work on the epic study by Abraham Flexner, *Medical Education in the United States*. Flexner's study had found a chaos in medical education in which "for-hire" schools, often inadequate in staffing and laboratory facilities, were operating alongside such new research institutions as Johns Hopkins and Harvard Medical School. Once the facts were evident, Flexner felt that the way forward was the classic "no brainer," and the medical profession agreed. The number of medical schools in operation went down, and the quality of those that remained went up. The whole system of medical education was improved.

Kelly clearly hoped for a similar result. While he found some seminaries operating on a very high professional level, including Union Seminary (New York) and the University of Chicago Divinity School, he found many more to be under financed, under enrolled, and poorly equipped. Admission was often more contingent on the ability of students to support themselves than on their proven scholarly capacity or even religious suitability. Although some of the leaders of the Conference of Theological Schools had worked as persuasively as possible behind the scenes to persuade Kelly to modify his conclusions, he followed his data to their natural conclusion: there were too many theological schools, operating with too low standards and too few resources, to produce the type of religious leaders that Kelly, a typical Protestant liberal, believed the churches needed.

### **Accreditation as a Way Forward**

Without drawing the cynical conclusion that the Conference wanted to "cook the books," the seminary presidents argued that a more adequate survey needed to be undertaken. While they were right about various weaknesses in Kelly's study, and particularly of his rhetoric, they were also reacting to the sting of the study. Enlisting the aid of the Institute for Social and Religious Research, a religious and philanthropic organization entirely funded and controlled by John D. Rockefeller Jr., they secured the funding for a more comprehensive, and, they hoped, more favorable, study. But there was a price to pay. In exchange for funding the study, Rockefeller's staff insisted that the Conference become an accrediting agency, an American Association of Theological Schools. Whatever may have been the presidents' hopes, both Rockefeller and the subsequent study conceded Kelly's main points: something had to be done to improve seminary standards.

Accreditation was a relatively new idea. In the 1890s, colleges and universities had begun to form voluntary associations to protect the quality of their degrees. In part, this move was because the various state governments—with the notable exception of New York—failed to provide adequate supervision of the various institutions that they incorporated and chartered. In addition, as the standards shifted from the inherited classical program to an elective and scientific program, schools had a number of problems, including the always vexing issue of transfer credits that necessitated agreements among them on minimal standards. The problem was that accreditation was designed for colleges and universities. The large regional accrediting bodies would not admit seminaries until the 1960s and, in some regions, the 1970s. The Institute for Social and Religious Research, in effect, was forcing the schools to take responsibility for their own common life.

A new study, by theologian William Adams Brown and Mark A. May, whose focus was on the formation of character, was published in four volumes under the title of the *Education of American Ministers*. Although the study relied on the popular survey technique, much of the work's power came from its definition of theological education as professional education. Ministers were trained to do a job, and the churches that hired them had a right to expect their employees to be competent and efficient. This understanding tried to leapfrog over one of the most persistent problems in historical North American theological education: its close relationship to the doctrinal traditions of the churches. By stressing what Protestant ministers did, Brown-May used a functional analysis of the theological curriculum to compare and contrast the work of different schools. One reason it succeeded, or appeared to, was that almost all the schools in the Conference, with the notable exceptions of Princeton and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, were liberal institutions that shared many theological commitments.

### **A Low Bar Set**

The new Association initially bore the marks of its origins in the midst of the Depression. Although the standards were not high, the members of the first Commission on Accrediting—Edward Roberts, Lewis Sherrill, Everett Herrick, Abdel Ross Wentz, Arthur McGiffert Jr., Robert Davidson, Luther Weigel, Albert Beven, Lavens Thomas, and Stanford Fleming—admitted that the standards were more aspirational than regulatory. This meant that the Commission had to use its

judgment in determining when it needed to rigorously enforce certain standards and when it needed to downplay or overlook deficiencies. The Association's means of enforcement reflected its ambiguities. When a school failed to meet the standard in a given area, the Commission might impose a "notation" that would be published yearly with the list of member schools, initially a system of public disclosure of deficiency.

Perhaps the most significant of the standards' "shall" statements was the insistence on four full-time faculty members as the minimum number for accreditation. The size of the faculty was an important benchmark of educational effectiveness since most seminaries, even the largest, had only a minimum number of staff positions, and faculty workloads often included tasks that would later be assigned to administrative offices, including the registry and the library.

The most recalcitrant issue was the old question of the four-three pattern (four years of undergraduate work and three years of seminary). This would not become normative in legal and medical education until after the Second World War, and many other professions had incorporated their basic training into the junior and senior years of college, with a master's program for those seeking advanced study. Most university leaders passionately supported this pattern, and many seminaries found that a two-year program followed by three years of theological study, the Bachelor of Theology degree, suited their candidates' abilities and financial constraints better than a purely graduate degree. Although one issue in the debate over the four-three pattern was whether sufficient numbers of students who had completed the Bachelor of Arts could be enrolled to keep the school viable, there were other substantial intellectual and educational dilemmas. For example, the key requirement, the four-year undergraduate program, was not defined, and no one had demonstrated convincingly that there was an inherent relationship between the liberal arts degree and the study of theology. The best that the Association accomplished, after years of impassioned debate, was a recommended list of prerequisite studies that seminaries might or might not require of potential students. And even as a voluntary measure, it was unable to stand the test of time. When enrollments fell in the 1970s and 1980s, these suggestions passed by the board. The compromise over the four-three pattern was a rule that permitted schools to enroll up to 10 percent of their students without a college degree. This rule, in various forms, has remained as part of the ATS

standards. The other decision, perhaps equally influential, was to concentrate on the Bachelor of Divinity degree (after 1970, the Master of Divinity degree) as the basic theological program.

What did it mean to be accredited? One thing it did not mean was that seminary attainments were automatically lifted to equal status with other professional or graduate schools. Both Brown-May and Kelly made it clear that the majority of seminaries was struggling to perform at that level and that only a few strong schools, including Union (New York), Princeton, Vanderbilt, and Yale, were in that class. Nor did it mean that seminaries had automatic standing in higher education. Accreditation was only beginning to be an important criterion for certifying institutions, and the North American educational marketplace was still relatively open and free of regulation. The Second World War, which required the standardization of everything from airplane parts to qualifications for the officer corps, would elevate all accredited institutions. This was particularly true of the chaplains, where the military's task of finding officers qualified to serve as both ministers and leaders was complicated by the seemingly endless array of qualifications for ordination. Graduation from an accredited institution was an easy way to cut through the confusion and enable quick appointments. But at first, to be honest, accreditation mattered little in terms of status. What it did do was to distinguish some seminaries as part of a culture of aspiration and improvement.

In many ways, determining the impact of those early standards is a classical problem in historical causality. The standards did set goals that seminary presidents, especially those embarrassed by notations, sought to meet. But impossible or improbable goals may have less influence than no goals at all. The standards, however, were only part of the early work of the Association. While historians generally do not like to reference conversations as source material, they are often the real origins of many of the events, developments, and other changes that the chronicler seeks to explain. And in fact, the early AATS was, like the earlier Conference of Theological Schools, preeminently a place for conversations. The annual meetings were characterized by the presentation of papers and by organized discussion of the ideas presented in them. But, like other professional organizations, the real business may well have been done in the halls as presidents and deans exchanged ideas, shared solutions to problems, bragged about their successes, analyzed their failures, and generally became comfortable in each other's

presence. If nothing else, these conversations broke down the parochialism of seminaries that were often embedded in the narrowness of their local denominational politics. A good dinner, with understanding colleagues, can do much to help solve a dilemma or to inspire a person to take an important course of action. Conversations would become even more important as AATS moved forward.

Although the leaders of the Association did not give a name to this process, they were in essence conducting a program of peer education in which professionals provided other professionals with the benefits of their knowledge and experience. What was creative about AATS was not that any of the particular elements was necessarily new; lectures and presentations were part of every academic gathering, and professional groups, dating back to the medieval guilds, had combined meals and discussion. The way that AATS adapted these various elements to the situation of theological schools and their leadership, however, was a mark of the Association's life. Unlike colleges and universities with their well-developed career ladders, theological schools were small and often had to elect leaders with little, if any, experience in the field. It was a rare Henry Pitney van Dusen who had been groomed for the position and nurtured step by step toward full responsibility. Hence, these school leaders needed all the help they could get, and welcomed every opportunity to receive it.

### **Renewal in the 1950s**

The Depression took a heavy toll on theological schools. They did not expand departments, lacked funds for scholarships and other forms of student aid, and made few new appointments. The immediate effect of the Second World War, which drained significant numbers of men into the armed forces, was to stall the development of the schools even further. But the post-War religious revival, whether genuine or not, provided the money and resources needed for advancement. Even Baptists and Methodists, who had historically drawn many of their ministry leaders from those with high school education or less, began to adopt regulations that first urged and then mandated seminary education. Old schools were renewed and new schools were founded. Almost all expanded their faculties and built new buildings to serve those now attending on the GI Bill.

At the same time, the theological renaissance of the 1940s and 1950s made theological education more exciting. Although biblical scholars did not ignore the painstaking work of historical and textual study, there was a widespread attempt to show how the Bible spoke to the contemporary situation, and the art of interpretation became a primary focus. Biblical studies, which had seemed on the verge of a new scholasticism, had become vital again. And the theological discussion included some remarkably interesting figures: Barth and Brunner, Tillich and Bultmann, Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer, and the archeologist Albright. Nor were these discussions confined to the seminaries. During the 1930s and 1940s, the denominational colleges established very strong departments of Bible and religion that introduced many potential seminary students to these discussions before they went on to seminary.

Among the first areas to demand systematic attention in this renewal process were seminary libraries. In many ways, the libraries had been the orphan children of the seminary system. Despite the success of such nineteenth-century schools as Andover (later Andover Newton), Rochester (later Colgate Rochester), and Union (New York) in accumulating strong collections, most seminary libraries in the early twentieth century were poorly staffed and lacked systematic acquisitions policies. In times of financial retrenchment, library expenses were relatively easy to cut. Few had trained librarians, and many of the sophisticated policies and procedures common to the better colleges and universities had not yet been adopted. By the late 1930s the regional accreditation organizations had begun to respond by devoting increasing attention to libraries.

Library trends at colleges and universities also played an influential role. Many undergraduate schools were downplaying the role of textbooks, especially in the area of a student's major, and students expected teaching at the same level when they arrived in seminaries. Reading lists of important secondary works, reproduced by the all-but-universal mimeograph machine, accompanied the now common syllabus or course outline. In some schools, small classes, often a byproduct of the school's financial difficulties, meant that discussion, long favored by professional educators as a method of instruction, had become more common as a teaching method. Ideally, the discussion class allowed students to bring a variety of resources to the classroom, and the reserved shelf, a special part of the collection set aside for each course, received increased interest from teachers and librarians.

In 1946, the American Association of Theological Schools helped to create the American Theological Library Association. It was the beginning of a long and successful collaboration among AATS, seminary leaders, and the libraries. One of the most important features of this partnership was the expansion of the AATS model of intensive conversations and peer-based education. As part of the effort to strengthen the libraries, the Association would later administer a significant grant from the Sealantic Fund for their benefit.

The 1950s were a very important decade for theological schools. Accreditation, which had proven important in certifying ministers for military chaplaincy positions, became an important mark of academic quality, and there was an increasing awareness that the seminaries would have to join the larger American academic order. Only a few schools, for example, were able to transfer their credits to other graduate or professional programs. Yet there was a general optimism in the air that was reflected in two important events: the commissioning of the study by H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James Gustafson and the Sealantic grants.

The Niebuhr-Williams-Gustafson report was commissioned by AATS in 1952. The project reflected the general optimism of the post-War religious revival. The picture of struggling institutions that had been painted by Kelly and Brown-May was no longer accurate, and the theological renaissance had made the implicit theological liberalism of the earlier study seem dated. It was a time to celebrate the *Advancement of Theological Education*, as the study would be titled, as well as to name remaining areas of concern, such as the need for better education of the next crop of seminary teachers. Further, Niebuhr-Williams-Gustafson raised a central issue for the future: What was theological about theological education? The question was, of course, as much a product of the religious revival as it was of the theological renaissance. Liberal and neoorthodox observers had noted, sometimes with pain and sorrow, that the religious revival of the 1950s was often shallow and frequently linked to patriotic fervor. In turn, the three researchers were turning the question against the seminaries that were supported and spawned by that revival. But the question had more bite than that: acute observers realized that the heyday of denominationalism had passed and with it had passed the clear visions of theological education enshrined in the great Reformation confessions.



The other major event of the decade was the large Sealantic Fund grant that went to the Association. The Sealantic grants were the brainchild of John D. Rockefeller Jr. and his staff. Rockefeller was the almost indefatigable champion and financial sponsor of liberal Protestant enterprises, and his fingerprints could be found on the finances of such stalwart liberal schools as Union in New York, the leading university-related divinity schools, and many African-American theological and undergraduate schools. The newly created National Council of Churches, handsomely housed at 475 Riverside Drive in New York City, was almost a monument to his belief in the power of liberal religion to transform the nation. The grant to the Association was intended to provide the body with both a permanent office and an executive director.

Five people have held the office of executive director in AATS/ATS: Charles Taylor 1956–1968, Jesse Ziegler 1968–1980, Leon Pacala 1980–1991, James L. Waits 1991–1998, and Daniel O. Aleshire 1998–present. Outside of its accreditation functions, supported by members' dues, the Association has had to find support for its work among a host of funding agencies. In effect, the executive directors have had to balance the wants of the Association's members against the willingness of the Association's funders to finance particular projects. They have been as much diplomats as executives. The first director, Charles L. Taylor, was an experienced theological educator who had served as dean of Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and as a president of the Association. Significantly, he was a close friend of Nathan Pusey, president of Harvard and a valued advisor of John D. Rockefeller Jr. and other foundation executives. In many ways, Taylor almost epitomized the previous twenty-five years of seminary history: he was passionately attached to the pattern of four years of undergraduate and three years of graduate study and deeply devoted to the belief that the classical theological disciplines, especially modern biblical studies, were the heart and core of the theological program.

Historians are habitually fascinated with firsts and beginnings. Indeed, those individuals who stand near the beginnings of an institution's history often have unusual importance in the formation of its heritage or inner assumptions. Taylor's period at AATS did have some of that heritage-setting character. The relationship between AATS and Lilly Endowment, one of the constants of the Association's financial support, was begun in that period as the Endowment co-

operated with AATS in the Bridston and Culver study of preseminary education and in the grant for the creation of the AATS journal, *Theological Education*, which began publication in 1964. Perhaps, as befits a former dean, Taylor also noted that the infrastructure of seminary education was in serious trouble. The problem was that the costs of theological education were skyrocketing and threatening to go out of control. Taylor was not the first seminary leader to have complained about the seemingly inevitable gap between income and outgo in theological education, but he did set the stage for a long and serious debate, one that still continues today within the Association, about how to guard against the wolf outside the door.

Perhaps the most important set of changes that began with the appointment of an executive director had to do with the increased professionalism of AATS as an accrediting agency. Few current theological educators are aware of the distance that their schools and the Association have traveled in tandem over the last century. In the early 1960s only those schools affiliated with major universities had credits that were recognized outside of the Association for transfer to other graduate programs. The Association itself had not yet been recognized by the U.S. Department of Education or by other accrediting agencies as an independent body with its own standards and unique sphere of operation. Such matters as joint accreditation with the various regional bodies were yet to be negotiated, and many of those bodies were, if not hostile, at least suspicious of the academic quality of theological schools.

To be candid, those suspicions were not ill-founded. Despite the striving of the period that followed World War I, most schools were pale reflections of the university professional schools they envied. In a sense, the Sealantic Fund grants of the 1950s had reflected this widespread perception. Rockefeller and his advisors had given the bulk of their largesse to a handful of theological schools, such as Union, Yale, and Harvard, that they believed could deliver theological education at a university standard. In many ways, the passionate 1960s debates over degree nomenclature—Bachelor of Divinity or Master of Divinity—and over whether the seminary should grant a professional doctorate reflected this underlying insecurity about where the seminaries actually fit into the larger academic world. The eventual inclusion of the seminaries into the system of federally guaranteed student loans—considered legal since the aid was technically going to the

student and not to the churches—was part of the pot of gold that helped to focus this quest for approval.

The most visible need for change was in the area of standards enforcement. Since the initial adoption of the standards (1936), AATS had operated with two systems of enforcement. Every other year, member schools were to file forms that detailed their compliance with the various standards and were often largely quantitative measures of available resources, statistics about current students, and the like. At best, these forms set forth minimum expectations. When a school failed to meet one of the standards, most often related to the percentage of noncollege graduates admitted, the penalty was to impose a notation, essentially a form of public discipline. The most serious sanctions, probation and possible loss of accreditation, were reserved, like Protestant excommunication, for those who sinned with a high hand.

This pattern, which held from 1938 to 1958, was both too little and too much. It was too little in that it tended to make accreditation more or less a matter of formulas and not to validate the actual work of the schools. Like the standards themselves, this form of inspection was broad but not deep. The other problem was that the system of notations was not anchored in reasonable sanctions. Probation and/or expulsion from the Association were too severe to be used effectively, and the notations were difficult to enforce. Insofar as the Association had power, then, it had it primarily before a school was admitted when it could insist on changes as a condition for membership.

### **The Self-Study and Periodic Visits**

By far the most important part of the Association's emergence as a federally approved accreditation agency was the development of the self-study and ten-year evaluation. The report of the Commission on Accrediting in 1952 remarked that it was giving serious consideration to a proposal to reexamine all accredited schools. What was interesting about the proposal was both its recognition of the great expense involved in such a self-study and team visit and its awareness that such reexaminations were becoming standard among college and university accrediting agencies (Bulletin 21, June 1954, p. 63). By 1956 the policy of the Association called for the reexamination of each accredited member every ten years,

with the basis of this reaccreditation being a thorough self-study, reported under guidelines developed by the executive director and approved by the Commission on Accrediting.

Developing the nuts and bolts of this process took time. It was not until the 1970s, for example, that regular training programs were conducted for evaluators. Yet, the new system had immediate effects on theological education. The process of self-study, which no one can say was (or is) popular, broadened the involvement of theological educators in the work of accreditation. A good self-study required, at a minimum, the cooperation of administration, faculty, and staff in gathering information, organizing it, and interpreting it. For the first time, broad cross sections of the schools were involved in reaching conclusions about the state of the institution and its future. In time, of course, trustees and other publics would become involved as well. If one of the goals of accreditation was to set a standard for what would later be called a “good theological school,” then more people were aware of what might constitute such an institution. In effect, the self-study process created, both in theory and often in practice, a community of improvement. As the standards progressively developed, the existence of this community supported each subsequent attempt to improve the educational quality of the seminaries.

The other effect of the self-study process was the creation of a broader and better-networked community of theological educators. As the visiting teams crossed the continent, they learned much about the problems and opportunities of other theological institutions. This increased the awareness of common problems and raised the possibility that they might have common solutions. Because theological education was and remains a relatively small educational enterprise, the process made possible a far deeper awareness of its possibilities. As the Association came to include evangelical, Catholic, and orthodox schools, the self-study process was an invaluable way of providing exchanges of perspective across confessional boundaries.

The new process also led to another development: a shift in the standards from a concentration on resources to more of an evaluative system based on an institution’s mission and sense of purpose. The older system of reaccreditation had depended on schedules that were regularly filed with the Commission and which,

given the nature of the process of filling in forms, did not admit to much intellectual or institutional analysis. One had, for example, either more or less than 10 percent of the student body without the bachelor's degree, or so many books, or so many faculty members, etc. The new self-study process permitted the asking of more basic questions and opened theological education to the possibility of more constructive changes and development.

### **Growing Stature among Accrediting Associations**

Accreditation in the United States, unlike other forms of institutional certification practiced in many other countries, involves a curious mixture of private (non-governmental) agencies, state agencies, and the federal government. The various accrediting bodies are private organizations, at least insofar as their memberships are self-determined and their budgets raised autonomously, and they must seek recognition by both other voluntary and federal agencies.

An essay of this length cannot detail every twist and turn in this complex journey toward recognition but can only note certain key turns in the road, and, above all, the overall significance of being accepted by all levels of the accreditation pyramid. Because ATS is a recognized accrediting agency, its member schools in the United States can participate in the federal student loan program, but, to retain that recognition, they must be responsive to the government and its need for quality control. If the first of these encouraged the participating members to strengthen the Association and its standards, the second encouraged them to be open to the full diversity of American religious faith.

A crucial step in the development of AATS as a guarantor of academic standards was its recognition by the National Commission on Accrediting (one of the predecessor organizations of what is now the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, a voluntary association that advocates for quality control in higher education through accreditation and that recognizes accrediting agencies). The National Commission on Accrediting urged AATS to take over the accrediting of schools of religious education, many of which were gradually being enfolded into nearby seminaries, and AATS did so, developing standards for the Master of Religious Education degree. This degree was the first of a number of specialized degrees that would be standardized by AATS/ATS. Another important standard

that became part of the life of AATS/ATS was the insistence of the National Commission that the public have representation on the governing boards of accrediting bodies.

The unitary approach to the accreditation of theological schools, urged by the National Commission on Accrediting, remained an important AATS/ATS goal. In the 1970s and 1980s, AATS/ATS sought to divide the field with the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges (AABC), with the latter accrediting undergraduate theological education and AATS/ATS serving graduate theological schools. In 1979, however, a long-standing desire by many conservative schools was fulfilled when the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS) was founded and, subsequently, gained recognition by both the Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. In addition, the Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools was recognized by both CHEA and the federal government. Nonetheless, ATS has continued to work to include all theological schools under its umbrella.

### **Faculty Development**

One of the most successful of the early Association programs was the Faculty Fellowship program. Niebuhr-Williams-Gustafson had noted the need for more systematic faculty development and the sabbatical leave process, increasingly popular in universities and the better colleges, provided an excellent model for postdoctoral study. The problem was that sabbatical leaves, like most forms of advanced education, were expensive. Not only did a school have to relinquish the services of a professor for a semester or a year, but the instructor acquired additional expenses that faculty members generally could not afford on their modest salaries. The Faculty Fellowship program, supported at various times by the Sealantic Fund, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Lilly Endowment, Hewlett Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and Lutheran Brotherhood, made funds available for sabbatical study. There were three conditions for funding: the recipient had to be employed in an AATS/ATS school, have a specific project, and spend the leave away from the home campus.

The original Faculty Fellowship program was one of the longest lived of the Association's projects, then followed by more sophisticated programs of theological research supported by Lilly Endowment and the Luce Foundation. A commitment to the intellectual formation of theological faculties has been central to the Association's program in the more than fifty years since the original Sealantic grants. In some respects, faculty members faced a similar problem financing advanced study as their institutions faced in getting grants for new programs. Few funders were interested in religious and theological studies, and the small size of most theological schools made it difficult for their faculty members to get a broader hearing. Such problems are systemic; that is, they are rooted in how theological schools in North America do business. What both the original AATS program and its successors did was, in effect, create a larger structure that could deal with funders as a group rather than leaving it to individual faculty members. Although professors from the university schools have taken advantage of these grants, the grants have had particular importance for faculty members at less prestigious and well-known institutions.

Evaluating this half-century of involvement in scholarship is a difficult task. After all, during this period university and college departments of religious studies have gradually come to dominate religious scholarship, and the seminaries are no longer the primary players, even in areas of traditional strength, such as biblical studies. If AATS/ATS support of faculty scholarship was intended to preserve or advance the place of the seminaries in the larger scholarly world, then one would have to be skeptical about its outcome. Yet, this may not be the best perspective from which to view the program. A better perspective would be that it enabled faculty members in some very small institutions to study and publish on the same level as scholars in larger and more prestigious institutions and with comparable rates of success. The indirect effects of the Faculty Fellowships were also considerable, although more difficult to document. While seminaries were generally influenced by the increasing popularity of sabbatical leaves in the larger educational environment, the AATS/ATS grant program in particular helped make the practice an Association-wide norm. And when it did, the seminaries had taken another giant step toward joining the larger academic world around them.

## The Mainstream Decline

By 1970 there were indications that religion, both in the United States and Canada, was undergoing substantial change. The old mainline churches, basically those that had come to social dominance in the United States after the Civil War, found themselves declining in numbers and influence. Both the seminary and the congregational (or parish) structure of these churches faced a similar problem. The mainstream churches had blanketed North America, locating competing churches in small towns and even in open fields, as well as the cities and suburbs. It was a like a flood a mile wide and an inch deep. Because most of these churches were small, it did not take a serious downturn in membership or contributions to put them into substantial crisis. The seminary systems supporting these denominations mirrored their parish structure. The mainline churches had tended to establish small seminaries, near their churches, and few had created anything like a systematic national network of schools. The massive demographic shifts of the 1970s through the 1990s affected both congregations and seminaries. Americans continued to flee from rural and small town areas into larger metropolitan areas, and the population shifted south and west. In Canada, there was a similar shift toward the west. In addition, both Canada and the United States experienced significant increases in immigration from around the world, and secularization seemed to continue in both societies.

The other side of the decline of the mainstream churches was the rise of various evangelical churches, many of which were nondenominational and often radically congregational in polity. The relationship between the decline of the older churches and the rise of new ones is not clear, but the effects of this change were dramatic. Whereas in 1960, the mainstream churches educated more than 50 percent of the Protestant seminarians, including many evangelicals, by 2000 approximately 60 percent of the seminarians in the country were in institutions that identified themselves as evangelical. And many candidates for mainstream churches attended evangelical seminaries.

The decline of American mainstream Protestantism, like every major social change, can be used to explain too much or pushed too conveniently to the side when another explanation may be preferred. The fact is that the decline was one of those large or mega events that touched almost all areas of American religious



life from 1970 to 2008 and one that should be presupposed, even when it is not explicitly mentioned.

The effects of the decline are evident in the change that took place in the support for a professional doctorate and in the way that degree was eventually offered. The drive for a four-year Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree began in the excitement of the theological renaissance of the 1930s and 1940s when theological educators were recovering some of the depths of historic Christianity. Three years did not seem enough time to provide young ministers with an in-depth knowledge of theology and contemporary practice. By 1962 Claremont had announced a four-year program leading to the Doctor of Religion, and it was quickly followed by Chicago, Vanderbilt, and Emory. The goal of these schools was to raise the ante and make the new degree, complete with such high academic standards as comprehensive examinations, the standard degree for ordained ministry. The new proposal was not initially popular, and the 1968 proposal by Seward Hiltner was defeated by the Association. Most schools lacked the resources needed for such an advanced degree. However, by 1970, a key change was introduced. Not all schools had to elect to offer the new degree, and those that did were allowed to offer it as either an in-course degree or an additional degree for those who were already in ministry. This later form of the degree, strongly affirmed in the 1984 standards, was to become popular with seminaries and to some degree with ministers, especially those in the liberal Protestant tradition. Part of the reason for the popularity of this DMin degree was that it was relatively inexpensive to offer, with many schools offering the key elements of the program in the summer months and using Master of Divinity (MDiv) electives that were often seriously underenrolled. In effect, the new degree became a way of developing a new constituency or, at least, recycling an old one. While enrollments would level off in the 1990s, they were still significant as part of the very thin margin of profitability that allowed many schools to stay afloat financially.

Another place where the effects of Protestant decline were felt was in the seminary's response to the women's revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Clearly, the major factor leading to change was the demand by women that they be granted a place in the ministry of the churches and the willingness of some denominations to grant this right. But the revolution was eased by the declining number of men entering the ministry and the need of seminaries to fill the seats in their

classrooms. The resulting virtual open admissions policy in many schools would encourage seminary leaders not only to admit women and persons of color, but equally importantly, to become their advocates in judicatories and in churches.

### **Beyond Liberal Protestantism**

The question of whether AATS, given its liberal Protestant history, could become a truly national and ecumenical voice for theological education was open in the early 1960s. The two groups outside the fold were the Roman Catholic schools and the evangelical schools. The issues with Roman Catholicism were the most serious ones intellectually; evangelicalism posed more serious practical issues.

Pre-Vatican II Catholic theological education in the United States was a primary example of the “ghetto Catholicism” that many educated Catholic leaders believed weakened the American church. While one can exaggerate the isolation of traditional Catholic priestly formation, it was often a comprehensive program of rigorous religious training coupled with doctrinal instruction. Although many seminary instructors held doctorates, often from prestigious European universities, much instruction was from approved doctrinal manuals that set forth the teachings of the Church clearly and systematically. Modern biblical studies, which were not approved by the Vatican until the 1940s, were slowly being incorporated into the program, but they were not yet constitutive. Although they were not recognized outside of Catholic circles, many American seminaries were accredited by Catholic University (Washington, DC), a pontifical institution, or were pontifical institutions in their own right.

The election of John F. Kennedy and, above all, Vatican II produced an atmosphere of change and excitement among Catholic educators. High school seminaries passed out of vogue, and even college seminaries became less influential. Catholic theological thinking, which had been exploring new directions in Europe, seemed to burst forth in a multitude of new directions, and both the form and content of Catholic theological education changed in response. These changes opened the possibility of partnership with Protestant institutions.

Protestants, especially liberal and mainstream Protestants, were also deeply influenced by the spirit of Vatican II. The two branches of Christianity seemed to be en-

tering into an era of good feeling and fellowship in which Catholicism might learn some of the critical and inquiring habits of Protestantism, and Protestantism might gain some of the stability and respect for tradition of the Roman Church. Consequently, Catholic schools, both diocesan and those related to orders, turned to AATS/ATS, and by 1980 all the major Catholic schools had become ATS members. The first Catholic to serve as the president of ATS was Vincent Cushing in 1982.

Liberal and mainstream problems with evangelicalism ran deeper. The modernist-fundamentalist battle had been largely fought over theological education, and both liberals and conservatives were still bloodied from those battles. Especially on the local level, Protestant judicatories still found themselves fighting the issues of the 1920s again and again at ordination councils. At the same time, Protestant evangelicalism had recovered, at least in part, from its defeat in the battle. During the 1930s, the conservative churches had constructed their own network of institutions, and these institutions were beginning to prosper. Many evangelicals dreamed of a great new Christian university, but most knew that finally they would have to settle, as the mainstream churches by and large had, for a system of seminaries. The easiest evangelical seminaries for AATS/ATS to include were the more denominational schools, such as Eastern and Northern Baptist Theological seminaries. Fuller Seminary in California proved more difficult to incorporate, due in part to opposition from many mainstream Presbyterians. But after Fuller was admitted, the Association regularly admitted conservative schools.

AATS/ATS was not able to become as comprehensive as it had hoped. The Association has been open since the 1960s to incorporating Jewish schools into its membership. Although some of these schools have maintained a relationship with the Association, they have not chosen to become members. This does not mean that these schools have not been influenced by AATS/ATS or by its standards. They have been.

For the Association, the decision of the Jewish schools represents a road not taken that has become an increasingly important turnpike in the last fifty years. Partly as a result of immigration, non-Christian forms of faith have been growing both numerically and proportionately. Islam is an excellent case in point. As these communities mature and enter more into the American mainstream, their leaders will have a similar need for publicly accepted certification of their professional

status. Fortunately, Hartford Seminary is providing the Association with needed expertise through its Islamic studies program, which is providing some Islamic leaders with this certification. Whether Islam will feel at home with this style of leadership preparation or will prefer more university-based Islamic studies programs is a major question before that community.

AATS/ATS success in creating an effective, unified agency for North American theological education rested on three factors. First, the U.S. government provided both a carrot and a stick. The carrots were the various benefits, including participation in the federal student loan program, that accreditation by a federally approved accreditation agency provided. The importance of this indirect pressure should not be minimized. By 1970 theological schools were frequently in financial crisis, and few could continue to exist without participation in the federal student loan program. Accreditation by a federally recognized agency was, for good or ill, the price of the ticket, and for that approval to exist AATS/ATS had to be as comprehensive as possible. Second, however controversial AATS/ATS programs and initiatives seemed to some, especially under Jesse Ziegler, the second executive director, the Association was blessed by a series of strong leaders who were able to negotiate effectively among competing groups. While it might be too much to say that AATS/ATS was able to set aside all differences, especially between evangelicals and the mainstream, the seminary presidents and deans continued to discover that they shared certain common interests and that substantial differences in theological conviction and educational methods did not exclude cooperation. Third, the process was eased by theological changes among all parties. The liberal and mainstream seminaries were just beginning to move from a strong emphasis on neoorthodox formulations to the more socially relevant theologies of the 1980s and the 1990s. Neoorthodoxy made those seminaries more responsive to other forms of orthodoxy and provided for a dialogue with similar changes in other confessional bodies, and the new social theologies were similar to those being developed elsewhere. Likewise, Catholic theology was in a period of ferment and transformation. The new Catholic historical and biblical studies suggested a renewed sense that “catholic” referred to the totality of the church, including its separated sisters and brothers. Further, Catholic liberation theology found readers among theologians of all Christian persuasions.

Evangelicalism was also in a period of change. Not only were some evangelical theologians more open to other forms of Protestant theology, but many evangelical biblical scholars were beginning to use tools pioneered by their liberal counterparts. Conservative churches were once more being regarded as socially and intellectually acceptable. In this atmosphere, the evangelical seminaries and their leaders were proud of their participation and acceptance in the Association, and two very prestigious evangelical leaders, David Hubbard in the 1980s and Robert Cooley in the 1990s, served as presidents of the Association. In short, the 1960s and 1970s were the period in which the three forms of Christian faith stood closer to each other than they had for some time and than they would in future decades. Their membership in AATS/ATS helped draw them together, and it has served to hold them together even as they have become more aware of differences.

The other area of growth was the steady increase in the number of Canadian schools. The Association had always had Canadian members, of course, and these schools had often represented a slightly different style of education for ministry. Perhaps the most obvious differences were in the relationship of the schools (and to some extent, the churches) to the government, the closer relationship between the churches and the schools, and the tendency of more Canadian schools to be integral parts of universities. Although Canadian seminaries have much in common theologically with American theological schools, including a Protestant division between evangelical and mainstream, the vast size of Canada and its sparse population have shaped the seminaries in many fundamental ways, particularly in the areas of governance and finance.

At times the differences between Canadian and American conditions required adaptation by the Association. One such example was when the government in Quebec decreed that professional education should be available to candidates who had completed two years of university-level training, which required the Association to stretch its accreditation requirements to meet the new situation. Perhaps the best sign of the Association's willingness to accept the Canadian schools on their own terms was the self-conscious decision of the Association to change its name in 1974 from The American Association of Theological Schools to The Association of Theological Schools.

The Association faced two crises related to its desire to represent all graduate theological schools. Both of these took place among American religious conservatives. The first was at Concordia Theological Seminary in St. Louis. The president, John Tietjen, had encouraged the school, one of the nation's largest, to accept some moderate biblical criticism and to listen to some of the neoorthodox theological voices in American theology. From the perspective of the Protestant mainstream and even from the perspective of many conservative Missouri Synod Lutherans, this was hardly a movement toward theological liberalism. But theological conservatives in the denomination triumphed, and Tietjen was removed. The majority of the faculty left the school to form a counter seminary, and both sides expected the Association to agree with them. Equally bitterly, the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest denomination, had a series of theological disputes beginning with a clash over Ralph Elliot's *Meaning of Genesis*, published in 1961, that pitted the denomination's conservatives against the more moderate leadership of the boards and agencies. By the 1980s, it was clear that the conservatives would win, and when they did, they proceeded to remake the denomination's seminaries and confessions of faith. As in the Missouri Synod, the Southern Baptist professors were hardly liberal, but almost all of them believed that academic freedom was necessary for theological inquiry. Academic freedom was not, of course, the only issue—the dispute ranged over such matters as the full incorporation of women into Southern Baptist leadership, the role of the Bible, interreligious dialogue, science and religion, and some particularities of Southern Baptist polity, including the strange, but persistent, landmark movement.

Other issues in the 1980s reflected the tensions caused by the changes in the composition of the Association. The most dramatic was the decision of the Roman Church to conduct visitations of the North American seminaries. American Catholics were divided on the visits. In general, conservative Catholics welcomed visitors representing the current conservatism of Pope John Paul, while most liberal thinkers, who had seen some promising developments from their perspective suppressed, were deeply concerned about the visits. At the same time, the United Methodist Church, openly concerned about the variety of institutions that its candidates for ministry were entering, was becoming more active, through its University Senate, in regulating the schools that Methodist candidates could attend.

Both the crises in the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, and Southern Baptist Convention and the developments among Catholics and Methodists, raised crucial issues for theological education, especially as understood by mainstream Protestant educators. But the academic freedom issue was the one that hoisted the Association by its own petard. The Association had traditionally affirmed a university-related standard for academic freedom in its publications, and it had recommended the American Association of University Professors Statement on Academic Freedom to member schools. But, that statement, never completely appropriate when applied to confessional schools, was now out of harmony with what was becoming the majority of the Association's membership. In 1990 the Association took the extraordinary step of adopting a statement, the Accreditation of Theological Schools and Ecclesiastical Assessment of Schools, carefully stated to be for the advice and counsel of its members, that sought to separate accreditation as a measure of educational quality from the church's right to determine ministerial suitability.

The philosopher Hegel often meditated on the relationship between quantity and essence. At what point did adding new elements to a given entity fundamentally change its character. He had in mind, for example, the way in which adding a number of tribes together might lead to something different, such as a nation state. The addition of Catholic and evangelical schools was a good demonstration of Hegel's thesis. Over time, these schools changed the character of the Association as they moved from the edges of what began as a liberal Protestant organization to the center of an organization that brought together Catholic, evangelical, and liberal Protestant and in which liberal Protestants were a distinct minority. We cannot date exactly when such an additive process changed the character of the group, but we can note by the 1990s the Association had changed and was marching to a different drummer on some important issues.

## **Globalization**

Perhaps the most interesting example of a synergy among the various components of ATS was the increasing emphasis on "globalization" that became part of the standards in 1990. American evangelicals largely replaced the mainstream churches as the primary American voices on the mission field after the 1960s. This was partly by default. The mainstream churches, responding to an often

expressed desire by churches in the Two-Thirds World to be granted full independence, withdrew their missionaries and much of their financial support from their daughter churches. The World Council of Churches, still a major concern of these denominations, became increasingly shrill in its denunciations of the United States, and although the mainstream leadership refused to denounce the Council, it did contribute less for its work, both in terms of money and personnel. Evangelicals and European pietists had long provided the majority of workers for expansion of the faith abroad, and they redoubled their efforts after the departure of their more liberal brethren from the work. To be an evangelical church pastor was to be in touch with this worldwide Christian reality.

At much the same time, the interest of mainstream and progressive Roman Catholic theologians was increasingly captured by a wide variety of new theologies, often summarized as “theologies of liberation,” that were being developed abroad and entering the West. At the same time, Two-Thirds World religion was beginning to show its power as African Christians led a movement for the end of apartheid in South Africa that seemed to be a model, at least to many mainstream church observers, of how religion might effect substantial social change. All Catholics were also aware of the power and influence of the Catholic Church in Africa and in Asia. Although still premature, some were envisioning a future in which the Pope might well be African or Asian.

The emphasis on globalization did not change theological education overnight. What it did do was encourage (and with the adoption of the new standard, gently force) the schools to become more aware of the worldwide context of their work. Many faculty members and students visited Two-Thirds World countries, and some schools added teachers from those countries. The trips were not, however, the heart of the globalization process. Clearly, the criticism that many schools were engaged in little more than theological tourism was valid for some programs, and few schools required people to be abroad for a semester or more, living in the culture and learning some of the language. Nor did the practice of a “junior year abroad,” an elective commonly offered by better colleges, become a common feature of seminary education. Perhaps more important, however, was the continual pressure that seminary classes include in their offerings the worldwide dialogue about the meaning of faith. Like many changes in a system as complex as North American theological education, they cannot be attributed to



one influence. But the patient work of ATS, urging schools to go one step further, publishing critical articles in *Theological Education*, and using the good offices of its staff, have been an important component in this change.

### **The Resources Commission**

One of the earliest signs that AATS/ATS was feeling the impact of the changing religious environment was the Resources Commission, which, after meeting throughout the 1960s, presented its report to the Association in 1968. The report appeared in *Theological Education*, a new journal initially financed by Lilly Endowment that had first appeared in 1964. The Commission, headed by Arthur McKay, was ably assisted by the accounting firm of Arthur D. Little. Warren Deem, an associate of Arthur D. Little, later the Commission's first public member, was among those who worked on finding appropriate ways to gauge seminary finances.

The seminaries were almost the canaries of the ecclesiastical world, responding to changes in the religious marketplace before they were evident to other analysts. And in fact, the conclusions of the Resources Commission were bleak. Although the seminaries were in the midst of the Vietnam conflict, which boosted enrollments, it was clear that they were seriously under financed, under enrolled, and under maintained. The Commission's suggestions were to be influential. In brief, they proposed that seminaries find ways to cooperate with each other, either in formal unions, such as the new Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, or by forming clusters of schools that might share the considerable expenses of the modern seminary. They noted that increased competition with college and university departments of religion had driven the price of faculty upward and that the schools should expect this cost to continue to rise. In terms of facilities, they noted that deferred maintenance had passed beyond temporary expediency and had become a habit. There was an irony in the report. At the same time as they studied school after school facing financial disaster, they shared the optimism of the early Kennedy years and could not envision a future without the rising of the American sun and without the continual expansion of the American educational system.

Perhaps the deepest irony was the report of the committee of academics appointed to produce "The Curriculum for the Seventies." Both at the time and even more in retrospect, the proposal seemed out of touch both with the reality of the seminary classroom and with seminary financial and academic realities. For example, in addition to facility in the biblical languages, they proposed that all seminary graduates have the ability to read another foreign language. Teaching was to be small-group based and individually directed as well as carefully organized by levels. In many ways, it was utopian. Yet, its utopianism was not out of harmony with the times. The rhetoric was similar to the language used at the contemporary founding of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) that likewise celebrated the brave new world ahead. But, the leaders of the AAR were in a world in which the many small denominational colleges that had college religion departments were becoming more prestigious and well-financed private colleges and leaving behind their former denominational identity. Many had used the post-World War II period to aggressively enter the world of modern fundraising and alumni support. And together with their counterparts in state-supported schools, the traditional religion departments were in the midst of one of the greatest expansions of public education in American history. In contrast, the curriculum of the 1970s was written by people in institutions that were increasingly fragile and threatened, supported by denominations that were also at risk.

One result of the work of the Resources Commission was to confirm Warren Deem as the nation's foremost expert on seminary finance. If one test of a teacher's influence is the large number of people that he or she trained, then Deem should be counted as one of the master teachers of the Association. In addition to his influence on Jesse Ziegler, Taylor's successor as executive director, he worked extensively with Fred Hofheinz and Robert Lynn at Lilly Endowment until his death in 1978. He made it clear to all who would listen that the seminaries needed to undertake fundamental financial and managerial reforms in order to survive. If some of his most dire prophecies did not come to pass, it was because people with power and influence heard his arguments. But the structural problems that he underlined, unfortunately, were not completely corrected. Many contemporary seminaries are still suffering from these same problems.

## Leadership Education

The Association's response to the growing crisis was to further develop its characteristic program of professionals training professionals. Clearly, the key figures in this were the presidents of member schools. There was no shared understanding of the nature of the seminary presidency. In some schools, the president was, in effect, the "boss" who had complete control over everything from faculty appointments to the academic schedule. In other schools, there was clear movement toward defining the position as that of a chief executive officer who exercises oversight over the school through a well-trained professional staff. AATS/ATS school leaders in the 1970s and 1980s were particularly enamored of this later understanding. A competent chief executive officer had the freedom and ability to delegate responsibility to well-trained people and the time (and hopefully skill) to attend to the many aspects of the financial crisis before the schools. In short, the Association became the catalyst for a "professionalization" of the seminary administration similar to the "professionalization" of the seminary faculties that had taken place with the almost universal adoption of the PhD, the tenure system, and departmental organization.

In part, the problem was that seminary presidents were recruited from a wide variety of backgrounds, including large churches, judicatories, and seminary faculties. Few of them had any formal administrative training, and even the handful of church bureaucrats who entered their ranks were comparatively unprepared for the complexities of seminary administration. At the same time, the seminaries seemed to be relatively simple organizations to direct. Most were small institutions that seemed capable of being run more or less as a "mom and pop" operation. Yet the irony was that this simplicity was apparent, not real. Small seminaries often had to perform the same administrative tasks of larger colleges or even small universities but without the financial and other resources.

The Association elected to pursue two directions in its quest to aid the development of administrative expertise. One was the education of the presidents themselves; the second was the training of staff, particularly those engaged in fundraising and development. The Association devoted the most energy and resources to the former of these tasks. In addition to the characteristic ATS program of professionals educating professionals, AATS/ATS executives, working closely

with Lilly Endowment, devised a summer program of executive training. The basic idea was to establish a summer institute where a select group of seminary presidents could participate in a series of seminars devised by the Columbia University Institute for Not-for-Profit Management. The Institute was offered throughout the 1980s with the best attended sessions in its earlier years. About 26 percent of all presidents attended the sessions.

Why was the program discontinued? Finances were one reason. Many seminaries reported that they could not afford the fee—once grant subsidy ceased. Perhaps a more pressing reason for its failure was the myth of the indispensable man or woman. Many presidents reported that they could not give up the time to attend such a time-intensive program. Ironically, this excuse for nonparticipation may have reflected the very problem that the Institute hoped to correct: an unprofessional, overly anxious presidency.

The Warren Deem Institute, as this program was aptly named, was the most costly and most ambitious attempt by the Association to do advanced training in the art of theological education. Both the attempt and its comparative failure defined the limits of what the Association might achieve even with the generous support of Lilly Endowment. But, that should not obscure one key point. Whether because of the example of secular educational institutions, the rising sophistication of those chosen to lead theological schools, or the need for a creative response, the Association had been an important midwife to a major change in how theological schools were governed. The characteristic professional trust in best practices had become part of how most seminaries understood their leadership. A similar proposal for academic deans, a relatively new office in most small seminaries, quickly moved to the more congenial format of an annual meeting combined with an electronic listserv. In some ways, the deans were more prepared for their work than most presidents. Most were survivors of the always earnest, and sometimes harsh, world of small-school faculty politics who had much experience in mediating among competing claimants for scarce resources.

Perhaps the most important of these leadership education initiatives came directly from the work of Warren Deem: the various programs for the education of development officers. One of the silent revolutions in theological education was the gradual withdrawal of the various denominations from active support of theo-

logical education. One must be careful not to confuse a withdrawal with a rout or with lack of interest. The churches did what they could, but they were discovering that they could not do as much as they had done earlier. And, although tuition steadily rose from the 1970s onward, it was also clear the seminaries could not shift as much of their increasing cost onto tuition as the more prestigious liberal arts colleges did. Working together with Lilly Endowment and others, ATS managed to create a network of development officers, with a yearly meeting, and a successful newsletter, *Seminary Development News*, that began publication in 1987. Again, ATS was doing what it had historically done best: it was using the expertise of practitioners in a small enterprise to serve one another as supporters and as resources. It was creating a professional community that understood the particular problems of its environment. In turn, this served as the model for similar work among seminary deans, chief financial officers, and student personnel officers in the most recent decade, as ATS efforts in leadership education continued to give attention to the growing need for professionally competent administrators.

### **Basic Issues Research**

One of the most ambitious of the Association's programs was the Basic Issues Research program that began in 1980. The program had six foci:

1. Review and update accrediting standards and process;
2. Support the scholarship and research of theological faculties;
3. Identify, research, and deliberate basic issues confronting theological education;
4. Enable executive leadership of theological schools to acquire current administrative and managerial skills and training;
5. Advance the capacity of theological schools to benefit in their financial development efforts from state-of-the-art practices and professional nurture of development officers; and
6. Identify the condition, needs, and issues confronting theological libraries and resources needed for the twenty-first century.

To understand the significance of the Basic Issues Research program, one needs to examine two aspects of it. First, the goal of the program was to promote a serious conversation among theological educators. The purpose of a series of regional meetings in 1984 was not so much to reach consensus about the problems facing theological education as it was to bring people together around the question. In that sense, the Basic Issues program was related to the long tradition of education through dialogue that was part of the inner history of AATS/ATS. Second, the choice of the word “issues” was deliberate. Unlike problems, which in principle can be solved or unsolved, issues are open-ended. There may or may not be a resolution to an issue, but the discussion may open up possibilities that had not been considered before.

In a sense, this fundamental discussion was long overdue. Despite the popularity of the professional understanding of theological education, theological educators did not have a clear understanding of their task or its theological underpinnings. In other words, the question of “what is theological about theological education” was apt. At the same time as ATS executive director Leon Pacala was undertaking this series of papers and conversations, Robert Lynn at Lilly Endowment was also encouraging some influential studies along the same lines, including Edward Farley’s *Theologica*, Charles Wood’s *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study*, Joseph C. Hough Jr. and John B. Cobb Jr.’s *Christian Identity and Theological Education*, Glenn T. Miller’s *Piety and Intellect*, and David Kelsey’s *To Understand God Truly: What’s Theological About a Theological School*. The conversation about theological education was enriched by the recovery of older paradigms, such as theological encyclopedia, and the reformulation of older concepts, such as the contrast between Berlin and Athens as ways of speaking about tensions in the theological community. But most important was the sense that theological education had to draw its basic constructs from its own substance and that this involved theological reflection as part of its goals and purposes.

The Basic Issues program, largely conducted during Leon Pacala’s tenure as executive director, had both direct and indirect impact on the development of the Association. One of its most important consequences was that it cemented the relationship between Barbara Wheeler and the Association. Barbara Wheeler and David Kelsey, professor of theology at Yale University Divinity School, were the consultants provided by Lilly Endowment on the program.

Working through Auburn Seminary, New York, where she was president, Barbara Wheeler established perhaps the most significant center for the study of theological education. Its Auburn studies of seminaries have covered topics ranging from faculties to trustees to student debt and have provided a running commentary on the state of theological schools since the 1990s. In addition, through her partnership with Tony Ruger, in some ways Warren Deem's unofficial successor, Wheeler has been able to provide the Association and many individual seminaries with first rate financial analysis. Much of the significance of the Auburn studies was that they provided both a wealth of factual information and a thoughtful analysis of the data. In that sense, they were an invaluable complement to the *Fact Book*, the yearly (now biennial) publication of data about seminaries that the Association has published since 1969.

### **Redeveloped Standards of Accreditation**

The most important direct consequence of the Basic Issues program's decade of sustained thinking was the decision of the Association to undertake a fundamental redevelopment of its accrediting standards in the 1990s. James Waits was executive director at the time. Daniel Aleshire, a former professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, was then associate director for accreditation. The minor revisions of the standards in the 1980s, featuring a greater emphasis on institutional mission, had been one step, but the larger educational world was in the midst of a more fundamental shift. The new emphasis was on accountability.

The larger American educational context in the 1990s was part of what mandated the change. American education had passed through the most sustained period of growth in its history, but American schools were now entering a period of demographic drought. The baby boomers had not had families as large as their parents' families, and all schools were being forced to find new constituencies in order to stay afloat. African Americans and Latinos/as were obvious beneficiaries of these changes, as were students from abroad. The United States had replaced Great Britain as the most desired place for Middle Eastern, African, and Asian students to attend school. But the schools also dug more deeply into their traditional demographics, so most European Americans had at least some college, and almost all white Americans could attend a school, if they so chose.

The problem was that much of this growth had been supported by the belief, encouraged by professional educators, that schooling was the way to a good job and economic prosperity. In other words, schools were as much prized as certifiers of skills and status as they were as educational enterprises. But, as more and more people actually completed the programs, the question naturally arose as to whether education was delivering on its promises. In one sense, the answer was no. No set of human institutions can deliver utopia or prosperity or virtue. But, as the cost of higher education rose almost as rapidly as the cost of health care, the question not only of what was being delivered, but also of what students actually learned, could no longer be ignored.

The redevelopment of the standards was a four-year undertaking, spanning two Biennial Meetings. More than 134 member schools participated in eight regional meetings to discuss the nature of the changes and their implications. The theme of these discussions was “the good theological school.” The title was significant. If the more resource-based traditional standards had been concerned with the adequate theological school, the redeveloped standards were concerned with developing standards that might prod theological schools into a continual quest for improvement. As in the larger, secular accrediting bodies, this was done in a variety of ways. Perhaps because of the fact that so many theological schools had skated on thin financial ice, the new standards kept some of the traditional emphases on resources. But to these traditional emphases, the new standards added a strong emphasis on planning and evaluation and an implicit, but growing, emphasis on learning assessment and outcomes. These standards could align neatly with those of the regional accrediting bodies, almost always now partnered with ATS in accreditation evaluations of schools in the United States, and with the expectations of the federal government. To that extent, they were part of a growing national consensus about how educational institutions should be held accountable both to their own constituencies and to the larger public. Every aspect of a school’s program was to be part of a comprehensive program of planning, evaluation, and assessment.

What was unique about the standards was the emphasis on the theological component of a seminary’s work. Standard 3 puts it succinctly: “A theological school is a community of faith and learning that cultivates habits of theological reflection, nurtures wise and skilled ministerial practice, and contributes to the forma-



tion of spiritual awareness and moral sensitivity.” This definition encompasses much of what makes seminary education distinctive. The standard is teleological, to use a traditional term, in that the ends or goals of seminary life are held to define the means by which those goals are attained. Part of what makes this definition so important is the way that it subtly moves beyond earlier understandings. Theological seminaries, for example, are not universities of religion that are defined by their subject matter; rather, they are defined by their inner nature and their purposes. Neither are seminaries professional schools devoted to passing on “best practices” from one generation of practitioners to another. In David Kelsey’s terms, seminaries are neither Athens nor Berlin. They are places where people engage in sustained, critical, and imaginative thought about human life before God. In the process, they grow toward fuller participation in the church and its ministry. While we cite Standard 3, similar language is found throughout the standards. Even as seemingly prosaic an activity as strategic planning is to be examined and evaluated theologically.

The language of the redeveloped standards defines them as a means for schools to improve themselves; that is, they are a means for good schools to become better schools, always on the way to fulfilling their missions. This implicit and explicit gradualism is important to their function. At different times, different member schools have felt the pinch of the standards in different ways. Initially, planning, evaluation, and governance were often the most important sticking points, but as time has passed, the more difficult task has been the evaluation or assessment of student learning. How do schools know whether what they have taught is, in fact, learned? One can expect the difficult passages on the road to grow as the Association uses and modifies these standards. Part of this modification will come, as it always does, from experience. The redeveloped standards have proven to be adaptable to the changing milieu, as witnessed by changes to the distance education Standard 10.

## **Two Sides of One Coin**

In 2004 the Association took an important and revealing step: the Commission on Accrediting separated from the Association and was given its own legal charter. In part, this was because of federal regulations designed to protect the independence of accrediting agencies from membership organizations, but it was also

because the Association itself had matured. Its research and teaching functions, carefully developed over the years since the Sealantic grants, had increasingly taken on lives of their own. Clearly, the Association was the most important repository of information about the nature, organization, and administrative best practices in theological education, and its executive director was increasingly called upon to interpret this material to both its internal and external publics. The Association was also the place where fundamental questions, such as what was the appropriate relationship of the schools to the churches in an era in which the churches were no longer the school's owners or primary supporters, could be asked and appropriate resources gathered to make the discussion rich and rewarding. And the various leadership education functions of the Association had likewise matured. Seminary chief administrative officers, chief academic officers, chief financial officers, student personnel administrators, new faculty, and development officers passed through its seminars, meetings, and conferences. *Theological Education* was no longer simply an in-house journal. Increasingly, it was the journal of record for theological education. And, perhaps equally importantly, the executive director was the recognized expert on theological education in North America, the person consulted by those who wanted to know what was really happening in the schools and who sought a binational perspective.

At the same time, the accrediting function had matured. Early AATS/ATS accrediting was often little more than filling out a form every two years. Although even the early standards pushed seminaries to become more than they were, it was often a gentle push, more like an ecclesiastical admonition. Today's accreditation, if not yet a science, is an increasing technical enterprise that is in dialogue, not only with schools, but equally importantly, with the government and regional agencies. And much more is at stake in the decisions. Few seminaries could survive without federal student aid, for example, and that aid is dependent on the schools maintaining a program accredited by an agency recognized by the federal government. The accreditation agencies are themselves periodically reviewed and recognized. Accreditation remains one of the most powerful ways to bring about needed change, and it has already moved the schools, to be sure often slowly, toward numerous advances including greater gender and racial diversity, especially in faculty positions. The first woman president of the Association was Barbara Brown Zikmund, elected in 1986, and the first African American, James Costen, was elected in 1996.

## Foundations

In many ways, The Association of Theological Schools is the house that the foundations built. From the early Sealantic grants to the present, the Association has received significant moneys from various foundations, especially Lilly Endowment and the Luce Foundation. Many of its most successful emphases and projects, including its commitment to faculty development and scholarship, would not have been possible without the money that these benefactors so generously provided. ATS has been fortunate to receive support from a number of generous funders. Those listed in this narrative represent a significant share, though not the full spectrum of benefactors. But the contributions of the foundations were not merely financial. Many foundation executives, including such thoughtful leaders as Robert Lynn, Michael Gilligan, and Craig Dykstra, have contributed their personal expertise and significant amounts of time to the Association and to its officers. Why? How does an organization like AATS/ATS attract the support of such influential and informed people? The historian is tempted to attribute this to the skills and persuasiveness of the people who served as executive directors: Charles Taylor, Jesse Ziegler, Leon Pacala, James Waits, and Daniel Aleshire. And to be sure, raising money is always providing a cause with a human face. But, we must be careful not to attribute to personality or executive skills consequences that may also have structural explanations. The fact of the matter is that theological education in North America is a somewhat chaotic assortment of generally small institutions scattered across the face of Canada and the United States. If one wanted to help them as a group to raise the general level of theological education and not simply to improve this or that school, the Association was and is the primary means to accomplish that end. ATS has the position, the power—largely conveyed by its role in accreditation—and the contacts to enable one contribution to influence many schools. Had the great foundations had to deal with theological education one school at a time, far less could have been accomplished for the whole. How could the foundations, for instance, develop a school by school or even scholar by scholar replacement for the current Lilly Endowment and Luce Foundation faculty grants programs or a school by school substitute for the seminars for incoming presidents? What is remarkable is that both the philanthropic leaders and the leaders of the Association, despite some times when they found themselves in deep disagreement, were able to agree that the Association was a key place to discuss these questions and to broker their understandings of theological education.

## Who is ATS?

My first outline of this historical sketch was organized rather prosaically around the various executive directors and foundation executives. As I have dug deeper, without denigrating the contributions of these leaders, I came to the conclusion that the real actors in the history of AATS/ATS were the schools that made up the larger body and their response to their own sense of need and status. AATS/ATS was an agent of change for the schools, and the schools in turn changed the Association. Even after ninety years, it remains a fascinating story.

What of the future? Since biblical times, historians have been much better at recording the sayings of the prophets than at prophecy. Increased government regulation may, at some point, make peer-based accreditation less important or may even replace it altogether with a national system, similar to those in Germany or France. The new technology may make possible a reduction in the number of theological schools with only a few schools surviving as centers of vast educational networks, completely unbound by spatial location. Or, especially among the mainstream churches, alternatives to the graduate professional seminary may be developed that make the schools, or those that remain open, much more elite institutions. Many candidates for ministry are already struggling with serious problems of educational debt that cannot be easily passed on to their congregations. Clearly, public certification will be needed by many of America's new religions, especially as their leaders seek to have a religious presence in hospitals and the military. And the growth of bivocational ministry means that theological degrees may have to certify a broad band of knowledge and skills. One thing is certain: the future will be different from the past, and ATS will be part of that future.

## A Note on Sources

To my knowledge, this is the first attempt to tell the story of the Association from the beginning. The first part of the story is told in Glenn T. Miller, *Piety and Profession* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007). In addition, I had the important and very informative histories by Jesse Ziegler, *ATS Through Two Decades: Reflections on Theological Education 1960–1980* (Vandalia, Ohio: The Association of Theological Schools, 1984) and Leon Pacala, *The Role of ATS in Theological Education 1980–1990* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholar's Press, 1998). The lat-

ter was particularly useful because of the high quality of the theological reflection that Leon Pacala included in his narrative. Neely Dixon McCarter, *The President as Educator: A Study of the Seminary Presidency* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholar's Press, 1996) was very important in understanding the transition to the chief executive officer model that ATS did so much to encourage.

The rest of the material had to be uncovered the old-fashioned way. I was fortunate to have a long and extensive interview with Daniel Aleshire about the last ten years and two very rewarding interviews with Fred Hofheinz and Robert Wood Lynn, both formerly of The Lilly Endowment staff. Past issues of *Theological Education*, the official journal of the Association, provided much information about the Association's programs and, in particular, its aims and purposes. The publications of the Association, including *Colloquy*, the *Fact Book*, and *Seminary Development News*, provided much information, both direct and indirect, about what I have called the Association's style of theological education.

There are many resources that I did not have time to read and master as thoroughly as I would have liked. Clearly, the correspondence of the various executive directors would provide needed insights into a variety of questions, including the influence of the foundations, and the crates of self-studies and the correspondence of the Commission contain much information that would fill out the story. In particular, careful study of the Commission correspondence might provide an answer to the question of how ATS and its directives were regarded on the field. But this work has to await another day and a full narrative.

There are some areas of the story that may be confused. This is not the fault of my sources and informants, but of my own lack of skills and time to do more research. The alphabet soup of organizations and agencies that relate accrediting agencies to the government is still, alas, somewhat of a mystery to me, although I am more sure of the overall effects of those bodies on theological education than I am of their interrelationships. If I err here, I will make my offerings to the offending party or parties when the opportunity comes.

Glenn T. Miller





1918 Conference of Theological Schools  
Cambridge, Massachusetts



The Association of Theological Schools  
The Commission on Accrediting