

# Student religious and denominational affiliation trends in ATS schools

By KRISTINA LIZARDY-HAJBI

*This is the first of two articles exploring denominational and religious affiliations of students in ATS schools. Thanks to new guidelines created by the Research and Data Advisory Committee under the direction of Deborah H. C. Gin, director of research and faculty development at ATS, individuals may request data for their own research and scholarship. Learn more about ATS data requests and data sharing at <https://www.ats.edu/new-research-opportunities>*



Over the past several years, the United States and Canada have experienced increases in both religiously and denominationally unaffiliated individuals, as well as people from a variety of religious traditions other than Christianity. According to the Pew Research Center, the percentage of people unaffiliated with a religious tradition in the US increased from 16% in 2007 to 22% in 2014. Over the same time period, the percentage of people affiliated with a non-Christian religion increased from 4% to 6%.<sup>1</sup> Pew reported similar findings in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

1 Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," May 12, 2015, available at <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

2 Pew Research Center, "5 Facts About Religion in Canada," July 1, 2019, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/01/5-facts-about-religion-in-canada/>.

On the whole, theological schools have also experienced similar increases over the last 20 years. While schools traditionally have been designed to prepare religiously and denominationally related persons for ministry and leadership, largely congruent with the denominational affiliations of the schools themselves, many ATS schools are finding more students in their classrooms with no connection to a particular denomination or tradition, affiliation with multiple denominations or traditions, or affiliation with a non-Christian tradition.<sup>3</sup>

What is the nature and scope of these trends within theological schools? In analyzing ATS data from the past 20 years, the following six key findings shed some light on these affiliation trends within theological schools.

3 Nancy T. Ammerman, "America's Changing Religious and Cultural Landscape and its Implications for Theological Education," *Theological Education*, 49, no. 1 (2014): 27-34.

**1. Three (3) out of every ten students identify in one of the following ways:**

- **Nondenominational**
- **Inter/multi-denominational**
- **Buddhist**
- **Jewish**
- **Muslim**
- **Other<sup>4</sup>**

In other words, 30% of all ATS students are either non-religiously or denominationally affiliated, inter/multi-affiliated, or non-Christian affiliated. Twenty years ago, only two out of every ten students (19%) identified with one of these alternative affiliation categories.

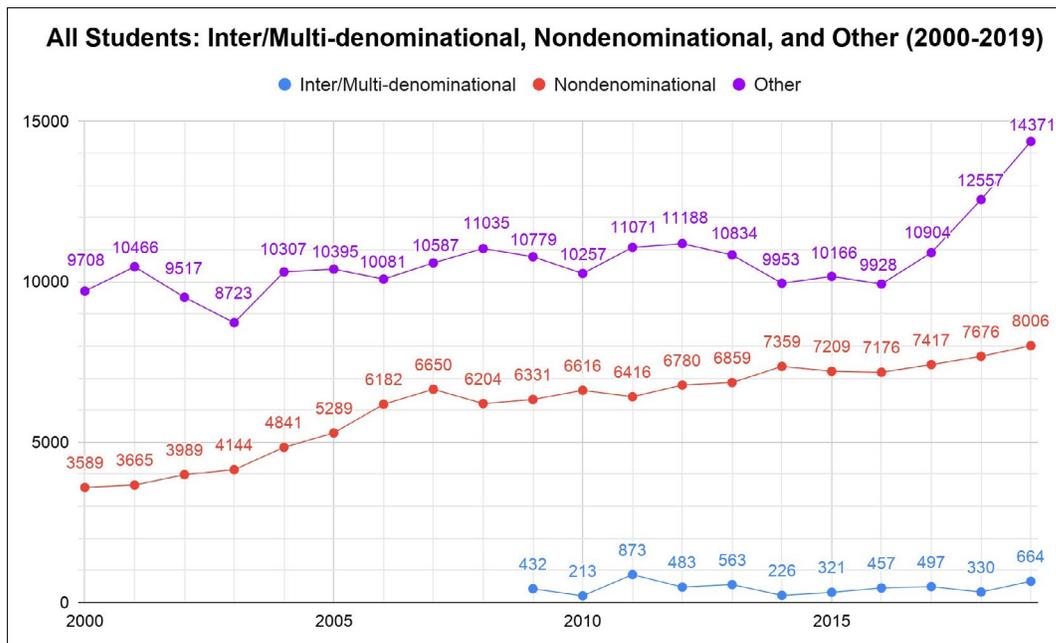
**2. Within these six categories of alternative affiliation, the group containing the greatest number of students consistently over time is “Other.”**

Students with this designation increased by 48% from 2000 to 2019.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to surmise what precisely is included in this particular identification and also safe

to assume that there are likely several sub-categories included in this category, including students in discernment or transition regarding denomination and/or religious identity and students identified with a denomination that may not possess its own category in ATS reporting.

“Nondenominational” is the second largest category of students, more than doubling from 2000 to 2019. It may be that these students identify as Christian but are not affiliated with a particular denomination. There are several ATS schools that also identify as nondenominational, so it is not surprising that students would identify in this way as well.

A newer category, “Inter/Multi-denominational,” was introduced into ATS reporting in 2009, though the numbers have been modest compared to the former two categories. This population has increased gradually over time, but it is unclear what types of affiliations students possess under this identification.



4 “Inter/multidenominational” and “Buddhist” were not added to ATS categories until 2009.

5 In fact, according to a recent report by ATS Director of Accreditation Tom Tanner, “Other” is the single largest category, more than any denominational tradition, in terms of student numbers, and the second largest in terms of MDiv students. Source: “Reports of the MDiv’s death are greatly exaggerated,” *Colloquy Online* (January 2019), available at: <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/colloquy-online/reports-of-the-mdiv-death.pdf>

**3. Muslim and Buddhist students within ATS schools have experienced the greatest growth rates within the six categories of alternative affiliation.**

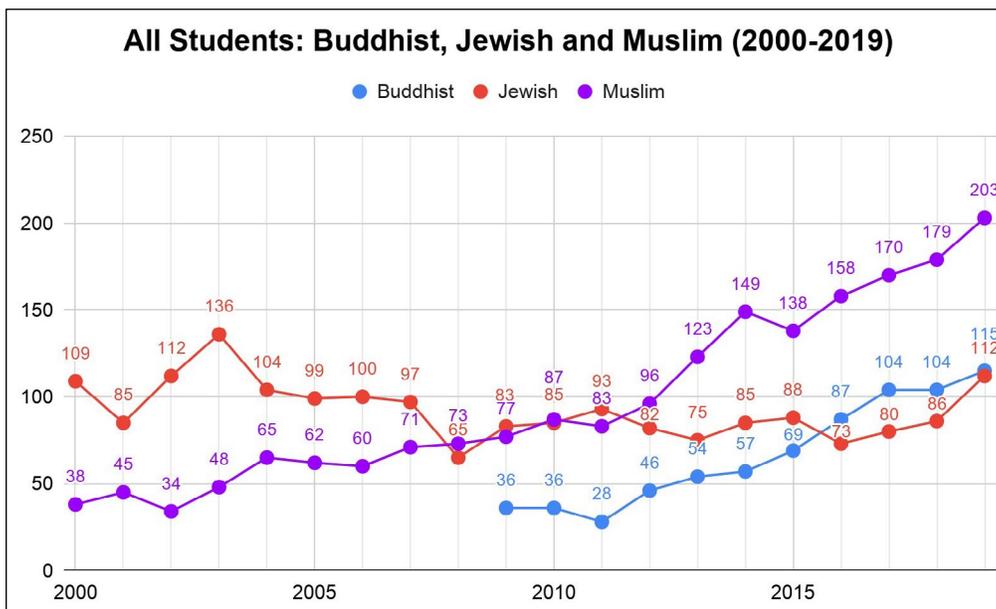
From 38 students in 2000 to 203 students in 2019, the rate of increase for Muslims surpassed rates for every other group except for Buddhists. In just the decade that Buddhist students have been tracked by ATS, they have more than tripled in number. Both of these groups of students still represent just a fraction of the total enrollment, but their rapid growth within ATS schools is noteworthy and reflects larger societal trends. The trend for Jewish students has remained relatively steady over time, even with the addition of the first Jewish theological school to ATS membership in recent years.

**4. When looking only at MDiv degree students, those identifying as “Other” increased at a significantly greater rate than the total population of ATS students over the last 20 years.**

“Other” MDiv students experienced a 116% increase compared to 48% for all students. Overall, however, a greater percentage of MDiv students identified with a single specific denomination (74%) when compared with all students (69%).

**5. Students from all six alternative affiliation categories are found in schools from each of the three ecclesial families: Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, and Roman Catholic/Orthodox.**

There are important nuances to consider for each ecclesial school grouping; however, alternative affiliation patterns of students largely reflected those found for all ATS students, with “Other” and “Nondenominational” categories comprising the largest share of students.



**Number and Percentage of Students by Ecclesial Family (2019)**

| Affiliation        | Evangelical Protestant |            | Mainline Protestant |            | Roman Catholic/Orthodox |            |
|--------------------|------------------------|------------|---------------------|------------|-------------------------|------------|
|                    | Number                 | Percentage | Number              | Percentage | Number                  | Percentage |
| Buddhist           | 2                      | 0.0%       | 88                  | 2.3%       | 25                      | 1.6%       |
| Inter/Multi-denom. | 558                    | 3.1%       | 98                  | 2.6%       | 8                       | 0.5%       |
| Jewish             | 5                      | 0.0%       | 46                  | 1.2%       | 20                      | 1.3%       |
| Muslim             | 5                      | 0.0%       | 175                 | 4.7%       | 23                      | 1.5%       |
| Nondenominational  | 6690                   | 36.9%      | 946                 | 25.3%      | 370                     | 24.0%      |
| Other              | 10882                  | 60.0%      | 2392                | 63.9%      | 1097                    | 71.1%      |

**6. Even though the number of alternatively affiliated students increased over time, not all schools reported increases.**

In general, an increased distribution of Evangelical Protestant and Mainline Protestant schools reported in these six categories between 2000 and 2019; but the distribution of Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools reporting alternative affiliations decreased across the board.

enrolled at Evangelical Protestant schools and more Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim students are enrolled at Mainline Protestant schools. What is surprising, however, is that all schools from each of the ecclesial families reported students from all six categories of alternative affiliation, no matter how minimal. How each school creates learning environments in which students with diverse affiliations, relative to the school's tradition(s), are incorporated into the whole life of the institution may

be a significant factor in ensuring a thriving academic setting and future societal relevance. Lastly, for schools that are experiencing significant

**Percentage of Schools Reporting by Ecclesial Family**

| Affiliation        | Evangelical Protestant |         | Mainline Protestant |         | Roman Catholic/Orthodox |         |
|--------------------|------------------------|---------|---------------------|---------|-------------------------|---------|
|                    | 2008-09                | 2018-19 | 2008-09             | 2018-19 | 2008-09                 | 2018-19 |
| Buddhist           | 0.0%                   | 0.8%    | 7.3%                | 18.6%   | 7.1%                    | 3.1%    |
| Inter/Multi-denom. | 17.8%                  | 25.2%   | 18.9%               | 25.2%   | 8.9%                    | 0.2%    |
| Jewish             | 6.9%                   | 3.2%    | 21.0%               | 18.6%   | 10.7%                   | 4.6%    |
| Muslim             | 0.0%                   | 0.8%    | 13.6%               | 23.0%   | 8.9%                    | 4.6%    |
| Nondenominational  | 71.2%                  | 62.6%   | 64.2%               | 64.8%   | 28.5%                   | 18.7%   |
| Other              | 77.2%                  | 82.1%   | 78.9%               | 85.7%   | 42.8%                   | 40.6%   |

**Conclusions**

There is much to consider when observing these trends within ATS schools over time. First, more students are unaffiliating or alternatively affiliating denominationally, whether within the Christian tradition or beyond. While this is not a new pattern within theological schools, it is not a trend that will diminish in the future. Gaining deeper insights into why these students seek theological education and working to meet their learning and vocational needs will be important considerations as schools navigate toward continued sustainability.

Second, different ecclesial families tend to have greater numbers of students with particular affiliations. It is not surprising that more nondenominational students are

increases in the number of students with alternative affiliations, it will be important to gather and report best practices and lessons learned so that other schools may gain wisdom and insight into navigating this specific change impacting theological education on the whole. Even though theological schools are not experiencing affiliation changes at the same scale as North America at large, schools are being impacted nonetheless. It will be critical for leaders to creatively consider, navigate, and/or adapt to these impacts while honoring each institution's particular traditions and contexts.

*This is the first of two articles on religious affiliation trends in higher education. The second article will focus on specific denominational changes in the ATS student population over time.*



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