

CONVERSATION GROUPS

Changing Seminaries, Changing Libraries, Changing Selves

By Megan E. Welsh, University of Colorado Boulder; Patrick Milas, Princeton Theological Seminary

ABSTRACT Religious identities and practices are changing. Religious studies and theological educators are adapting curricula and services to support increasingly diverse student populations. On an institutional level, some religious studies departments and seminaries' priorities are changing, too.

For example, Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS) remains one of ten seminaries of the Presbyterian Church (USA), but currently, only 28% of students identify as PCUSA personally and over fifty Christian traditions are represented, reflecting a trend toward ecumenism. ATS-accredited institutions have faculty and students whose faiths are outside of Judeo-Christian traditions, principal traditions that comprise the ATLA membership. Additionally, there is increased representation from secular institutions (e.g., University of Colorado Boulder) and organizations not affiliated with specific denominations within ATLA membership.

It's time for librarians to share with each other their perceptions of their institutions' relationships with students, administrations, and denominations, as well as where they fit within ATLA personally.

SUMMARY

The conversation group facilitators introduced background information, including historical information about the founding of ATLA and more recent demographic data which describes ATLA membership trends. Additionally, attendees were provided with a paper copy of a handout and a [link to a live, electronic version of the handout](#) with this information and question prompts.

Responses to a Kahoot quiz helped the facilitators to quickly identify who was in the room. Through this low stakes and interactive medium, attendees disclosed which settings they were from, the faith traditions with which they were affiliated, whether their personal religious affiliation matched that of their institution, and how important they considered the differences between personal and institutional affiliations to be.

Much of the session focused on an engaging conversation where many people from a variety of institutions contributed. There were four initial conversation prompts:

1. What is your understanding of why ATLA was founded?
2. What is the relationship between personal religious belief and the affiliation with our institutions? With our students?
3. What are the relationships between members' personal religious identities and ATLA denominational groups?
4. How can our personal identities strengthen the community in which we work?

The last question received much attention from the group. Attendees recognized that ATLA members come from a variety of institutions, though there was an acknowledgment that some librarians consider their work to be a ministry or a vocation. Some attendees described their work as being a service to their communities, and they said that religious language is a convenient and appropriate way to frame their views towards librarianship. Yet, attendees also acknowledged the conflation between the concept of Theology/Religion and Christianity, the dominant religion among ATLA membership and the United States. This is problematic considering the greater religious diversity among the patrons we serve and that ATLA membership is becoming more diverse. It takes effort, often from the minority (some

of whom may not visibly express their religious identities), to explain differences and counteract preconceived notions around religious diversity.

This conversation group demonstrated the necessity of continuing conversations among ATLA members around issues of religious identity, what religion means to the membership and the organization, and how, as an organization, we can support the diverse religious identities present. We must also acknowledge that people approach ATLA from different frameworks and for different purposes. For some, librarianship and ATLA involvement is a vocation, while for others it is primarily a means of networking and professional development. Let us remember the unique identities which make ATLA a robust and caring community of dedicated librarians.