

So Your School is Becoming More Religiously Diverse...

Drew Baker, MLIS, PhD
Assistant Library Director and Head of Technical Services
Claremont School of Theology

Beth Larkee Kumar, MLIS, EdM
Head of Reference Services
Graduate Theological Union

T. Patrick Milas, MLIS, PhD
Director of the Gardner A. Sage Library
New Brunswick Theological Seminary

ABSTRACT Over the past decade, many Atla-member institutions have become increasingly religiously diverse. From larger actions like starting new interreligious programs or partnering with other institutions to smaller steps like changing branding and programming, many institutions have actively sought to become more ecumenical and/or interreligious and attract more students from religious traditions beyond the institutions' particular historical traditions. Given this reality, how can librarians at these schools adapt to serve their increasingly religiously diverse students better? What do librarians whose institutions are moving in more ecumenical or interreligious directions need to consider? From collection development to reference and instruction, this panel reflected on this topic as the panelists raised important questions and provided helpful, practical advice based on their experiences at their institutions.

All three panelists are part of the World Religions Interest Group (WRIG) of Atla. More information on WRIG is at <https://www.atla.com/learning-engagement/groups/ig/wrig/>

BACKGROUND OF EACH SCHOOL

New Brunswick Theological Seminary

At New Brunswick Theological Seminary, we have been increasingly diverse since the 1970s, but that increased diversity has been primarily related to denomination, race, and gender. As the oldest Protestant seminary in the United States, we have a rich history of preparing white men for ordained ministry in the Reformed Church in America, our parent denomination, since 1784. We are humbled to now prepare predominantly women of color for myriad career paths in many denominations and non-profits. It's religious diversity where we are most excited to grow next. In spirit and institutional culture, we have been embracing interfaith sensibilities for years, but the collection development policies pertain directly to the curriculum. Without curricular change, collection changes can be difficult to justify with faculty and administrators. We are just beginning to consider the implications of two new opportunities to expand the scope of our traditional collection development practices. The opportunities both relate to newly accredited degree programs, an ATS-accredited academic MA that affords space for interfaith studies, and a regionally-accredited professional MA that can prepare folks for interfaith chaplaincy with state licensure in counseling. We are eager to gradually select more interfaith items, but we don't know what they are yet.

Claremont School of Theology

Throughout its history, Claremont School of Theology has been at the forefront of seminaries seeking to become more religiously diverse. Beginning with a deep ecumenical Christian spirit in 1885, CST was one of the first seminaries in the United States to explicitly welcome non-Christian students. In the past ten years (coinciding with my time at CST), CST has made significant progress in becoming a more religiously diverse institution—with more diverse faculty, staff, students, messaging, events, partnerships, and programs.

Much like other institutions, the growth in religious diversity at CST began with students; as CST's student body became increasingly religiously diverse, the institution (and the library) looked to improve its services to meet this diversity. In the library, we have adopted several intentional strategies to serve our increasingly diverse

students better. We have sought expertise among our staff, faculty, student workers, as well as outside the institution. This expertise has helped us improve our collections, reference, and instruction related to traditions beyond mainline Christianity. We have reevaluated dominant approaches to topics like information literacy and research training (which favor “scholarly” and “textual” sources) that might distort or conceal some non-Christian traditions. Instead, we focused on the diverse contexts of sources for research. We have worked to listen to the voices of our religious minority students so that we can address their needs better. Our staff has taken seminars on topics like microaggression training so that we can help create a more welcoming and inclusive space. We have developed partnerships with local experts and practitioners to create displays that honor and feature many different traditions within our community. We have made significant progress and yet there is much more work to be done.

Graduate Theological Union

The Graduate Theological Union formed in 1962 with what was, at the time, a bold idea. Seminaries of different denominations, who had worked together in the past, decided to formally cooperate by combining collections to become a single library while remaining individually accredited institutions with their separate faculties, students, and staff. The seminaries were all physically located near each other in the Holy Hill neighborhood, and most were founded in the mid-to-late 1800s. This consolidated library would support graduate theological education and promote ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

Ecumenical from the start with eight seminaries (Catholic, Protestant, and Unitarian), the GTU established a Center for Jewish Studies fifty years ago. Since then, the GTU expanded its interreligious connections, affiliating with the Institute of Buddhist Studies in 1985, opening a Center for Islamic Studies in 2007, and founding a Center for Dharma Studies in 2015. With students from nearly every branch of religion (and others which are none), the GTU has become a hub of diversity in the already diverse city of Berkeley, California.

However, there are still silos to break down, as each tradition coexists side-by-side, with primarily the students in the consortial PhD program learning about religions other than their own. The Divinity students (MDiv & DMin) still mostly take courses from their

own seminaries and with people of their own faith. The library remains the only consortial campus space that every student can call their own.

As such, the GTU librarians have been at the center of religious diversity, first with our collections. The original library collection formed when the eight seminaries physically merged and cataloged their books and journals, and continued with the current collection development policy encompassing the religions, both traditional faiths and new religious movements. Today, we are asking more questions beyond the books, in order to be inclusive and welcoming to all.

QUESTIONS

Each of us on the panel has taken a role in our institutions where we can shape the services and collections of our libraries and have a voice with the campus administration. However, we don't have a one-size-fits-all solution, since each campus and each religion has different needs within the library.

We've developed a list of questions that we have asked ourselves to continue the conversation about inclusivity in our libraries. The first and most obvious area of diversity to measure is the collection—but the collection is often a reflection of the current and historical student and faculty population, i.e., courses taught in the past. It may not reflect the future of the seminary or the composition of the employees and their faith traditions.

Our questions include:

- Should the permanent art collection be more neutral, such as florals instead of images of Jesus?
- How are holidays recognized in the library displays and social media? Do we celebrate and decorate for them all or none?
- Do any of your staff meetings begin with a prayer, Bible reading, or song?
- What foods can we serve at staff events and meetings to accommodate all the religious preferences? Should we serve vegetarian food only?
- What is your policy on faith-based work restrictions—such as specific holidays off when the library is open?
- How can our workshops, instruction sessions, and LibGuides use

more diverse examples to teach, and when is it best to teach to the majority?

- How can reference librarians be expected to answer questions about religions they do not know anything about, or possibly have never heard of?
- How can you best utilize religious or foreign language expertise in your staff, including your student employees?
- Is it possible to have an interfaith or interreligious prayer/meditation room? Or is it just a multi-faith room, as individuals are silently praying alone?
- Does your library or campus send out Christmas cards or have a Christmas tree? Do you feature other traditions in a display?
- Would your staff be receptive to an interreligious or microaggression training session?
- How can you handle changes without upsetting the majority/traditional denomination or perspective at your library? (Change is scary!)

CONCLUSIONS AND PROGRESS

While we don't have all the answers, we believe we are progressing toward a more inclusive and welcoming place to people of all faiths. There isn't a single correct way to serve your students and staff as they diversify, but asking questions and brainstorming solutions is a start. The important part is that you and your library are open to asking questions and starting an interreligious dialog. Whether these conversations include partnering with external faith leaders, or you begin discussions as a staff, the essential part is to remain inclusive and welcoming, even when you don't necessarily know the right things to do.