
The Atla Committee for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Conversation with Jeannine Hill Fletcher's "The Promising Practice of Antiracist Approaches to Interfaith Studies"

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ABSTRACT In this conversation session, the Atla Committee for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion guided conversation between Atla members and Jeannine Hill Fletcher's essay, "The Promising Practice of Antiracist Approaches to Interfaith Studies." We examined Atla's history of diversity efforts and initiatives and looked forward to potential futures. The purpose of this conversation session was to better understand the history of Atla within the religious and racial history of the US, reflect on the institutions that make up religious studies and theological education, and identify ways to advance Atla's affirmation of the intrinsic value of all members.

Over the past few months, the DEI committee has spent a considerable amount of time examining the history of Atla in light of the current changes in theological education and the possibilities of our future. We invited the conversation session participants to reflect with us on some of the same questions that we have been contemplating.

As we move forward together in this conversation, it is important that we highlight a few of the spaces that we think are important.

First, we approach this time together as a space for growth. As we heard in Dr. Yamada's opening plenary, theological education is at a time of change and one of those changes is that our student bodies increasingly look different from the way they have over the last 100 years. Our students are older, they are more diverse in their ethnic and racial backgrounds, they are more diverse in their religious beliefs and denominational belonging, and they are more diverse in their career goals. So, as we come to this space to consider the history and possibilities of theological librarianship and Atla going forward, one of the things we want to recognize is that this is a space for growth.

Second, we see this time together as a time for conversation. We recognize that many of us come from different experiences and different types of institutions as well as different expectations of what it means to be a theological educator and what it means to be a librarian. We hope that this space is one that can be thoughtful and experimental. As we move forward in this conversation, we hope to use your conversation and comments to shape the future work of the DEI committee at Atla. While we are not expecting you to necessarily put your name or your institution behind the comments and questions that you might have today, we will use them to help us better understand the needs of our members in the organization and to inform the ways that the DEI committee might better serve Atla's membership.

Finally, as we will see, the folks who are in this room today and participating in this conversation will be, by virtue of being theological librarians, largely whiter and more Protestant or Christian than is probably reflected in many of our institutional demographics. It is important to raise this reality at the beginning of our conversation to name the fact that the dominant perspective in this room is one that has largely benefited from and contributed to the theological histories of majority cultures in the United States. In other words, in so far as theological education, and we might add librarianship, has benefited from the religious and racial landscape of the US, it has also contributed to it in significant ways.

One of the opportunities for reflection that we want to bring into this conversation today is a chance to think through or to anticipate the ways in which theological education may look different 20, 30, or 40 years from now, in the same way that theological education looks different today than it looked 20, 30, or 40 years ago. In other words, we assume, in line with Dr. Yamada's comments, that the future of theological education is *already* less white, less Protestant, and less pulpit-oriented than it has been in the past. In order to remain in theological spaces and theological conversations in the future, Atla will by necessity look different than it did when it was founded. One only needs to consider the collections within *Atla RDB* to see how Atla has developed, expanded, and changed over time. However, we recognize that many of us in this conversation today come to this topic from places within or adjacent to the majority perspective. Additionally, we recognize that DEI includes more than racial and religious diversity, but for the purposes of the conversation today, that is where we will focus most of our energy.

As we embark on the discussion about where Atla might be shifting regarding the future of theological education, we would do well to reflect on the history of Atla as an organization. Thankfully Susan Ebertz has done a good deal of work to help us understand Atla's historical membership and diversity profile. In her work in *Theological Librarianship* examining Atla's membership at 65 years and 75 years, Ebertz brings to light the demographic diversity of Atla. Among the many findings are some that are important to highlight at the top of our conversation today. Ebertz finds that America's population is 60% white and 40% Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). By contrast, ATS populations are even more white than the national average. ATS populations are 81% white and 19% BIPOC. This is across the board at all member schools. Within the individual membership survey, the percentages are even lower among librarians than they are among ATS faculty and students. In other words, one of the key findings of Ebertz's work is that theological librarianship as a field is whiter than our students and faculty, which are themselves whiter, and anecdotally more Protestant, than the national averages.

One of the implications of this that becomes evident is that there's a good deal of work to be done not only to bring theological education in line with the lived experiences of many people in the North

American context but to bring theological librarianship in line with those experiences as well. We must work to ensure that our libraries actually reflect the diversity that makes up our communities. How will these metrics look at Atla's 85th or 95th anniversaries? This question is not one that is new to Atla, as we can go back to the 1990s to see that Atla as an organization has been well aware of the challenges related to diversity within its ranks and that the awareness of those challenges is an important part of the story of Atla's history.

The following data comes from Gillian Harrison Cain's historical review of the Atla diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and initiatives. This history goes back to when the DEI committee of Atla was first imagined. Gillian organizes this history into four waves that I think are useful for thinking about the history of Atla.

First, she recognizes a period of focus on racial diversity from 1999 to 2007. During this period, the Board allocated endowment funds to recruit members from minority communities and added related language to the organizational ends.

The second wave was a time of concentrated effort to develop ethnically and racially diverse leadership among the membership of Atla. That period lasted from 2008 to 2011. It saw the establishment of a special committee on diversity, which compiled reports on diversity initiatives in other associations and received scholarship applications for students from minority communities. During this time, the definition of diversity was also broadened beyond racial diversity to include underrepresented and minority communities (Cain 2020, 3).

The third wave, stretching from 2013 to 2015, can be categorized as a redoubled effort on continued discussion of DEI as well as the development of related programs including sponsored conversation groups on diversity, guided tours of ethnically diverse neighborhoods, and pre-conference sessions on racial equity in theological librarianship (Cain 2020, 5). Such programming complimented the work of other Atla members and groups like the World Religions Interest Group. During this period and the fourth wave, Atla has sponsored interreligious field trips and worship services as well as interreligious programming.

Finally, from 2015 to the present (or perhaps 2020), the charge was again updated to explicitly include within its definitions the diversity of race, culture, age, career stage/experience, sexual orientation, gender expression, religious tradition, and socio-economic difference (Cain 2020, 5). Atla has continued to focus attention on questions of interreligious and interfaith dialogue and research in both the membership and the products, looking for ways to further incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion by increasing programming and scheduled conference sessions (Cain 2020, 5). It is clear that Atla understands diversity, equity, and inclusion to be part of the core values of our organization.

As we turn now to the possibilities of an anti-racist interfaith future for Atla and theological education, it is important to remember that Atla's DEI values have been expressly part of our organization for nearly 30 years. This work has, in many ways, been motivated by more precise understandings of our membership as well as the changing landscape of the students and the institutions that we serve. Again, the theological landscape of 1999 looked different from the landscape of 1946 and, as Frank Yamada pointed out in his plenary address, the future of theological education is one in which the students of tomorrow look radically different from the students of today. Our future largely depends on our ability to meet the needs of those students and researchers. Here is where we enter into what Jeaninne Hill Fletcher calls the promising practice of antiracist approaches to interfaith studies. Her argument is one that the DEI committee found particularly helpful over the last few months and is where we invite you into some conversation around the topic.

In her essay, the "Promising Practice of Antiracist Interfaith Studies," Jeannine Hill Fletcher articulates a history of theological education in the United States that is deeply embedded within a particular type of educational and racial project throughout US history. In short, she argues that theological education was part and parcel of a larger attempt to Christianize the "New World." This approach to education was one that in many ways had the explicit goal of bringing people of many different backgrounds in line with a largely European Christian understanding of God and religious practice. Hill Fletcher, however, is quick to recognize that the dominant narrative of this particular religio-cultural educational system is not one that has gone unchallenged. She articulates that

for as long as this particular vision of education has been around there have been individuals and movements that have resisted the flattening of religious understanding and theological experience to a white Protestant European model of belief.

This dominant refrain, according to Hill Fletcher, meets resistance in the works of individuals like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and many others. The very fact that this resistance exists historically gives us hope that the way things have been in the past is not necessarily the way things have to be in the future. In other words, what feels natural in many cases to some of us is not necessarily inevitable. Models for religious practice and even theological education outside of White Protestant European models are as American as any other. Nevertheless, the dominant one is often assumed to be a white Protestant European one.

In response, Hill Fletcher suggests that interfaith dialogue and interreligious education can actually be a way that theological educators shape the future of religious and racial realities. She says, “Interfaith studies may be one way in which the religio-racial project of theological education can reflect the diversity of the American experience” (Hill Fletcher 2018, 143). In other words, by focusing our attention beyond the experiences and beliefs of white Protestant European Americans, we have an opportunity to complexify our understanding of the world. (As an aside, we do not think we have to look far afield from the work of Atla and its members to be convinced of this claim). Finally, Hill Fletcher suggests that interfaith studies can be one of the tools that theological educators use to form a country that is religiously literate and positively responsive to the diversity reflected in the nation (Hill Fletcher 2018, 145). This work does not just happen but rather requires attention and self-reflection.

And so, here Atla sits. Collecting information and connecting people related to religion and theology. In many ways, Atla is *already* poised at the intersection of what Hill Fletcher describes. We believe that it is possible to leverage this situation by providing information to the world about religious and theological topics while also attending to the diversity that is already in our own midst and which is reflected in our institutions.

As this session was a conversation session, we continued by asking participants to think about ways that we might begin challenging

our role within this shifting theological landscape. We asked them to think about how Atla has, should, and could respond to an increasingly diverse religious landscape in the future. We asked our participants to consider how Atla might respond or might flex to this future. Below are the four questions which we proposed to our in-person and online audience, and which we now propose to you. The questions are ones Hill Fletcher raises for us. We broke up into four groups to address the questions and each group used post-it notes to put their ideas on the wall. We asked our participants (and we ask you) to think about them in relation to Atla and their own institution. Keep in mind that there is a subtle distinction between the second and third questions that has to do with our moral and ethical values as an organization. That is to say, what we think of regarding what Atla, as a member organization, *should* do in the future may very well be different from what it *might* or *could* do in the future. In what ways do you feel Atla has engaged or not engaged with these questions?

QUESTIONS

- 1) What have we learned from our history? Where does Atla fit into the history of the United States as a White Christian Nation? How has structural dispossession and generational inheritance shaped the current religio-racial landscape of Atla?
- 2) Mapping our power structure: Who holds the resources in Atla and in your own institution? What are the religious affiliations within our leadership structure and our committees? Is there diverse religious representation on our Board and on our staff? How is your own religious affiliation related to Atla's resource-holding individuals/structures?
- 3) Gatekeeping: Where do you have power to inform the knowledge production of Atla? Where do you have power in relation to the material resources of Atla? And where do you have power in relation to Atla's political resources?
- 4) Sharing Culture: How can the work of Atla inform the creation of a multiracial, multireligious culture? What sites of resistance to the creation of a multiracial, multireligious culture (theologically, politically, socially, practically) do you see in Atla? What would you like to see Atla do more of?

SUMMARY

The questions presented to participants in the conversation session resulted in as many, if not more, questions than answers. A variety of types of responses can be found throughout the feedback. For some, the questions prompted reflections on the institutions in which members participate. Most often, these institutions can be described as Atla or the educational institution at which the member works. Some questions prompted reflections on the membership and leadership demographics of Atla. Several acknowledged the role that white Protestant Christian men have played in the organization and reflected on ways that Atla might respond to opportunities for diversity in its body. Another common reflection stemmed from the nature of theology libraries. Do they have responsibilities toward Christian belief, history, and praxis, or is there opportunity to expand beyond this focus? This question was especially pertinent toward Atla and its products, like *Atla RDB*. These questions and reflections fit well within Atla's Organizational Ends and require further elucidation by the DEI Committee and related programming.

CONCLUSION

As we reflect on Hill Fletcher's call to reshape interfaith studies in ways that dismantle religio-racial hierarchies and foster a truly multiracial and multireligious society, Atla's Organizational Ends provide both a compass and a charge for how we, as theological librarians, can respond. Organizational End 1.5 says, "Members are equipped to successfully navigate the changing landscape." Hill Fletcher challenges us to confront colonial legacies and systemic inequities—this is the changing landscape we must be prepared for. Atla's commitment to equipping members means we are not alone. We are developing tools, language, and community to do this work with intentionality and resilience. Organizational End 2.1 says, "Members have support to preserve, describe, and share collections." However, preservation is not just about safeguarding books, it is about whose voices we choose to preserve. Descriptive practices are acts of power. Hill Fletcher reminds us that interfaith work must be antiracist. That means interrogating our metadata, expanding our collections, and amplifying silenced narratives. Organizational End 3.1 asserts that, "Members are included as partners in religious and theological

education.” Theological librarians are not just service providers; we are educators and partners. This end affirms our role in shaping curricula and expanding the canon. By supporting interfaith and antiracist scholarship, we help transform classrooms into spaces of critical inquiry and inclusive formation. Finally, Organizational End 4.1 says, “educators and researchers have access to increasing full-text content that is inclusive and global in scope.” Hill Fletcher invites us to dream of a multifaith, multiracial America—and to build it. One way we do this is by ensuring access to content that reflects the full breadth of global religious experience. From Buddhist temple tours to metadata interventions, we help make that vision tangible.

In short, Atla’s Organizational Ends are not abstract goals. They are tools for action. They empower us to live out the work Hill Fletcher envisions—in our libraries, in our partnerships, and in our shared commitments to justice and hospitality.

Throughout this conversation, we explored how Atla has flexed—and how it must continue to flex—to meet the urgent call for anti-racist, multifaith engagement in theological education. We have reflected on our history, examined where power resides, and asked how we as librarians can foster a more inclusive, representative scholarly landscape.

The Organizational Ends we have shared are more than benchmarks—they are invitations. They ask us to be responsive, courageous, and collaborative. Whether we are navigating shifting cultural contexts, rethinking how we describe collections, serving as educational partners, or increasing access to global voices, our work is essential to the thriving of a truly multiracial, multireligious academic community.

As we move forward, let us carry these Ends with us—not just as institutional goals, but as shared commitments that help us answer Hill Fletcher’s challenge: to be leaders in shaping a more just and inclusive future through our scholarship, our collections, and our common vocation.

REFERENCES

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