
The Atla Code of Conduct

Promoting Shared Values in Atla Spaces

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ABSTRACT Based on their panel discussion at Atla Annual 2025, members of Atla's Code of Conduct committee present the rationale for the Code of Conduct and provide a timeline of key events in the process of its creation. They also detail the responsibilities of the committee, as determined by the prior work of the Board of Directors and Code of Conduct Task Force. They discuss the relationship between their role in the association and the principles of restorative justice. The committee hopes that this introductory work will inform Atla's membership, encourage increased dialogue, and continue to build a culture of respect built on concrete documentation instead of unspoken norms.

WHY DOES ATLA NEED A CODE OF CONDUCT?

The core purpose of Atla is to promote worldwide scholarly communication in religion and theology by advancing the work of libraries and related information providers. This is Atla's why.

Atla achieves this end in three key ways. First, as an association, it fosters a community of professionals who get to know one another and share in the joys and struggles of working with theological and religious library collections. For many, these professional relationships become deeply meaningful, providing an important source of solidarity and support in what can be an isolating field of work.

Secondly, beyond personal relationships, Atla stewards a conversation about how best to collect, preserve, and provide access to religious and theological information. This conversation endures even as individuals and institutions come and go. It helps define the community while serving as a resource for the wider professional community.

Third, Atla is actively engaged in the task of cataloging and providing access to religious and theological information in its databases and other products. This task is an important and shared contribution to the broader scholarly community, and its impact extends beyond the disciplines of religion and theology.

Atla has identified the values of hospitality, inclusion, and diversity as core aspects of a rich community, a vibrant conversation, and a successful repository of information. These values, along with collegiality and collaboration, are all important but can also be difficult. Humans have engaged in religious practice and conversation for thousands of years. Atla members have thought long and seriously not only about historical religious practices but also about their current significance. We have deep and abiding differences and must push back against both historic and recent currents that want to separate and divide.

This has led to recurring side conversations within the membership about who is or is not welcome in Atla. Matt Ostercamp remembers a whispered bus conversation years ago at an annual conference where he was asked if Evangelical Christians (his own religious identity) were welcome at Atla. We have heard stories from fellow members about similar conversations on whether people of color, non-Christians, queer individuals, or atheists are welcome at Atla.

Historically, Atla has maintained its community largely through unspoken norms. Social cues and the leadership of individuals deemed important either by their position or seniority have set the tone for the association. However, this organic process of establishing communal identity has at times proven to be confusing and inconsistent, especially in periods of change and stress. It becomes the subtext of leadership votes that may be completely lost on newer members. Therefore, the need to resort to side conversations noted above, which were often unsatisfyingly opaque, was built into the system.

The Atla Code of Conduct is an attempt to meet the challenge of our global context where intellectually and religiously diverse communities are under pressure to pick a side and participate in polarized and polarizing “us versus them” conversations. It is our hope that we can substantively build upon the tradition of hospitality while also moving from implicit, undocumented norms to a written set of community expectations. We see the advantages of this approach being 1) people inside and outside the group can know who we are and what type of community we are trying to build, and 2) we can update and evolve our expectations through an open and formal process where diverse voices can be respectfully heard.

TIMELINE FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CODE OF CONDUCT

Atla’s Code of Conduct is not just a policy; it is an embodiment of Atla’s mission and the values embedded in our organizational ends. In October 2023, the Board reaffirmed that Atla exists so that libraries, librarians, and information providers in theology and religion “connect and grow professionally in an equitable, supportive, diverse, and global community” (Atla, n.d.-a). This is the lens through which we can understand the Code of Conduct—as a framework that ensures our community can thrive safely, collaboratively, and inclusively.

GROUNDWORK: RESOLUTIONS AND ENDS (2020)

The journey formally began in June 2020, with the Board’s Resolution Against Racism and Xenophobia. It acknowledged that systemic racism threatens our shared scholarly mission by marginalizing voices and perspectives, and it committed Atla to education, reflection, and antiracism work. Around the same time, the Board adopted a new organizational end, enumerated 1.5, which states: “Members are equipped to successfully navigate the changing landscape” (Atla, n.d.-a). That landscape includes societal change and shifting expectations around safety, inclusion, and justice. The Code of Conduct emerges from that call to equip members to engage and grow in a rapidly evolving professional context.

Table 1: Key Events in the Development and Implementation of the Code of Conduct

June 2020	Board resolution against racism and xenophobia
June 2021	DEI policy adopted; Code of Conduct Task Force convened
May 2022	Draft Code of Conduct developed
August 2023	Code of Conduct launched
October 2023	Code of Conduct adopted by the Board
December 2023, December 2024, & June 2025	Restorative Justice training sessions for committee members
June 2025	Presentation to membership at Atla Annual
Ongoing	Ongoing implementation and member education.

DEI POLICY AND THE CALL FOR A CODE (2021)

In June 2021, the Board adopted a formal DEI policy, Appendix BP15, which states: “Diversity strengthens us as an organization, broadens our knowledge base, and stimulates innovation” (Atla, n.d.-b). From this emerged the charge to create a Code of Conduct that didn’t merely serve as a procedural safeguard, but as a values-based framework grounded in the core values of hospitality, inclusion, and diversity, supporting organizational ends 1 and 4.1, which address professional development, and global inclusivity of resources and voices, respectively. A member-led task force was convened later that year to carry out this work.

DRAFTING THE CODE (2021–2022)

The task force studied models from related organizations such as the American Library Association, the Society of Biblical Literature, and the Association of Theological Schools, but made a deliberate choice to craft something specific to Atla:

- Centered in our mission to foster the study of theology and religion
- Designed for community, not control
- Rooted in restorative justice rather than punitive enforcement

By mid-2022, a full draft was completed. Implementation was planned for the FY24 membership cycle, timed to coincide with Atla's evolving membership practices and renewed emphasis on building inclusive networks of scholarly communication advocated in organizational end 1.3.

COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION (2022–2023)

Throughout late 2022 and 2023, Atla transparently introduced the new Code to the membership. It was included during renewals and registrations, and its acknowledgement was required for participation in Atla-hosted events and platforms. It was framed as a way to foster respectful engagement across differing traditions, perspectives, and global contexts, reflecting organizational ends 1.4 and 3.1. Importantly, it aligned with organizational end 4.1, which calls for increasing access to inclusive and global content, because inclusion does not only happen in what we read, but also in how we relate. By August 2023, the Code of Conduct officially launched.

OVERSIGHT AND RESTORATIVE APPROACH (2023–2024)

Following the launch, Atla appointed a Conduct Committee, composed of members from different backgrounds and career stages, a representative from the DEI Committee, and an Atla staff liaison. In December 2023, committee members completed training with the Zehr Institute for Restorative Justice. The committee's mandate is to:

- Address concerns with care and confidentiality
- Promote community repair rather than punishment
- Model Atla's values in practice

This committee helps operationalize organizational end 1.2, enhancing the value of members to their institutions, because safe, inclusive professional spaces support thriving, visible leadership.

WHEN DOES THE COMMITTEE NEED TO BE INVOLVED?

The committee's involvement in any complaint is contingent upon three other "question" words: what, who, and where. These criteria establish the parameters for which an investigation may be initiated.

WHAT

This simply establishes that the complaint references some part of the Code of Conduct that was perceived to have been violated. However, the severity of a complaint may also warrant that different channels be employed, such as police or other emergency responders, when there is a substantial risk of immediate physical harm or loss of life. The committee is a deliberative body that does not compromise the fairness or thoroughness of its investigation to meet deadlines.

WHO

For the Code of Conduct to be applicable, both parties must fall under the definition of participants in Atla activities. This applies to the members of the Association and non-members when participating in an Atla-hosted function. Notably, Atla employees are not covered by the Code of Conduct, as their conduct is directed by the terms of their employment.

WHERE

The Code applies in physical and virtual environments where Atla is acknowledged as the sponsor or host. While the annual conference is the clearest example, other Atla spaces include virtual events, committee meetings, and Atla-hosted listservs such as Atlantis.

RELATIONSHIP TO ATLA'S GOVERNANCE

The Committee operates under authority delegated by the Board of Directors and is appointed by the Executive Director. Each member is required to participate in a training activity each year

focused on investigative procedures and restorative justice. The committee functions independently in complaint handling, making decisions based on policy, and reports details to the Board without compromising individual confidentiality.

CONDUCT COMMITTEE'S CORE RESPONSIBILITIES

The Committee promptly receives and logs all Code-related reports. They evaluate these reports for credibility and the scope of the allegations, then determine an appropriate response route and recommend resolutions or outcomes (e.g., mediation, referral, educational action). Throughout the process, they uphold confidentiality, due process, and restorative principles.

WHAT THE COMMITTEE IS NOT

It is important to emphasize that the Committee is not a law enforcement or judicial body. It is not an entity focused on punishment or blame, nor does it serve as forum for theological, academic, or policy debate outside of Code violations.

REPORTING

Any Community member who believes that they have been the victim of a Code of Conduct violation should report the incident immediately to anyone listed below:

- Executive Director
- Director of Membership & Engagement
- Any member of the Conduct Committee

The reporting individual will be treated with respect, and Atla prohibits retaliation of any kind against an individual reporting a perceived violation of the Code of Conduct.

INVESTIGATION

The Committee will promptly investigate each report by delegating a team to investigate. They consider conflicts of interest when appointing these teams. Investigations are fair, impartial, thorough, and timely. Reporting individuals will be informed of the outcome, with details limited to protect privacy.

OUTCOMES AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

As mentioned earlier in this article, the Conduct Committee receives annual training in the use of restorative justice. Restorative justice is defined as “a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in an offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs and obligations, in order to heal and put things right as possible” (Zehr 2015, 48). The outcomes of the Atla Code of Conduct focus on restorative practices in alignment with Atla values of hospitality, inclusion, diversity, collegiality, and collaboration. Atla is a community and aims to repair and restore relationships should a violation of the Code happen. Relationships are key and this work is invitational. Therefore, if all parties involved are not open to a restorative process, then this outcome is not an option. This work is about our shared responsibility of making Atla spaces free from harassment and discrimination.

CONCLUSION

What began with a resolution in 2020 has grown into a living commitment aligned with Atla’s mission to foster theological study, framed by its organizational ends, and implemented through a collaborative, restorative structure. The Atla Code of Conduct affirms that how we engage with one another is as important as what we contribute. It is about building the conditions in which all members can share, lead, and grow together.

We are living in challenging times. Many of us have lived through the fracturing of families, churches or other communities of faith, and educational institutions. We do not expect that the rich, inclusive community Atla aspires to is going to happen on its own. Instead, we as an association need to think carefully about how to navigate

our current cultural moment. Our hope is to move forward with clarity, kindness, and conversation.

Our invitation to all Atla members is to join us in thinking intentionally about community. Atla has a long history of constructive engagement across a broad spectrum of religious communities, and we want to see that continue and grow. We believe that this work is important not just for the organizational ends of Atla but also as a model and witness to a world where many choose to vilify others instead of listening and engaging respectfully with people from different traditions. We invite you to extend trust and open yourself to the vulnerability that comes from discussing community norms and expectations. We hope that you choose to engage with us in this process and continue the conversation.

REFERENCES

Atla. n.d.-a. "Mission & Organizational Ends." Accessed July 24, 2025. <https://www.atla.com/about/mission/>.

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