David N. Hempton

From Nonsectarian to Multifaith: An Educational Experiment in Religious Diversity at Harvard ca. 1800–2020

Abstract: The foundation of Harvard University in 1636 and later the Harvard Divinity School (HDS) in 1816 had their roots in puritanical and then nonsectarian Protestantism. By 1816 the original desire to "purify" the faith from Rome had given way to an emphasis on moral unity among Protestant Christians. By then, non-sectarianism implied little more than an attempt to mend fences between Unitarian and Trinitarian Congregationalists. If anything, HDS's liberal Protestant identity was reinforced after the Second World War by President Nathan Pusey who recruited Paul Tillich and pledged to revitalize HDS's Christian mission and ecumenical credentials. Over the next half-century, a complex of changes produced perhaps the most diverse and multireligious divinity school in the United States. How did this happen? In the journey towards a more multireligious school, four innovations are worthy of special treatment: the formation of the Center for the Study of World Religions (1958); the Women's Study in Religion Program (1973); the Pluralism Project (1991); and the creation of the Master in Public Life degree (2020). The purpose of this paper is to identify the social contexts and structural dynamics producing these changes, the theological and philosophical conversations that shaped their expression, and the resistant factors and blind spots that make this story anything but a conventional ascension narrative. Attention will be paid to changing understandings of what constitutes religion and theology, the appropriate categories and social locations for their study, and the engine drivers of change and resistance, which are sometimes more surprising than some metanarratives of increasing religious diversity suggest.

Keywords: Harvard University; multifaith; religious diversity; pluralism.

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David N. Hempton: John Lord O'Brian Professor of Divinity and Dean of Harvard Divinity School.

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The foundations of Harvard University in 1636 and, later, of Harvard Divinity School (HDS) in 1816 had their roots first in puritanical and then nonsectarian Protestantism.[1] By 1816 the original desire to "purify" the faith from Rome had given way to an emphasis on moral unity among Protestant Christians. By then, nonsectarianism implied little more than an attempt to mend fences between Unitarian and Trinitarian Congregationalists. Since then, throughout its history, HDS and the Unitarian Universalist tradition have grown up conjoined. Despite formal nonsectarianism, HDS was founded by Unitarians, nurtured by their support, and shaped from the outset by their interest in non-Christian religions.[2] Interest in other religions, however, did not presuppose equality of esteem. When the transcendentalist James Freeman Clarke examined Asian religions in his course "Ethnic Religions" in the 1870s, he based his reflections on his book *Ten Great Religions* (1871), which argued that non-Christian religions approached truth through the specific cultures of their origins, whereas Christianity was a universal religion divinely adapted to become the religion of all races (Clarke 1871). The cover of the book presents concentric circles, with Judaism and Christianity at the center and other religious traditions and countries of origin distributed around the periphery.

HDS's liberal Protestant and ecumenical identity was reinforced after the Second World War by then Harvard president Nathan Pusey, who recruited Paul Tillich and pledged to revitalize HDS's Christian mission and ecumenical credentials. The Convocation picture of the HDS faculty in 1955, all white men, is a vivid, midcentury testament to the ecumenical aspirations of the School, and to its European philosophical and theological influences. Standing alongside eminent American Unitarian scholars like George Hunston Williams and Conrad Wright are Paul Tillich, Krister Stendahl, the Catholic modernist George LaPiana, the distinguished Jewish philosopher Harry Wolfson, and John A. T. Robinson, later the notorious author of *Honest to God* (1963). Several others had their personal or intellectual roots in Germany, German philosophy and theology, and the German universities.

Over the next half-century, a complex series of changes produced perhaps the most diverse and multireligious divinity school in the United States. How did this happen? Faculty appointments are the easiest to monitor. First, there was a chair

1 For extensive histories of religion at Harvard, see Wiliams 2014 and 1954.

2 I also want to acknowledge several foundational Harvard Divinity School documents and sources that helped inform this address, including Foundations for a Learned Ministry (Anthony 1992), particularly the opening essay written by the late Reverend Peter J. Gomes; Harvard Divinity Bulletin; the Harvard Divinity School news website, https://hds.harvard.edu/news-events; and the HDS bicentennial exhibit, Faces of Divinity, https://hds.harvard.edu/about/history-and-mission/faces-of-divinity-exhibit. Additionally, for an excellent treatment of Puritanism from a faculty member of Harvard Divinity School, see Hall 2019.

in Roman Catholic theological studies, followed by appointments in Jewish studies, African American religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islamic religion and society, comparative theology, and so on. The student body was also changing rapidly with the admission of women and students from non-Protestant Christian backgrounds. In this journey toward a more multireligious school, four innovations, like cardiograph spikes, are worthy of special treatment: the formation of the Center for the Study of World Religions (1958); the Women's Studies in Religion Program (1973); the Pluralism Project (1991); and the creation of the Master of Religion and Public Life degree (2020). The purpose of this essay is to identify the social contexts and structural dynamics producing these changes, the theological and philosophical conversations that shaped their expression, and the resistant factors and blind spots that make this story anything but a conventional ascension narrative. Attention will be paid to changing understandings of what constitutes religion and theology; the appropriate categories and social locations for their study; and the engine drivers of change and resistance, which are sometimes more surprising than some metanarratives of increasing religious diversity suggest.

I would like to start with a personal story, which tends to strike American audiences as strange, though it is more common in other parts of the world, including Europe. I grew up in a working-class Protestant family in East Belfast in the 1950s and '60s and soon entered an educational system that was deeply segregated between Protestants and Catholics. It remains so, even after a quarter of a century since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 that brought an end to the violent conflict known as the "troubles." Insofar as my memory can be trusted, I have no recollection of ever entering a Catholic school or place of worship before the age of eighteen. The first Catholic place of worship I ever set foot in was as a curious and awestruck tourist to the Cathedral of Santa Maria of Palma on the island of Majorca. To this day, I know that I have visited and attended more worship services in Catholic churches outside of Ireland than within Ireland, despite living most of my life in that country. These educational realities of segregation and denominational exclusivity did not alone cause violence in Ireland, but they have certainly contributed to the separations and stereotypes that often precede and undergird conflict.

My experience of Harvard Divinity School could not be more different. With students from over forty different religious traditions, and a faculty with expertise in many of the world's major religious traditions, HDS is as religiously diverse as any divinity school in the world. How did it get that way? What follows is an attempt to sketch in the broad contours of an unplanned and often unselfconscious educational experiment at Harvard University in creating a multireligious divinity school.

What, then, is a multireligious divinity school? Let's begin with some framing questions. First, there is a terminological problem. There is a paradox in the title

itself, because "divinity school" generally connotes Christian, which of course is the religious tradition of HDS's founding and is still its largest tradition as represented by its faculty and students. The phrase "multireligious divinity school" is therefore somewhat problematic, even if alternatives are notoriously hard to come by.

Second, what are the compositional desiderata in a multireligious divinity school? HDS's recent practice has been to appoint professors and enroll students who may be religious practitioners and/or whose primary objective is academic study and scholarship. Some of those professors and students may have no religious beliefs whatsoever and may even be skeptical about religion. That proportion will increase as the share of "nones" and those who are religiously unaffiliated continues to rise as projected in Western societies over the next quarter of a century. Also, in terms of composition: who or what gets to determine the "multi" of multireligious, and how are those decisions made? Explicitly and consciously, based on principles and objectives, or unconsciously and obliquely, based on cultural adaptation and cultural osmosis? The history of HDS seems to suggest that the students, more than professors or administrators, have driven its increasing pluralism. Moreover, what are the appropriate spatial and geographic parameters of "multireligious?" For example, should a divinity school reflect the religious constituencies of its city, its region, its country of location, or the world as a whole? Does Harvard, and do other universities who aspire to global significance and influence, have different criteria for religious diversity than more specifically regional colleges or traditional denominational seminaries?

Third, what are the curricular desiderata of a multireligious divinity school? Specifically, how should religion be studied in a multireligious school? At HDS, and certainly within the historical worlds in which I have operated, there has been a strong emphasis on practice or on what we call "lived religion"—that is, religion with all the messiness of diverse practices, cultural expressions, changes over time, and attention to all of the "religion and . . ." questions. Attention to lived religion in all its forms and expressions means that we also treat current practices seriously, however sharp-edged and exclusive they may be. I do not see it as HDS's job to promote a kind of neutral syncretism. Differences and disagreements need to be honored, not etherized, which leads us to our fourth question.

How does a multireligious divinity school build a community of pluralism, respect, and mutual understanding? How does it construct community rituals, celebrate diverse religious holidays, create welcoming and religiously appropriate gathering spaces, and treat bodies and dress with sensitivity, all without capitulating to some kind of anemic lowest common denominator? Promoting pluralism—not just in theory but in practice—allows each member of our community the opportunity to engage in not just their own religious traditions but the traditions of others. This also allows us to expect and make accommodations, to care as much

about the sensitivities of others as about ourselves, and to contribute to community life rather than retreating into sectarian isolation. None of this is automatic or trouble free.

Finally, what does a multireligious divinity school do that a monoreligious school can't (and vice versa)? In a world that is multireligious, an academy that is self-consciously multireligious provides a community context and a curricular content that prepares practitioners and scholars (and combinations of both) for the world into which they will graduate. A multireligious school provides a relatively safe space in which one can experience, study, and work to understand religion in all its complexity and to appreciate difference as a positive reality. In short, this question can be summarized as our "why." Why do we put in the work of ensuring religious diversity for the sake of multifaith education? What benefits will this yield for higher education and for the world at large? The last two points, which I will refer to, in shorthand, as the "how" and the "why," will be where we spend most of our time. In particular: What are the engine drivers and instruments of change? What are the pertinent factors? What are the issues at stake? What are the limiting factors? What are the most pertinent theological issues and scholarly debates?

Let's start with a brief institutional and cultural context. Harvard University was founded by Puritans to advance learning and promote the idea of a learned ministry, an idea rooted in the Puritan sense of vocation, or calling, and the public, civic, and institutional expression of that vocation in both church and state. In recalling the founding acts and metaphors of Harvard College, the public, corporate, civil, *and* religious dimensions cannot be easily separated, and it becomes necessary to relearn the interconnections that, for the Puritan of the seventeenth century, bound up together matters of church and state, private piety and public policy, worldly scholarship, and religious faith. It's not surprising that the first 150 years of Harvard College—from its presidents through its faculty, students, libraries, and pedagogical aspirations—were really directed toward fields that had been a big part of the Puritan tradition. The study of divinity was at the center of a curriculum that was supposed to prepare students for all aspects of life. If you look at those great books of divinity that were written by the seventeenth-century Puritan divines wherever they showed up—especially in the more reformed capitals of Scotland, the Netherlands, and New England—the idea is that all we study reflects the divine character. That's the foundation point. So, you start off from there, then look at the natural world and other aspects of human life. The "professionalization of vocation" as we've come to know it since the eighteenth century, had not yet occurred, and a "profession" was the way one practiced one's vocation. That vocation was to live a godly, righteous, and sober life and to maintain a society in which it was possible to do so. This vocation was both public and comprehensive, and hence the founding of Harvard College was neither an act of the church nor of private

patronage and philanthropy but an unambiguous public act of the state in which all aspects of a godly and civilized society were combined. It is, therefore, through the lenses of this concept of vocation that we read the famous passage from *New England's First Fruits*, the earliest account of Harvard College at Cambridge in New England:

> After God had carried us safe to New England and we had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God's worship, and settled the civil government: one of the next things we longed for, and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust (Eliot 1643).

"Illiterate ministry" refers not simply to those incapable of reading Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, or to those otherwise deprived of the benefits of a university education, but also to those whose sense of vocation was insufficiently capacious for the founding vision of New England. Hence, the nurturing of all society in its godly vocation, not just the church, was to be the central work of Harvard College. A learned ministry was intended for the well-being of all, not simply the elect.

By the 1800s, religion at Harvard had become a hotly disputed affair, and a conscious battle of wills between the Unitarians and the Trinitarians resulted in the emergence of Unitarian dominance in 1805. In 1816, the Society for the Promotion of Theological Education in Harvard University was organized, and its objective was simple: to provide money for instruction in theology and give it to the Harvard Corporation for that purpose. Harvard Divinity School's founding in 1816 was part of the move among Western universities toward the "Enlightenment project," which included an element of separation, an element of specialization, and an element of professionalization. At Harvard, these were represented by the fact that the Divinity School was situated at the edge of campus. This venture was both a serious attempt to improve the training of religious leaders and ministers and a convenient way of allowing Harvard to separate out vocational religious preparation from the wider, more secular University curriculum. By 1826, a curriculum, a faculty, resident graduates, and a building gave ample proof to the existence of Harvard Divinity School. Yet, the School's status was not secure. The problem was not only the perennial one of money, but rather of the political and ecclesiastical conflicts that characterized politics in Massachusetts, from which Harvard was not immune.

In the late 1830s, the School weathered one of its first existential crises. Renowned philosopher and onetime HDS student, Ralph Waldo Emerson, gave a talk, now known as "The Divinity School Address" that "tore them apart," according to historian Stephen Shoemaker (2005). Emerson lambasted the Divinity School for teaching a "corpse cold Unitarianism" that was more interested in promoting ritual

and studying the theology of Christ than in living like Christ. While the student body might have been open to such ideas, the faculty was horrified, and Emerson was shunned for thirty years. Controversies surrounding Emerson's views and their social and cultural ramifications were not the only controversies embroiling the Divinity School. Its first dean, John Gorham Palfrey, was an abolitionist who was expressly forbidden by two successive Harvard presidents and its governing corporation from propagating antislavery views on campus. He was effectively forced out and eventually given a government commission by Abraham Lincoln. More durably, the well-known status shifts of the nineteenth century away from theology and toward the natural sciences persuaded growing numbers of Harvard faculty that a modern, evolving institution of higher education should not deal at all in the partisan and irrational speculations of theology.

But, during the years 1877–1879, Harvard president Charles William Eliot made a compelling case for the existence of a nondenominational, nonsectarian, graduate divinity school, arguing that Harvard and the country needed such a place:

> Let at least one University school of theology be suitably supported, where young men may study theology and the kindred subjects with the same freedom of spirit with which they study law in law school or medicine in medical school, and with as little intention or opportunity of committing themselves prematurely to any particular set of opinions or practices (James 1930, 368).

President Eliot concluded his forty-year tenure in 1909 with an address at the Divinity School, "The Religion of the Future," in which he saw, somewhat optimistically, less doctrine, less denominationalism, and more moral and spiritual consensus along the lines of the scientific religious inquiry and cooperation he had championed at Harvard (Eliot 1909). Some of Eliot's successors were not so enthusiastic about the role of religion in a serious university. James Bryant Conant, who served as Harvard president from 1933 to 1953, had a noted distaste for religion, and he deliberately permitted the Divinity School to wither on the vine. But in 1953, the newly appointed president, Nathan Marsh Pusey, revitalized the Divinity School. In his 1953 Divinity School Convocation Address, Pusey stated: "It is leadership in religious knowledge, and even more, in religious experience—not increased industrial might, not more research facilities, certainly not these things by themselves—of which we now have a gaping need." Not many university presidents of elite universities in the West could make such a statement now.

How then can we explain the growing religious diversity of HDS since the Second World War? One example of how the School adapted to the social context of the 1960s was by developing a new degree program for a new era. In 1968, the introduction of the Master of Theological Studies (MTS) degree and a new doctoral field in comparative religion expanded the School's recruitment beyond

Protestants and Unitarian Universalist candidates, most of them men, pursuing the professional degree in ministry. The 1970s and 1980s saw a dramatic and permanent shift in the student population: women became at least half of each entering class. Gradually, students from other religious groups joined Protestant ministry candidates. Students enrolled in the MTS for predoctoral work, as well to combine training in religion with other professional fields. With the adoption of a new curriculum in 1981, MTS students could concentrate in non-Christian religions, as well as study Christianity. Faculty appointments outside of Christian studies attracted an increasingly diverse student population. While most faculty saw this as an expansion of the School's historic commitments, a few regretted the decentering of Christianity. No formal decision determined that HDS would become a multireligious school. Change came incrementally by curricular decision.

This period also included major shifts in leadership. One of the most influential Europeans at HDS was Swedish theologian and New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl, who served as dean from 1968 to 1979. The early years of his administration were marked by the social and academic turbulence characteristic of higher education institutions in this period. The war in Vietnam was debated passionately within the Divinity School community, and such symbolic gestures as offering of sanctuary in Andover Chapel to a draft resister and the flying of the red flag from Andover Hall served to remind the Divinity School that it was not isolated from current affairs. Throughout this time—one of the most tumultuous political eras of American history, on college campuses and elsewhere—Stendahl successfully guided HDS with an astute, sometimes blunt, decisiveness that was tempered by his wry humor and his enormous gift for listening. Stendahl served as Bishop of Stockholm, Sweden, from 1984 to 1988, but returned to HDS in the late 1980s to become the School's first chaplain, a much more important undertaking than the title at first suggested, given the ethos of religious pluralism, and related pedagogical approach, that had developed further at HDS in the 1980s. At the time, Stendahl explained his vision for his new assignment in this way:

> In our community there is no one form, name, or liturgy which can claim the allegiance of all. To be a chaplain in this place therefore must mean to help worship happen in many forms at many times and to guard fiercely the freedom of every person to pray and speak in ways important to him or her—lest the specter of "pluralism" mute authentic expression of devotion (Joyner 2008).

Any attempt to explain the increasing religious diversity of Harvard Divinity School and the wider University in this period must reckon with the impact of the Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR), founded in the late 1950s. The controversies surrounding its formation tell you a great deal about the intellectual currents of this period regarding the place of religion in the curriculum of an aspiring world-

class university (Carman and Dogson 2006, 11–14). The all-important donors for this new venture were mostly Anglicans influenced by the Theosophical Movement. Their leader, known anonymously as "the lady," was partly inspired by the existence of the Spalding Professorship of Eastern Religion and Ethics at Oxford University, the first holder of which was Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who later became president of India. Neither HDS nor the wider Harvard University was united behind the idea of establishing the CSWR, or even where it should be located. Superimposed on the inevitable turf wars over power and influence, in which universities specialize, were complex intellectual and ideological disagreements over whether religion should be taught as phenomenology in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences or as lived practices at the Divinity School, or, as some would have it, not at all. In the end, money talked. As Krister Stendahl later explained it, the donors expressed a strong preference for the Divinity School being the home base for the Center because "they feared that unless it was related to a theological faculty, the tendency would win out by which the emphasis on language studies, etc., would short-change the emphasis on contemporary manifestations of the faith" (Carman and Dogson 2006, 13–14). Even so, the faculty of the Divinity School were not themselves united on the wisdom of having the CSWR attached to their school. Those influenced by German Protestant theology wanted HDS to concentrate solely on educating Protestant ministers and were concerned about the possible long-term decentering of Christianity. As time has shown, neither of these concerns proved groundless. Only a small minority of students currently enrolled at HDS are bound for ministry in a Protestant tradition.

In the foundation of the CSWR, accepting the money and establishing the location was far from the end of the matter. The new center needed a professor and director, which occasioned even more complicated ideological and practical disagreements. The desired appointee, it was decided, should have both scholarly credentials and administrative and political skills. Moreover, the ideal appointee should have familiarity with at least one major Asian or "world" religion. But there was also distrust of appointing someone from a missionary background, which would not sit well with the postcolonial critique of Western proselytism and imperialism. On the other hand, there was a desire not to appoint someone solely within a historicist, objective approach to the study of religion that was deemed heavy on post-Enlightenment disciplinary scholarship and light on theology. Who would now want to be on this search committee?

As it turned out, it did not matter. After failing to lure the Islamic scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith from McGill University, HDS dean Douglas Horton offered the position to Robert H. L. Slater, Cambridge University–educated and formerly an Anglican chaplain at the University of Rangoon in Burma, who had done his doctoral work on Theravada Buddhism at Columbia University and published books

drawing on his wartime experiences in Burma and on his expertise in both Christianity and Buddhism. As John Carman, a future director of the CSWR, put it, "in addition to the difficult ideological objections to the new chair in world religions from secular philosophers, traditional historians, and neo-orthodox Protestant theologians, the first holder of the chair had to begin with his faculty colleagues resentful of the high-handed action of their dean," who had already disturbed the theological waters with his recent approval of a new chair in Roman Catholic studies (Carman and Dogson 2006, 17).

Slater was charged with a formidable list of tasks: to encourage the study of the great religions of the world; to create a world religions graduate program; to encourage a sympathetic understanding of religions; to encourage spiritual conversations between people of different religious faiths; and to facilitate the creation of works of art, music, or literature that would stimulate the sympathetic understanding of the religions of the world. Despite the challenges confronting him, Slater did a remarkable job of achieving many of these objectives and also succeeded in opening the Josep Lluís Sert–designed CSWR building in 1960, recruiting distinguished faculty like Robert Bellah and Masatoshi Nagatomi, and overseeing a peaceful transfer of power to his successor as director, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. The Center was sent on its way, with a stirring speech at the opening of the Sert building by the then vice-president of India, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan:

> In every religion we have people who do not believe in provincialism, who emphasise religion as experience to be attained by self-conquest and self-transformation, appreciation of other faiths, and a sense of loyalty to the world community. If man is to achieve wholeness for himself and for the world, if he seeks harmonious living, he must know other religions. We must set aside differences caused by the accidents of geography and history and accept the universal ideas transmitted by a common heritage [...].
> The different religions should be regarded as comrades in a joint enterprise in facing the common problems of the peaceful coexistence of the peoples, international welfare and justice, racial equality and political independence of all peoples (Radhakrishnan 1961, 39).

Perhaps the clearest testimony of the achievement of the early objectives of the CSWR comes from the pen of William Graham, the distinguished Islamicist and former dean of HDS, who joined one of the earliest cohorts of doctoral students associated with the CSWR. He came to the CSWR in 1966, two years into Cantwell Smith's directorship. He writes warmly of Smith's relentless attempts to create "a multitraditional and multi-linguistic intellectual community of scholars" dedicated to the comparative study of religion through the widest possible geographical and conceptual lenses. According to Graham, Smith thought that

> the CSWR was [...] the one place in North America, maybe even the world, where such study and reflection was assumed to be the baseline for conversation, corporate and individual

> investigation, and cutting-edge intellectual exploration. Furthermore, he was convinced that the Christocentric curricula, not only at Christian seminaries, but also at university divinity schools such as Harvard's, were inadequate to the serious investigation of religion as a panhuman, global phenomenon of critical importance to culture and history everywhere (Graham 2006, 4–5).

The chief challenges to these expansive aspirations were the Christocentricity of the Divinity School and the unwillingness of the rest of Harvard to take religion seriously. But there were also self-imposed ideological limitations. For example, before the 1970s, the indigenous religions of Africa were excluded from the CSWR because of the view that they lacked written scriptures. Visiting African students, some of whom were political exiles, saw this as yet another expression of Western colonialism. A tour of African universities in 1974 by John Carman, a scholar of Hinduism and comparative religion and director of the CSWR at the time, and the eminent African American scholar, Preston Williams, helped turn the tide at the CSWR and HDS, resulting in several important appointments in African religious traditions.

Over the six decades of its existence, the Center has worked to create a multireligious space, in which interfaith understanding was developed both in academic work and in shared meals, late-night conversations, and the cultivation of a common garden. Among the many distinguished visiting faculty members who have been a part of life at the CSWR, the Spanish priest and comparative philosopher Raimon Panikkar was one of the most influential. In residence at the CSWR between 1967 and 1971, he mirrored the Center's comparative perspective. Reflecting later on his time of pilgrimage in India, he wrote: "I 'left' [Europe] as a christian, I 'found' myself a hindu, and I 'return' a buddhist, without having ceased to be a christian" (Panikkar 199, 42). In 1979, the fourteenth Dalai Lama made his first trip to the United States. His final stop, at the invitation of the CSWR, was Harvard, where he gave a lecture and taught a seminar to HDS students. He has come back repeatedly—in 1981, 1995, 2003, and 2009.

How then are we to evaluate the achievements and limitations of the CSWR in light of its ambitious original objectives? This is a hard question to answer. Any evaluation of the CSWR under its seven directors—many of them, ironically, with missionary backgrounds—must consider the different priorities of its leaders and scholars, which serve almost as a chronological and intellectual barometer of the prevailing currents and fashions in the study of religion.[3] But there are three

3 The first three directors developed fields of study in Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism; the fourth focused on South American and Indigenous religious traditions without written scriptures. More

inescapable conclusions. The first is that the CSWR has inexorably reshaped the curriculum of the Divinity School in the direction of a world religions focus and helped make it one of the most religiously diverse divinity schools in the world. The second is that the CSWR became a temporary home for hundreds of distinguished scholars of world religions who then carried their newly refined expertise to all parts of the world. Third, the various controversies that surrounded the creation of the CSWR have never gone away. The role of religion in the various schools and curricula of wider Harvard is still contested territory. The old Enlightenment-inspired hostility to the teaching of religion in a great research university and its multiple graduate schools has persisted, despite what many readers of this essay might regard as the inescapable importance of developing religious literacy in a world in sore need of it.

Whether or not religion ought to be taught in a research university is one thing; how it is to be taught is another. In facing that issue, none of the following questions will be news to readers. What is the relationship between insider and outside perspectives? How can, or should, conservative and fundamentalist perspectives be incorporated into curricula and reflected in faculty appointments and student enrollments? Has the old comparative approach to the study of religion run out of steam, along with its sometimes-naïve sister, ecumenical dialogue? What counts as religion, and who sets the agenda for its study? As we judge the intellectual blinkers and limitations of past scholars on how to think about the category of religion, what are ours, and how would we recognize them?

Another milestone of comparable importance to the founding of the CSWR in the growing diversity of HDS's approach to the study of religion was the formation of the Women's Studies in Religion Program. Women were admitted to HDS in 1955 as part of the expansion of the School's mission to train leaders for the international ecumenical movement. By 1969, a total of twenty-three women had graduated, and never more than three in a single year. In a dramatic reversal, women would compose a majority of students by 1980 and would remain at least half of each class from then on. If women were to become religious leaders, millennia of scholarship supporting their exclusion had to be critiqued, reformed, or contradicted. Women's studies started as an approach to women's ministry but expanded to ask what difference gender makes in every field taught at HDS. Increasing enrollment of women students coincided with the blossoming of feminism in the 1970s. In a 1971 HDS course, women in the class blew noisemakers and kazoos whenever a masculine pronoun was used to refer to human beings or, more controversially, to God.

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recent directors have focused on environmental sustainability and on transcendence and transformation in spiritual traditions.

After classmate E. J. Dionne reported on the class in the student newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*, members of the Department of Linguistics ridiculed the action as "pronoun envy." Then *Newsweek* magazine picked up the story. In 2014, *The New Yorker* published HDS alumna Anne Carson's poem about the incident. The result is that this has become a famous early assertion of inclusive language and represents the impact HDS students have as agents for change.

The Women's Studies in Religion Program (WSRP) was founded in 1973 in response to the need to transform theological education to reflect the unprecedented presence of women as candidates for the ministry and students of religion. The WSRP was established not only as a place of diversifying representation but as a bedrock for a newly institutionalizing area of study: that of women and religion. Constance Buchanan, a faculty member and associate dean at HDS for twenty years, is credited with leading the WSRP to become an internationally recognized center for research on faith, gender, race, and sexual orientation. Buchanan became director of the WSRP in 1977, and she had the foresight to reach outside academia to find philanthropic women with passions and interests that intersected with the WSRP's mission, even though many of them had no direct Harvard connections. Among the frustrations of building a "new" and lasting body of scholarship centering on women's stories is the fact that many of the women predecessors working decades, even centuries, prior to the founding of the WSRP have consistently been ignored, forgotten, or erased. As our current WSRP director, Ann Braude, said:

> Men have thousands of years of religious scholarship, performed exclusively by men for men from a male point of view. Men were the only ones who had access to education and access to the languages, access to the technical and intellectual and scholastic skills. There were always women with stories. There were always women intellectuals. There were always women asking questions. But there wasn't an institutionalized way to build.[4]

The WSRP sought to remedy that deficiency by bringing five research associates every year to teach students, give a public lecture, and complete a major research project. Over 200 women have benefited from this program, and many have gone on to influential academic or professional appointments in the United States and all around the world.

A third important milestone in HDS's and wider Harvard's multireligious journey was the creation of the Pluralism Project. In 1991, HDS Professor Diana Eck, who had been deeply involved with the CSWR as a student, first offered the Harvard course "World Religions in New England." The subject matter came organically from her growing interest in the shifting religious landscape of the United States, a

4 Ann Braude, interview by HDS student Madeline Bugeau-Heartt, March 2022.

trend that could be seen in the changing face of the student body at Harvard. Twenty-five students joined Eck in the inaugural course, and together they set out to explore the increasingly diverse religious communities in the Boston area:

> When I first met these new students—Muslims from Providence, Hindus from Baltimore, Sikhs from Chicago, Jains from New Jersey—they signaled to me the emergence in America of a new cultural and religious reality about which I knew next to nothing. At that point I had not been to an American mosque, I had never visited a Sikh community in my own country, and I could imagine a Hindu summer camp only by analogy with my Methodist camp experience. I felt the very ground under my feet as a teacher and scholar begin to shift. My researcher's eye began to refocus—from Banaras to Detroit, from Delhi to Boston (Eck 2001, 17–18).

From the Sri Lakshmi Temple to New England's first mosque, students documented the post–Immigration Act (1965) transformation of Greater Boston's religious makeup. The result of this research was the publishing of *World Religions in Boston: A Guide to Communities and Resources*, a printed guidebook that would serve as a model for future research. The Pluralism Project engaged the best energies of Harvard students from both the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Divinity School (the oft-sought-after cross-university collaboration) in "hometown" research and in such cities as Denver, Houston, and Minneapolis. Some had a more specific focus: Hindu summer camps in Pennsylvania, Vietnamese Buddhist struggles with zoning laws in California, the annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America in Kansas City, or the history of the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Each year, during the subsequent fall semester, the researchers presented their work at a Pluralism Project research conference. Over the course of its existence the Pluralism Project has experimented with film and case method teaching and focused attention on immigration, teachers and school curricula, and women's religious networks. In 1998, President Bill Clinton recognized Eck with the national humanities award, explicitly for the contribution of the Pluralism Project to national culture.

Discussing the Pluralism Project and its exceptional online content is an excellent transition to the expanded digital age we have experienced in the last two decades. As more information became available through the Internet and geographical distance became less of a barrier, thanks to online engagement, the digital age brought to light many opportunities—and many challenges from our past. As for opportunities, HDS has seen a boom in online engagement. Faculty members have created Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that are offered for free to those who audit. HDS is now in its sixth year of offering such courses, including one titled "World Religions Through Their Scriptures," which have together registered around one million participants from over 150 countries. HDS has also benefited

from expanding events with digital access and sharing lessons learned from visiting scholars and monastics with wider audiences.

So, we have made our way to the current decade and the endpoint mentioned in my title, 2020, when HDS launched a new program called Religion and Public Life (RPL). We talk about this program as a canopy, which covers many different elements, such as Religious Literacy in the Professions and the Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative, to engage professionals in a range of fields traditionally thought of as secular. They join the HDS community for a year or two, connect with our students, staff, and faculty, work on a research project or book, and create networks to further expand what has become the mission of this program—creating a just world at peace. We also developed a new master's program to bolster this work, the master of religion and public life degree, which is the first new degree program at the School since we launched the master of theological studies in the 1960s.

In the past several years, we have seen trends, both from our own admissions numbers and from large organizations such as Pew Research Center, that show people's engagement with religion is shifting. Simultaneously, we have seen an increased number of students who identify as "no affiliation" or "spiritual but not religious," along with students reconnecting with faith traditions that have been marginalized from academia and students from any number of traditions who are concerned less with their own doctrine and more with learning how to connect across differences. For these reasons, among many others, we felt the urgent need to build out an academic home, if you will, for anyone interested in exploring religion through the lens of public life—activism, education, government, humanitarian action, journalism, law, media, medicine, public policy, and so on. This program filled a long-felt need to create space for those interested in the study of religion who are not interested in ministry studies or traditional theological scholarship. In many ways, this program has brought us back to our roots: that ideal of a learned ministry informing the evolving concept of vocation—the notion that piety, policy, and the public weal were all expressions of the divine will.

Going back to some of the challenges mentioned earlier: Increased access to information and expanded audiences has also brought issues related to representation, equity, and justice into clearer focus for many of us—a reckoning, if you will. Whose voices have been centered, and whose voices have been subjugated? What perspectives have dominated the narrative, and what perspectives have been underrepresented? This work includes learning more about Harvard University's involvement in removing native peoples from their land and its complicity in slavery. A sobering recent report released by the University, *Harvard and the Legacy of*

Slavery, tells uncomfortable and hard truths, one of which is that HDS itself was partly funded by money made out of the slave trade and the slave economy.[5]

What this report has made clear is that it is not enough simply to recognize subjugation and injustice. Rather, a genuine look at our past must also involve meaningful action to do better now and build a just future for all. Under the leadership of our School's associate dean for diversity, inclusion, and belonging, our aim is to actively build an antiracist and anti-oppressive Harvard Divinity School—which means that our students, staff, faculty, alumni, and supporters, and those who engage with the HDS community, are learning valuable lessons about how to address bias, promote equality, and understand intersectionality. That also involves grappling with the difficult dichotomy shared by many institutions within higher education that simultaneously represent truth and knowledge while steeped in histories entangled with oppression and injustice.

As my title suggests, HDS is still an educational experiment, and only time will tell where the future of religious diversity in education will take us. The first step is to better understand and reckon with our past. The two most important questions to answer are: What were the engines driving the transition from nonsectarian to multireligious at HDS? And what were its chief characteristics and limitations? The answer to the first question must pay attention to the profound cultural shifts in the post–Second World War era, including deep unease over colonialism and the impact of decolonization, the rise of feminism and women's participation in higher education, the influence of multiculturalism and pluralism, the growth of international travel and experiences of globalism, and the widening of educational opportunities to different social groups and constituencies through technology. HDS had the advantage, perceived so only in retrospect, of having weak ties to any formal religious tradition or establishment and hence few financial, theological, or intellectual obligations to religious institutions or controlling authorities beyond Harvard itself. The School, to my knowledge, never set out with a clear ideological agenda or institutional plan to become a multifaith institution. As much driven by student demand as by institutional strategy, by cultural shifts as by considered priorities, and by donor desiderata as by academic rationale, the "multireligious move" was episodic, pragmatic, and contested. The trajectory was nevertheless fairly consistently in an increasingly diverse direction, with cardiograph-like spikes around the formation of the Center for the Study of World Religions, the Women's Studies in Religion Program, the Pluralism Project, and Religion and Public Life. Moreover, there are clearly parallels between the story of increasing religious

5 *The Legacy of Slavery at Harvard: Report and Recommendations of the Presidential Committee* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

pluralism at HDS and in the roughly coterminous history of the United States. HDS is probably the most religiously plural divinity school in the United States, and the United States, depending on chosen criteria, is one of the most religiously plural countries in the world.[6] Claims to American exceptionalism are generally worth resisting, but it is hard to imagine that HDS could have developed the way it has in states with a closer connection between religious establishments and political power.

The second question, about the characteristics and limitations of HDS's multireligious experiment, is easier to figure out, even if it is not always straightforward. HDS grew out of settler colonialism, religious independence, and a progressive bent that has always been part of its tradition. There are some obvious ironies. HDS has always been better at critiquing other people's empires than in paying attention to the religious traditions of native or enslaved peoples, or even the religious consequences of America's own imperial entanglements in places like the Korean peninsula. There is still no established chair at HDS on the religions of Indigenous people, and only recently could one say that Africana diasporic and African American religious traditions have been treated with the seriousness they deserve. Similarly, only lately have we paid attention to the very close connections between American and Korean evangelicalism in the Cold War era through parachurch organizations like the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Campus Crusade for Christ, and World Vision (Kim 2022). American evangelicalism has taken on more of a nationalistic hue over the past several decades, but that should not draw attention away from its less well-studied trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific influences (e.g. Stanley 2013).

What one can say with certitude from this brief survey of an important educational experiment is that the categories for studying religion have steadily expanded over the past two centuries, and that trend is not going to stop. Neither will the university turf wars between those who regard the study of religion as an unfortunate vestigial remnant in the modern academy and those who see religion as a primary characteristic of the human condition, past, present, and future, that needs to be treated with both analytical sophistication and a degree of critical empathy. If current trends continue, HDS will be enrolling more and more students who self-identify as religiously unaffiliated or as spiritual but not religious and who have growing interests in religious traditions beyond the conventional world

6 According to the global religious diversity index constructed by the Pew Research Center, the United States, because of its high proportion of Christians, counts as only moderately diverse, even though the sheer number of different religious traditions represented in its population is quite high.

religions paradigm. As the climate crisis becomes more urgent, there will be a special interest in religious traditions, ancient and modern, that have something to offer a burning and flooding planet. As ever, students and the wider culture will help determine the shape of change, and educational institutions and their faculties will have to adapt or disappear. Many denominational seminaries in Greater Boston and throughout the United States have already closed. The content of religious and theological education is also changing rapidly. At HDS, during its two centuries–long journey from a nonsectarian to a multifaith institution, what counts as multifaith has changed from encountering other traditions in order to missionize them more effectively, to learning *about* them out of academic curiosity, to learning *from* them out of epistemic humility, and, inexorably, to learning *with* them as collaborative partners.

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David N. Hempton is John Lord O'Brian Professor of Divinity and Dean of Harvard Divinity School. He held prior appointments as Director of the School of History at Queen's University Belfast and distinguished University Professor at Boston University. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and an Honorary Member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has delivered the Cadbury Lectures at the University of Birmingham, the F. D. Maurice Lectures at King's College, London, and the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh. His books include *Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750-1850* (Stanford University Press, 1984), winner of the Whitfield Prize of the Royal Historical Society; *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (Yale University Press, 2005), *Evangelical Disenchantment: Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt* (Yale University Press, 2008), *The Church in the Long Eighteenth Century* (I. B. Tauris, 2011), winner of the Albert C. Outler Prize of the American Society of Church History; and most recently (with Hugh McLeod), *Secularization and Religious Innovation in the North Atlantic World* (Oxford University Press, 2017). He is currently preparing a book from the 2021 Gifford Lectures.