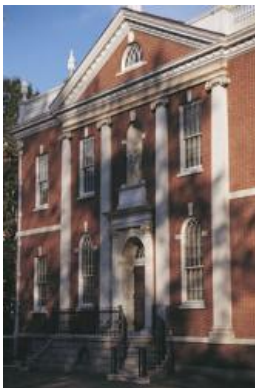


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# Liberal Theology and Theological Education — A Cautionary Tale

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The history of theological education in the United States is a convoluted tale involving a host of institutions — each with its own story. *The New York Times* recently looked at one of these stories in its article, “[A Seminary Where a Bicentennial Looks Forward.](#)”

The focus of the article falls on the [Andover Newton Theological School](#) in Newton, Massachusetts (part of metropolitan Boston). Reporter Richard Higgins began his article with a look at the school’s 200th anniversary:

*At the Andover Newton Theological School here, banquets, exhibitions and church services proclaim the bicentennial this year of the school’s founding as the Andover Theological Seminary.*

*The Rev. Nick Carter, its president, celebrates the seminary’s history proudly, but he is more engaged by how the school will adapt to the deep ferment in American religion and survive until the 250th anniversary and beyond.*

The focus on institutional survival may surprise some readers, but many theological seminaries are in deep institutional crisis, and several have simply ceased to exist as institutions for the training and education of ministers. The survival of freestanding institutions (not related directly to a larger university) is especially in question in many denominations.

As Higgins reports:

*The nation has 165 seminaries, but 39 percent of seminary students attend just 20 of them. The 20 large institutions, all but two evangelical Christian, raise substantial money, have big endowments or receive moderate to high denominational support — or do all three.*

*In addition, nonsectarian theological and divinity schools that exist within a university also tend to be in good shape.*

*But a majority of Protestant seminaries are smaller independents, and many, including Andover Newton, lack adequate endowments. The mainline churches that parented the older seminaries have sharply cut financial support.*

*A result, said Daniel O. Aleshire, executive director of the National Association of Theological Schools, is that around 30 seminaries are in financial stress. In the future, Mr. Aleshire said, “There may be just two kinds of seminaries, those with substantial endowments or effective annual giving and the nonexistent.”*

There is a wealth of data in those paragraphs. Virtually 4 out of 10 students enrolled in the nation’s 165 seminaries are in just 20 schools — and all but 2 of the twenty are classified as evangelical. This is an amazing imbalance, but it is essentially tied to the dramatic decline of Protestant liberalism.

Look carefully at this section of the report:

*The nation's first full-time graduate theological school, the Andover Theological Seminary was started by orthodox Calvinists who fled Harvard after it embraced Unitarianism. The school opened in 1808 at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass.*

*Until then, ministerial training had been undergraduate, capped by parlor study under a pastor. Andover started three years' graduate study of four subjects under a residential faculty: the Bible, church history, doctrinal theology and the practical arts of ministry.*

*That model became the gold standard, although Andover Newton has long since changed it. Andover Seminary, a bastion of Christian evangelical and missionary zeal, moved here in 1931 to an early Baptist seminary campus, merging in 1965.*

*Today, Andover Newton maintains ties to the United Church of Christ and the American Baptist churches and has 380 students from 35 denominations. One-fourth are Unitarian Universalists.*

Andover Theological Seminary was indeed the first freestanding seminary in the United States and it was, as this report indicates, "started by orthodox Calvinists who fled Harvard after it embraced Unitarianism." But then look at the fact that today one-fourth of the students enrolled in the school are Unitarian-Universalists. The school is also tied to the United Church of Christ, the nation's most liberal mainline denomination. The school now represents the very beliefs its founders sought to oppose.

Andover Newton underwent a massive theological transformation over a period beginning in the late 19th century and continuing into the 20th. One historian of American higher education referred to the "liberal takeover of the Andover Theological Seminary" and traced its influence on other New England institutions. As far back as 1886 the editors of the school's faculty journal commented that the "Christian faith is not necessarily committed to the infallibility of the Bible."

Even as Andover Newton now shares its campus with a Jewish institution in order to save funds, *The Christian Century* reports that institutions associated with the Episcopal Church are also struggling. As John Dart reports:

*The deans of Episcopal seminaries warned bishops and other church leaders last year that their theological schools must deal creatively with hard financial realities. The schools can no longer function separately as "11 little grocery stores trying to sell the same products to the church," declared Donn Morgan of Berkeley, California, then convener of the Council of Deans.*

*The challenges have been felt not only in the Episcopal Church—which has been torn by breakaway parishes and dissenting dioceses—but in virtually all U.S. denominations, added Ward Ewing of New York City, the current council convener. "Seminaries are in the midst of major transformational change," Ewing told bishops in September.*

*Actions by three Episcopal seminaries reflected that crisis. Pullback plans were announced by schools in Evanston, Illinois, and Rochester, New York. A promising financial partnership was struck in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

The Episcopal Church USA has experienced a catastrophic loss of members over the last several decades, and recent controversies over sexuality and biblical authority have only served to drive more members and congregations out of the denomination. The crisis in the denomination's seminaries should come as no surprise.

These two reports should serve to remind us all of what happens when theological liberalism takes control — the institutions and the denominations pass into decline. Theological liberalism undermines the Christian faith, turning it into another religion entirely. There should be no shock in the fact that this is also a recipe for institutional collapse.

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Historical material on Andover Theological Seminary is taken from Glenn T. Miller, *Piety and Profession: American Theological Education, 1870-1970* (Eerdmans, 2007), pages 134-153.

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