

Sorting Out The Puzzle of U.S. Theological Education*

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The institutional configuration of U.S. and Canadian theological education in the professional preparation of Jewish and Christian clergy is a puzzle even to those who participate in it. Post-baccalaureate academic programs for clergy education exist, for instance, in universities, liberal arts colleges, and “free standing” seminaries. The sheer variety of names for the various settings of theological education intensifies the puzzle: divinity schools, schools of theology, theological schools, graduate departments of theology, theological seminaries, schools of religion and religious studies, institutes, seminaries, houses of study, and even a college or two. This list does not begin to account for approaches to clergy education that are not dependent on the baccalaureate degree—schooling programs in Bible colleges, apprenticeship programs in congregations, and formation programs in monastic settings. Nor does this list of names suggest a typology of institutional programs or emphases. For instance, one often hears the claim that divinity schools are associated with major research universities while seminaries are free standing and autonomous institutions. While it is true that major research universities such as Harvard, Yale, Chicago, Duke, Vanderbilt and Howard do have divinity schools, not all divinity schools are linked to major universities. The independent and free standing Colgate Rochester Divinity School, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and several Episcopal divinity schools are examples. Meanwhile, Methodists historically identified most of their university based programs of theological education with the other professional “schools” being established on the modern university campus; hence the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, Candler School of Theology at Emory University, Iliff School of Theology at Denver University, Boston School of Theology at Boston University.

Some of this confusion may be traced to the confluence of different historic traditions in U.S. clergy education. Cambridge was the model for Harvard and Yale colleges. The scholarship of the 19th German universities influenced both the organization of the curriculum and the institutional setting for clergy education on the university campus and in free standing institutions among both Christians and Jews. Permeating these academic institutions were influences from the Yeshiva for Jews, the monastery for Catholic and Orthodox Christians along with the apprenticeship patterns of both residential clergy in New England and the circuit rider of the frontier, the Bible training school for many Protestant denominations, and the expanding attention given to issues of professional identity and practice in higher education.

The puzzle is compounded further by the variety of approaches among the religious traditions regarding the relationship of the clergy education experience and ordination. In Jewish seminaries the faculty ordains students who have successfully completed a two year Master of Arts degree program and an additional three year program in rabbinical education. The processes leading toward ordination for Orthodox Christian and for Roman Catholic students are integrally woven into their seminary experience. Graduates from these programs are assumed to be prepared for ordination by the church. The story for most Protestant theological students, however, varies widely. In some denominational schools, candidacy procedures for ordination

may function interdependently with the academic program (especially for Lutherans, Anglicans, and Presbyterians), but authority for education and ordination are clearly distinguished. In other denominational schools and in those schools with a diverse denominational constituency, students preparing for ordained ministry work simultaneously on their academic programs and the candidacy processes run by their respective denominations designed to help them articulate and assess their readiness for ministry along the way. For these students and for students not seeking ordination, the Master of Divinity is a professional academic degree, not a license to be ordained.

The binding structure for most Christian academic ventures in clergy education is the accreditation process of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). All but approximately thirty of the Christian programs and most Jewish seminaries also work within the accrediting standards of the regional college and university accreditation agencies. This means that the puzzle of the configuration of U.S. clergy education may be clarified to an extent, through the standards they share. These include the common practice of admission after the completion of a baccalaureate degree and the development of shared curricular expectations. Although the specifics of the curriculum will vary from institution to institution, they typically include four elements:

1. Instruction in sacred texts, the doctrinal or theological tradition of the community of faith and/or practice and the social and institutional history of that community;
2. attention to contemporary cultural and social issues and their significance for clergy leadership, using the insights of the arts and humanities, the natural sciences, and the social sciences;
3. programs to provide for students' growth in personal faith and/or practice, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness;
4. reflection on and education for the practices associated with clergy leadership.^a

Completion of this program of study, which may last from three years in most Protestant and Orthodox Christian schools to four years in Lutheran schools to four or five years in Catholic schools, culminates in the Master of Divinity degree for Christians, and after five to six years with ordination in Jewish schools.

A broad comparative overview of the curricula from several schools is attached. In U.S. clergy education, courses range in size from 5-50 (or higher) students, typically 15-30, and are taught using a variety of pedagogies, although some pattern of lecture and discussion remains a dominant form. Assignments take many forms, from readings and research papers to reflective exercises to preparation of creative team presentations. Assessment may or may not include formal exams. Item #3 above sometimes includes required or elective coursework but typically takes place through extra-curricular programs such as participation in chapel, spiritual direction, faith-sharing groups, and the like. Although considerable experimentation may currently be seen in approaches to clergy leadership (item #4 above), students usually work toward these goals through a combination of coursework (in religious education, homiletics, pastoral care, etc.), supervised field experience in congregational or other settings, Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), internships, and theological reflection groups or courses to help students integrate their field experience with their academic studies (and vice versa). In distinction from some European

^a See Section 4, "The Theological Curriculum" (2.1.1), *Basic Programs Oriented Toward Ministerial Leadership*, Association of Theological Schools Institutional Standards (Web Citation).

models, no formal set of exams typically concludes the program of study, although some schools (such as the two U.S. Jesuit seminaries) do require all students to pass “comps” in their final semester, and some schools make provision for honors work with exceptionally gifted students.

Even as the story of clergy education in the U.S. involves the confluence of several academic and religious traditions, contemporary social and demographic changes continue to influence its future. For instance, while Catholic and Anglican candidates for the priesthood must earn their M.Div. degrees from academic programs approved by their dioceses, most other Protestant candidates have greater freedom in choosing the site of their theological education, as long as they also complete the ordination requirements of their denomination. Thus the pressures of economics and demographics mean that in most programs of theological education there is more fluidity across denominational and theological traditions than in past generations; more racial and cultural diversity; and greater numbers of older students with spouses and children who hesitate to move their families great distances across the country to a denominationally sponsored school.

Other demographic changes further challenge the shape of contemporary Jewish and Christian theological education in the United States. Increasing numbers of commuter students live at home and drive to school one or more days a week for classes. More and more students work part to full time to defray school expenses. Although most seminaries are unable to obviate the necessity of students’ working, some seminaries do resist, or simply lament, the trend toward increasing populations of commuting students, given the difficulty under these circumstances of establishing the intimate forms of relationship most effective for professional and spiritual formation. Other seminaries embrace these trends and in fact cultivate even more forms of “distance learning” (satellite campuses, weekend-intensive courses, on-line courses, etc.) to open their offerings even further; yet they struggle with how to foster within such short-term or “virtual” contexts the relationality and maturity in faith, practice, and psyche at the heart of face-to-face ministry. In retrospect, in these and other ways, the current era in clergy education may be seen as one of transition in mission and program.

Beyond the basic educational programs in clergy education, some research universities (Harvard, Chicago, Yale, Duke, Notre Dame, Vanderbilt, Catholic University, Emory, Perkins, Baylor), some free standing schools in collaboration with a research university (Union, Claremont, Graduate Theological Union), and some free-standing seminaries (Jewish Theological Seminary, Princeton, the Southern Baptist seminaries, some of the Lutheran seminaries, Fuller) also grant the Ph.D. Most theological institutions offer an academic masters to equip persons for teaching or research in the field. Many, especially among free standing schools, may offer a range of related professional ministry degrees from sacred music to counseling to religious education. They all share, however, the basic standards identified with the Master of Divinity degree in the educational preparation of clergy for ministry.

A COMPARISON OF CURRICULUM REQUIREMENTS IN SELECTED U.S. PROGRAMS FOR CLERGY EDUCATION (in semester hours)

	Mainline Protestant Eden St. Louis	Jewish JTS New York	Catholic St. John's Camarillo, CA	University Yale New Haven	Evangelical Protestant Fuller Pasadena, CA
Textual Studies	21	63	18	12	17
History	9	9	12	18	8
Theology/ Ethics	9	6	34		15
Society/ Cultural Studies		12		9	
Law		12	3		
Ministry	21	30	36	12	27
Electives	36	36	9	21	18
Languages		12 Hebrew	Proficiency Spanish		6 Hebrew/Greek
TOTAL	81	168	111	72	91
	3 yrs.	5 yrs.	4 yrs + intern year	3 yrs	3 yrs

* This essay was written for theological educators from Great Britain and Germany attending a conference at Oxford University to describe some of the distinctive features of U.S. seminary education.