

The History of the Boston Theological Institute

The Boston Theological Institute is rooted in the history of theological reflection in New England and in the schools that were formed in this region for the training of clergy. The remarks that follow on the history of the BTI are taken from the thesis written by Brian Boisen, "A Brief History of the First Twenty-Five Years of The Boston Theological Institute," submitted to the Department of Church History of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary for the requirements of the degree Master of Arts, 15 April 1994. This history was written on the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the BTI, acknowledged with a symposium titled "Christianity and Civil Society: Theological Education and Public Life" (published by Orbis Books, 1995).

Note should be made of the book, *Religion at Harvard. 1636-1992* by George H. Williams with Rodney L. Petersen, General Editor (forthcoming). Chapter 10 (pp. 552 ff. is particularly relevant). No systematic attempt has been made to update the Boisen history of the BTI although reference should be made to the following files: 1) History of Grants 1990-2011; 2) History of Programming; and 3) History of Costas Consultation in Global Mission.

I. Pre-1966 Environment

It is important to have some sense of the environment which inspired the conversations which eventually led to the formation of the Boston Theological Institute in academic year 1967-1968.

The "Sixties" have become a metaphor for upheaval and change, especially in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement, Sexual Revolution, and national debate concerning the nature of the Viet Nam War all conspired to bring a new social climate to the United States. These three events have continued to shaped the social history of the United States into the contemporary period.

Social distress was evident as America reflected on its activities domestic and abroad. The Civil Rights Movement brought attention to the country's ugly heritage of racist arrogance and systematic oppression. Segregation was passionately attacked by a growing public outcry, and the retaliations proved to be as zealous. Students and clergy from across the country joined Black communities as solutions were fought for. There also grew a growing realization of the male dominance that permeated society, which brought to the fore attention to women's issues and a quickly developing feminist agenda.

Social distress was intensified as the United States entered into militaristic conflict in the Far East, sending troops into Viet Nam and Cambodia to fight the "Red Scare" of communism. Though the conflict could not have reached America directly, it created an internal wound that festered and grew. Criticism was organized and openly demonstrated. Coast to coast students and others actively protested the United State's presence in Viet Nam and Cambodia as a generation became disillusioned with the values that their country portrayed.

Within this period there was a great shift in ecclesial understanding as well. The waves created by The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) both stirred up excitement and created a great confusion with the Roman Catholic Church. As bishops and their priests across the world struggled with awkward variables in liturgy, the ecumenical seed that had been sown in the Council was embraced and explored. Catholics looked with new freedom for opportunities to undo the isolation that had for centuries frustrated their relations with the Protestant churches.

Conciliar ecumenism, specifically in the work of the World Council of Churches and the various National Councils, gained a momentum during this time. There was great excitement with the ecclesial pursuits of understanding and cooperation amongst the Protestant churches and Eastern Orthodox representatives, as well as seeing the first official Vatican observers in the WCC's General Assembly. Within those pursuits was an increased incorporation of the social agenda. Though an assassin's bullet prevented it from happening, Martin Luther King, Jr. was invited to deliver the opening sermon for the WCC's Fourth General Assembly in 1968. Expressed both in the WCC's statements and actions and in the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, it was recognized that the churches were to tend to their own internal strife and to join as a common voice to address and effect the greater world society.

This began to be expressed in theological education with the emergence of seminary "clustering". Berkeley California's Graduate Theological Union was established in 1962 when nine independent graduate theological schools joined together to create a cooperative doctoral degree. Various Protestant schools incorporated with Franciscan, Dominican, and Jesuit schools, creating a unique phenomena and opportunity in the world of theological education.

Boston also enjoyed degrees of cooperation in theological education. Four of its major Protestant graduate theological schools in Boston had enjoyed "for over fifty years now" the agreed upon privilege of cross registration amongst themselves. Philosophers William James (1842-1910) had once referred to such cooperation as evidence of a "University of Theology" in the Greater Boston with Josiah Royce (1855-1916) developing the term "building the beloved community," later to be picked up by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Martin Luther King, Jr. There was also an active bi-annual series of "Joint Seminars in Ecumenical Theology", which by 1967 involved faculty and/or students from ten schools of the Greater

Boston area. Lastly was a growing movement in cooperative Field Education training, which involved a number of schools including Episcopal Theological School, Holy Cross, and Saint John's Seminary.

II. CABAL, 1966

By 1966 a group of seminary leaders representing the schools felt ready to pursue incorporation for the Boston Theological Institute (BTI). The school representatives that had been attending the Cabal meetings became the Executive Committee (EC) of the BTI, and they continued to work through the matters necessary for incorporation. To assist them with this, they decided on the enlisting of an Executive Secretary to oversee the process. Tjaard Hommes was initially hired as the Executive Secretary, but due to his responsibilities as Field Education Director at HDS, he was only able to serve half-time. Eventually he was joined by Fr. Charles Von Euv from Saint John's Seminary as Co-Executive Secretary.

During this time Walter Muelder, then chair of the BTI, had been in communication with Henry Pitt Van Dusen, former president of Union Theological Seminary in New York. Muelder had invited Van Dusen to Boston to serve as a consultant for the BTI. After a number of communications, a five-day visit to Boston was arranged, and Van Dusen spent that time meeting with members of the EC as well as visiting with faculty and students of each school. After he gathered his reflections, Van Dusen presented a report to the EC, relating his impressions and presenting suggestions. He reported that the over-arching impression is that every one of the seven (at that time) schools is committed unqualifiedly and wholeheartedly to its participation in the Boston Theological Institute, looks forward to its development of a definite program with high expectations, and believes that the time has come to translate the broad general intentions of the past eighteen month's discussions and the decisions recorded last spring into definite action.

Van Dusen also worked through the various records and minutes from the Cabal months, analyzing the group's objectives. From this he discovered a pattern, a tension that would follow the BTI throughout its life: With respect to program, much of the early discussions in Cabal envisioned the BTI as an agency through which the participating schools together might undertake projects which no one of them alone was able or interested to undertake; in other words, the emphasis was on "the new". In later discussions, however, the emphasis appears to have changed towards the conception of the Institute as an instrument through which the participating schools might collaboratively do more adequately and effectively the central tasks of theological education to which each of them is committed; in other words, the emphasis is upon the enrichment and enlargement of the existing programs.

Van Dusen was particularly excited about the potential that he saw within the BTI, claiming that: "From the realizable fulfillment of these potentialities, if correctly grasped and vigorously and imaginatively implemented, there should eventuate--and in a relatively short space of time--the unchallenged foremost center of theological learning and training in the western hemisphere which, in addition to its immediate and direct services to common goals, may well demonstrate examples and supply models for other possible centers of theological education and thus indirectly render an incalculable service to the larger cause of leadership for the Church of Christ in our day."

It was to realize this great potentiality that the original drafters of the BTI desired to establish the degree granting power of the Institute. They understood that the strength needed to facilitate the desired level of academic cooperation and ecumenical interaction would have to stem from truly integrated activities common amongst the schools. It was also recognized that the integrity of this integration was dependent upon the sense of equality with which each school participated. In a letter, Muelder expressed his concern that this integrity might be jeopardized without the degree: "The history of our discussions point to the incorporation of the Boston Theological Institute with degree granting power at the doctoral level. One of the principle reasons is that Boston University and Harvard now offer doctoral degrees and the participating schools should not be in a position to be only feeder schools for these universities with respect to advanced graduate programs."

The difficulty with the realization of this goal was most actively its being rejected by the Harvard Corporation. During the time that incorporation was being pursued, Harvard approached the subject of its participation with great care. It demanded that the Institute have a stable financial base, as mentioned above, before it would commit its resources to the venture. Yet the most profound difficulty for Harvard was the issue of degree granting power. Helmut Koester, HDS's liaison to the BTI, worked with Walter Muelder as they negotiated back and forth with Harvard, until finally Harvard stated absolutely that there would be no power to grant degrees: "Mr. Pusey emphasizes in his letter that Harvard University must by all means maintain its policy to keep exclusive control over all degrees which are granted and thus no arrangement is possible in which Harvard or a department of Harvard would assume responsibility for a degree shared with other institutions. I am afraid that as long as the degree-granting clause is in the Statement of Purpose, we will have no chance whatsoever to get permission from the Harvard Corporation now or in the foreseeable future."

This was then translated to the rest of the EC in a "Supplementary Statement" which first stated Harvard's firm position, and then went on to provide further reasoning. Koester argued that the primary need for the Institute was to establish itself through incorporation. To pursue the power to grant degrees would greatly complicate the process of incorporation, and as such it in itself would frustrate the objectives of the BTI. Also, as Koester pointed out, "there is a question of benefit of the degree-granting phrase at this present time since there is no immediate intention of initiating advanced degree programs under the auspices of the Institute. It was pointed out that it would be a wiser and sounder policy to apply for such permission from the Commonwealth at a later date when the Institute is sufficiently consolidated in its efforts." Koester then reasoned that with the affiliation of all the schools, degree candidates could do a large portion of their work under the guidance of faculty from anywhere in the constituency, without it being directly a BTI degree.

The conclusion of the discussion was that in November of 1967 the EC voted for the dropping of the degree-granting phrase from the Purpose Statement. With this done, Koester reported to Muelder that in late November the Harvard Corporation voted to approve HDS's participation in the BTI. This cleared the way. During the December EC meeting James Garfield passed around the appropriate documents for signatures, and on 9 January 1968, the Boston Theological Institute was officially incorporated in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

With incorporation the BTI was ready to begin its life. A press release was issued for December 10th, in which the Institute was announced and its activities described. In it the various "Task Forces" of the BTI were listed, including Urban Studies, Field Education, Continued Education, Library, and Curriculum. Also the search for an Executive Director was initiated, and soon the name of Walter Wagoner was mentioned. By February Wagoner had accepted the position, to be effective that July.

Wagoner, and in a sense the BTI, was received by Boston in a series of three events. In April Wagoner was met by faculty members of the seven member schools. In early May the EC held a reception for "the Religious Leaders of Boston", in which Muelder expressed the BTI's recognition of debt to these leaders for the "spiritual climate" of cooperation which allowed for the BTI to be born, and the BTI's expressed desire to endeavor together with the churches of Boston as "colleagues" to fulfill their "common obligation under Christ". The third event, which was to take place in October, was a full convocation in which an entire day was devoted to administrators, faculty, and students from all the schools would join together to celebrate the BTI and to stand together in a "corporate ecumenical commitment to theological education". Amidst such fanfare Walter Wagoner took his position as the first Executive Director of the BTI.

III. Some Aspects of Theological Education in New England Religious History

The following time line is suggestive of some of the significant events that have shaped the histories of the schools that comprise the Boston Theological Institute and s related generally to the emergence of the theological consortium.

Colonial Period, 1636:

Founding of Harvard College by vote of the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Called the "school of the prophets," the study of theology preeminently under the covenants of works and of grace was central to the founding of what would become Harvard University.

The first professorship in Harvard College and the oldest in what would become the United States of America was the Hollis Professorship of Divinity, endowed in 1721.

- **Nineteenth Century:**
 - 1807: Founding of Andover Theological Seminary, the oldest graduate school in theology in the country, as a separate department of divinity of Phillips Andover Academy.
 - 1811-16: Founding of Harvard Divinity School as a non-sectarian school of theology and and of a liberal Protestantism, to become generally Unitarian after the formation of the American Unitarian Association in 1825. Under Harvard University President Nathan Pusey (1953-1971) the Divinity School would appropriate a wider orthodox and intentional perspective, noted presently for its interest in the wider study of religion.
 - 1825: Founding of Newton Theological Institute, oldest Baptist Seminary in the USA.
 - 1831-36: Founding of Episcopal Theological School, established in Cambridge in 1867.
 - 1839-69: Founding of The Seminary (or, The Methodist Theological School) at Newbury, Vermont and Concord, New Hampshire. The school moved to Boston in 1867 as the Boston Theological Seminary, becoming Boston University in 1869. The Seminary, the oldest Methodist Seminary in the USA, would become Boston University School of Theology.
 - 1863: Founding of Boston College one of the oldest Jesuit founded universities in the USA, presently providing theological leadership through its Department of Theology.

- 1883: Founding of the Boston Ecclesiastical Seminary, to become Saint John's Seminary, serving the local archdiocese and wider mission of the Roman Catholic Church.
- 1889: Founding of the Boston Missionary Training School, to become Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and the Center for Urban Ministerial Education.
- Early Twentieth Century: 1908: Andover Theological Seminary and Harvard Divinity School attempt to merge together as an institution, only to separate again in 1931.
- 1922-32: Formation of Weston School of Theology taking the name Weston Jesuit School of Theology in 1994.
- 1937: Founding of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Pomfret, Connecticut
- 1947: Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology moves to Brookline, Massachusetts.
- Late Twentieth Century: 1965: Andover Theological Seminary and Newton Baptist Institute merge to become Andover Newton Theological School.

IV. Aspects of Theological Education Related to BTI

- 1967/68: Founding of the Boston Theological Institute, to be a "University" of the different theological schools in the Greater Boston area (picking up language from William James and Josiah Royce).
- 1971: The Boston College Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry is established to educate men and women in religious education and pastoral ministry, offering academic-year and summer study
- Union List of Serials developed as prominent effort in library cooperation (to continue until mid-1990's).
- 1974: the Episcopal Theological School and the Philadelphia Divinity School merged to form Episcopal Divinity School.
- 1976: Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary's Center for Urban Ministerial Education opened in the Martin Luther King Jr. House of Twelfth Baptist Church, Roxbury. Later becomes Gordon-Conwell's Boston branch campus.
- 1985: The Annual Costas Consultation in Global Mission grows out of the increasing concern among BTI faculty and students to find a forum to address issues of global mission and ecumenical ecclesial and ethical cooperation. The annual forum is named in memory of Orlando E. Costas, Academic Dean of Andover Newton, in 1989.
- 1990: CUME moves to its present location in Jamaica Plain.
- 1991: Beginning of BTI seminar-workshops under Petersen to enlarge ecumenical learning and formation.
- 1992: Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary founds its Charlotte, North Carolina branch campus.
- 1993: Religion and Ecology Programming begins with work with the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Pew Charitable Trusts. BTI work in science and religion (in four tracks) emerges out of this.
- 1996 Beginning of BTI certificate programs at the instigation of Weston Jesuit School of Theology and Sister Margaret Guider. First one: International Mission and Ecumenism.
- 1997: BTI adds to the annual overseas workshop studying the role of religion in social conflict, with accompanying documentary video series. Initial trip studies Northern Ireland, with later trips studying the Balkans, South Africa and the Middle East. Series grew out of overseas study series beginning 1991.
- 1997: The *Journal of Faith and Science Exchange* begins with Templeton funding; continues as a print journal through 2001; later re-started as an e-journal.
- 1997: Beginning of certificates in science and religion.
- 1999: Beginning of certificates in Youth and Young Adult Ministry
- 2001: Beginning of the *Bulletin of the Boston Theological Institute*, under Petersen at the trustees' encouragement; Marian Simion to be founding editor; later to be renamed, *BTI Magazine*.
- 2001: Beginning of certificates in Religion and Conflict Transformation.
- 2002: Hebrew College and Rabbinical School (founded, 1921) moves to campus adjacent to Andover Newton Theological School.
- 2010 Boston – "The Changing Contours of World Mission and Christianity," one of four major international conferences (with Tokyo, Edinburgh, and Cape Town) making the centennial of the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference.
- 2011 Hebrew College with its Rabbinical School joins the BTI, marking a new interfaith as well as ecumenical identity for the consortium.