

Greater Understanding



During a four-decade career working in museums across the United States, Lonnie G. Bunch III has perceived an interesting gap in how museums have traditionally captured the history of the United States in exhibitions, collections and educational programs.

“I’ve asked myself, ‘Where can I learn about the complexity of spirituality and religion in America?’” recalls Bunch, who is secretary of the Smithsonian Institution based in Washington, D.C. “It was rarely there. Even though the notion of religion is important, cultural institutions have tended to shy away from it. They may mention it but with no deep understanding.”

Yet, he contends you can’t fully comprehend U.S. history or where the nation is headed without considering the role of religion. That’s why Bunch led the Smithsonian’s effort to create the Center for the Study of African American Religious Life, which was supported by a \$10 million Endowment grant in 2015. It is based at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, where Bunch served as founding director.

Recognizing the important role religion plays in shaping American life, the Endowment is continuing to make grants to support the efforts of museums and to fund documentaries, public radio broadcasts and podcasts that strengthen the public’s understanding of religion. These grants are in addition to grants the Endowment has made that are helping Religion News Service and The Conversation U.S., in collaboration with The Associated Press, strengthen their news reporting about religion.

How Religion Shapes American Life



Exhibitions explore religion's role in American culture

Through its **Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative**, the Endowment asked museums to consider how an exploration of religion could help them further their missions. The initiative began with a series of planning grants in 2019, followed by grants totaling more than \$43 million that are funding implementation of projects at 18 museums and historic sites around the nation. They include grants supporting efforts at four Smithsonian museums and cultural centers: The Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, the National Museum of American History, the National Museum of African Art and the National Museum of Asian Art.

Funding has helped the Smithsonian establish a Center for the Understanding of Religion in American History and endow a curator in religion to run the center. Peter Manseau now directs the center. As different Smithsonian museums explore the place of religion in their collections and exhibitions they are reflecting important perspectives on religion, Manseau says.

“American religion has been diverse from the very beginning; it has never been about one religious tradition or even several religious traditions,” he says. “It always has been about the interactions of many traditions.”

Manseau adds that religion is embedded throughout American culture, not restricted to houses of worship or personal religious practice. These are aspects that the Smithsonian is working to illuminate through its exhibitions and public programs.

- Smithsonian Institution museums and cultural centers are mounting exhibitions, educational programs and performances that feature religion.



“Lilly Endowment gave us the opportunity to take an area like religion, which can be considered controversial, and make it the key to understanding who we are as a people, who we are as a nation,” Bunch says. “It’s important to let people understand how, in many ways, religion has been a glue in America and then sometimes a hammer that divides.”

Encouraging new conversations about religion

Longtime journalist Krista Tippett developed her own curiosity about the public’s perception of religion following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in America in 2001. “I was aware that the diversity within religious traditions had been lost in terms of a public imagination,” Tippett recalls. “There was one way to be religious. One way to be a Christian. One way to be Muslim. Those were the things I wanted to shine a light on.”

When Tippett proposed a religion-themed program for public radio in 2003, the idea was met with trepidation.

“It was very controversial to talk about religion on public radio,” she says. “There were a lot of skeptics. I just had to do it and show that it didn’t have to fulfill everybody’s worst imagination. It didn’t have to be proselytizing. And, yes, it could be intelligent. It wouldn’t necessarily make everybody angry or feel exclusionary.”

The result of that effort is “On Being,” a multi-media project that began as a one-hour weekly public radio show. It has aired on more than 400 public radio stations each week, and podcasts of the show have been downloaded more than 300 million times. Tippett has plans eventually to end the public radio show and focus “On Being” more on podcasts and other digital media formats.

Through “On Being,” Tippett explores the human condition through conversations with guests that cover topics such as grief, healing, beauty, loneliness, fear, eternity and goodness. Guests have ranged from theologians and clergy to scientists and researchers, including the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the primatologist Jane Goodall, Franciscan Catholic priest Richard Rohr and Rabbi Sandy Sasso.

The Endowment’s support for “On Being” and other efforts that help strengthen public understanding of religion reflects a recognition that people are increasingly interested in engaging with religious and spiritual ideas and questions outside of traditional religious institutions.

“This idea that it has to be a certain way and everybody turns up at a certain time in a certain place to practice religion is not the case anymore,” Tippett says. “This change is not just happening to religion; it’s happening to all our institutions. The church and other organizations are all included in this cultural paradigm shift, and it really has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Yet, religious and spiritual traditions offer valuable context to contemporary inquiry. That’s why a recent grant to support “On Being” is helping the organization integrate the voices of more theologians into its content.

Searching for answers to life’s hard questions

Kate Bowler, a historian of Christianity at Duke Divinity, has developed a podcast that is inviting audiences to explore their own spiritual and religious journeys. Called “Everything Happens with Kate Bowler,” the podcast grew out of her own deeply personal experience.

Bowler had spent much of her academic career researching the prosperity gospel in Christianity. But when she learned that she had life-threatening colon cancer at the age of 35, she began to step away from the objective, detached work of research and started asking questions that have altered her work and her faith life. Among the questions: “Was this meant for my life?” and “What does it mean to be a Christian in this world?”

■ | Lonnie Bunch, Krista Tippett and Kate Bowler (from top)





“I used to be more of a belief-centered, idea-centered person, where I really appreciated Christianity for its very good arguments,” she says.

Since the diagnosis, which came after repeated attempts to get doctors to take her symptoms seriously, Bowler says, “I’ve needed so much love to hold my life together. I had a very powerful experience of God’s love when I felt largely disposable in a medical system that almost killed me.”

Since 2019, Endowment grants to Duke University have helped fund Bowler’s podcast. Named after her 2018 spiritual memoir “Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I’ve Loved),” it features Bowler’s conversations with cultural and religious figures that have included author Malcolm Gladwell, actor Matthew McConaughey, Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry, theologian Barbara Brown Taylor and Harvard University psychologist Susan David.

Bowler and her guests talk candidly about love, fear, uncertainty and loneliness—experiences that span people of all backgrounds, she notes. These conversations are especially needed today when people, she says, are looking for new ways to cope with challenges caused by the pandemic, social unrest and difficult personal circumstances. For many people, she adds, the old sources of comfort no longer work.

“We’re in the midst of an authenticity crisis, in which people are naturally quite skeptical of institutions and conventional leadership models,” Bowler contends. “People really want to hear the sometimes-messy wrestling with hard spiritual

questions for which there often isn’t an obvious answer, and we have to find ways to stand in emotional intellectual traffic somewhere and be worthy of these conversations.”

Finding spiritual inspiration in the Black church

The Black church, which has served as a source of spiritual inspiration for Black Americans during incredibly difficult times, can serve as a source of comfort to all Americans, according to Harvard University scholar, filmmaker and author Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Gates, who directed the 2021 public television documentary “The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song,” says his work on the film further convinced him that the Black church has the potential to inform and fortify people of all faiths and backgrounds as they deal with difficult challenges.

“My biggest realization was that the Black church was a cultural laboratory,” Gates says of the project, which was largely funded by Lilly Endowment and produced by the public broadcasting station WETA in Washington, D.C.

■ The National Museum of Asian Art featured an exhibition, *The Art of the Qur’an* (above). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (right) directed the documentary “The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song.”



“(The church) was the basis for economic institutions as it was the first self-sustaining institution funded by regular Black people with nickels, dimes and pennies,” he says. “And among the freemen and freedwomen in the South, the church was pivotal in terms of being an organizational center for Black reconstruction and ensuring Black men were able to vote.”

However, those lessons weren’t solely tied to financial and civil rights developments, Gates says. The well-received documentary, which debuted in February 2021 on PBS stations nationwide, also detailed the impact of the Black church in helping enslaved people and their descendants endure oppression.

“These people were picking cotton and being beaten and raped. Yet, they still held on to their belief in God, creating a culture of hope,” Gates says. “I wanted to preserve a record of that—the complex legacy of the Black church.”

Even though the role of the church in the Black community has evolved—especially now that Black people organize and forge influence through many avenues within American society—the church remains a model for transformation in the nation right now, Gates says.

“All Americans need the essence of the Black church because we’re in a crisis. We’re terrified. Given the rise of white supremacy and COVID, people are looking for hope,” Gates says. “People are looking for the reassurance the church gave us. It gives us calm, assurance, confidence and peace of mind to deal with modern pressures.”

Gates is at work on a second documentary in conjunction with WETA. It will explore the impact of the Black preaching tradition and Black gospel music on American society. A \$3.5 million Endowment grant to WETA in 2021 is supporting the project.

As the nation continues to grapple with formidable challenges, many will join Gates in finding comfort in the hope that religion has offered people across generations, Bunch says. Others will struggle to make sense of religion’s role because they are not part of a religious tradition or perhaps skeptical about faith matters. Yet Bunch contends that religion is important to the identities of all Americans because of who we are as a people. “As such,” he says “it’s something that needs to be explored in all its complexity.”

Public Understanding of Religion Grants

Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative

Grants totaling more than \$43 million are helping museums and other cultural institutions across the United States develop exhibitions and educational programs that fairly and accurately portray the role of religion in the U.S. and around the world. The Smithsonian Institution received grants to support efforts at three of its museums and one of its cultural centers and to enable the National Museum of American History to establish its Center or the Understanding of Religion in American History.

“The Black Church”

In 2018, the Endowment made a \$3 million grant to WETA (Greater Washington Educational Telecommunications Association) to support “The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song,” a four-hour public television documentary first broadcast in February 2021. It traces the 400-year story of the Black church in America. A \$3.5 million grant in 2021 is supporting a follow-up documentary that will explore the contributions of Black preaching and Black gospel music to American society.

“On Being”

Since 2004, Endowment grants have supported “On Being,” a radio show and podcast that originated at Minnesota Public Radio and is now produced through The On Being Project. A \$2 million grant in 2019 enabled the project to continue its weekly broadcasts and podcasts, expand theological content and strengthen its engagement with Christian congregations and other faith communities nationwide.

“Everything Happens with Kate Bowler”

Duke University has received grants in 2019 (\$649,021) and in 2021 (\$1.1 million) to support Duke Divinity School professor Kate Bowler and her colleagues as they produce the podcast, “Everything Happens with Kate Bowler.” The podcast is part of a larger multi-media project designed to help people draw more fully on the wisdom of Christian traditions as they face questions about faith, God, hope and suffering and how to live in the midst of uncertainty.



Initiative Provides Resources for Theology Schools Seeking New Pathways

Today's pastoral students are more diverse and preparing to minister to congregations with modern-day challenges.

- Matthew Wesley Williams is president of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, one of 84 theological schools in the U.S. and Canada funded through Phase 2 of the Pathways to Tomorrow Initiative.

“What has typically happened in theological education, in response to changing dynamics, is to reflexively change curriculum, look at our faculty, redesign classes,” Williams says. “Those are technical fixes when what is really needed is a change in institutional thinking. We have been thinking of symptoms, not systems.”

—Matthew Wesley Williams, Interdenominational Theological Center

In 2021, Lilly Endowment approved 84 grants of \$500,000 to \$1 million each to theological schools across the United States and Canada in the second phase of its Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative. This three-phase initiative is designed to help theological schools strengthen and sustain their capacities to prepare and support pastoral leaders for Christian congregations.

Theological schools have long played a central role in preparing pastors for Christian congregations, according to Frank M. Yamada, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). Today, these schools are facing significant challenges, due in great part to changes affecting both higher education and Christianity in North America.

The Endowment launched Pathways to assist theological schools in responding to these changes. Through an initial phase of assessment and planning grants, the Endowment invited theological schools to explore emerging challenges, gain clarity about their missions, assess educational strategies and financial operations, and design plans to become more educationally effective and financially viable for the future. The second phase grants are enabling selected schools to implement their plans.

Like most higher education institutions, theological schools are adapting to new delivery methods, including distance education, as they strive to recruit and serve new generations of students.

“The 21st century student is different in every way,” Yamada says.

He describes the typical 20th century theological student as a young white male raised in his parents’ Christian denomination. After college he enrolled in a seminary of that denomination and went on to serve a congregation of the same denomination.

Theological students today are from far more diverse backgrounds. They are often older, don’t live in seminary campus housing, and chances are they’re working and raising families while attending classes. They may already be serving congregations, but perhaps not in the denominations in which they were raised. They’re looking for affordability and flexibility.

The congregations these aspiring pastors will serve are changing, too. Many seminarians will serve churches in increasingly diverse contexts, which require a wider range of skills and competencies.

In response, theological schools are re-envisioning strategies to make educational programs more accessible and more relevant to emerging leadership challenges. Schools also are working to strengthen fundraising capacities to improve long-term financial stability and help make their programs more affordable for students.

“The Pathways initiative couldn’t have come at a better time,” Yamada says. “Schools were already contemplating how to rethink their strategy while continuing to fulfill their mission.”

New Wineskins

The Pathways initiative was especially timely for Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), a historically Black ecumenical graduate school in Atlanta. In 2020, under the leadership of Matthew Wesley Williams (ITC ’04), ITC initiated a process of institutional innovation, and in 2021 the Endowment awarded ITC a \$1 million grant through Phase 2 of the Pathways initiative.

The ground has shifted for religious institutions, and it’s time to question long-held assumptions about what it means to be an expression of the gospel in the world today, Williams says.

“What has typically happened in theological education, in response to changing dynamics, is to reflexively change curriculum, look at our faculty, redesign classes,” Williams says. “Those are technical fixes when what is really needed is a change in institutional thinking. We have been thinking of symptoms, not systems.”



“As the student experience is transformed, so too is the face of the Church as these missionary disciples go out to minister around the world.”

—Sr. Barbara Reid, Catholic Theological Union

The Endowment grant is helping ITC reimagine its entire approach. The seminary is exploring innovation in its educational model, institutional design, organizational assessment and governance. The goal: sustainably prepare pastoral leaders for viable vocations in the pulpit, parish, and public life, which ultimately strengthen the social impact of the Black church. ITC, Williams says, seeks to cultivate a new generation of “prophetic problem solvers” who build the capacity of Black congregations and communities to co-create alternatives to the status quo.

“The Pathways initiative enables theological schools space to ask the questions that matter, not just about leaders they produce, but also what it requires of the institution to cultivate the kind of leaders our congregations and communities need now,” Williams says. “Without new institutional imagination and design, anything we do at the academic and program level is just old wine in new wineskins.”

Co-Creating the Church of Tomorrow

Catholic Theological Union (CTU), a Roman Catholic graduate school of theology and ministry in Chicago, received a \$997,000 grant to launch its plan, Pathway for Tomorrow: Co-creating the Church of Tomorrow.

CTU President Sr. Barbara Reid, OP, a member of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids, Mich., says the school is committed to increasing the number of young adult ministers for the Catholic Church. In doing so, CTU is responding to new realities and emerging needs in the Church—including the need for more lay ecclesial ministers who will work with ordained priests and deacons in parishes.

Funding is helping the school engage more young adults from diverse backgrounds who are considering lay or ordained ministry and create a “living-learning community” that will be central to their theological and ministerial formation.

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—The Rev. Dr. Mark Labberton

Research CTU conducted as the school prepared its Pathways grant proposal indicated that young people want to be part of organizations and activities that are openly welcoming, empathetic and accepting, and that foster connections.

With that in mind, CTU has several goals for its Pathways Initiative grant. They include creating a focused appeal to young adults from Latino/Hispanic, Black, Asian American/Pacific Islander, and LGBTQ+ communities and building the living-learning community to nurture faith formation and help students recognize the connection between religion, discipleship and social change.

CTU also is taking deliberate steps to ensure that formation, coursework, and community life are integrated around preparing lay and ordained ministers to engage in more collaborative ministries that are inclusive and responsive to a changing world.

“Pope Francis has emphasized that every person is entrusted with the responsibility of being a missionary disciple,” Reid says. “As the student experience is transformed, so too is the face of the Church as these missionary disciples go out to minister around the world.”

Responding to the Changing Leadership Needs of Churches

Fuller Theological Seminary is using a \$1 million Pathways grant to launch the Indispensable Church Leadership Project. Located in Southern California, the nondenominational evangelical seminary created the project to make its degree and certificate programs more affordable for

aspiring and current students; to strengthen its course offerings by developing and testing new interdisciplinary curricula for ministerial candidates; and to reach more ministerial candidates and pastoral leaders through a stronger approach to digital learning.

“These new approaches are important as Fuller seeks to be responsive and creative during this exceptionally turbulent and daunting season in higher education, in theological education, in the Church, and in contexts everywhere,” says the Rev. Dr. Mark Labberton, president at Fuller.


Pastors, he says, need formation that is flexible and responsive to the times even while being rooted in the wisdom of Christian faith and tradition.

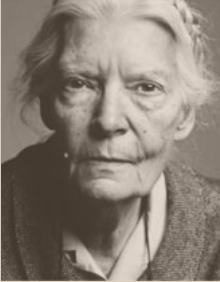
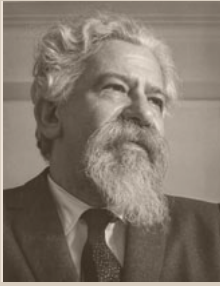
“We are not presuming people will serve within the reliable structures and predictable roles of the past. No one knows the models of the Church of the future,” Labberton says. “However, we trust the God of that future. In addition to embodied faith, we know that our graduates will require authenticity, courage, vulnerability and resilience, amidst ever-roiling change.”

Up Next: Collaboration

In Phase 3 of Pathways, the Endowment invited theological schools to submit concept papers for large-scale, collaborative projects that provide compelling and sustainable models for theological education. Selected schools were invited to submit full proposals for grants of up to \$5 million to fund projects that offer the potential to be replicated at other theological schools. The Endowment anticipates announcing Phase 3 grants in 2022.



 The Rev. Mark Labberton,
Fuller Theological Seminary



Abraham Joshua Heschel, Dorothy Day, Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (from top)



Documentaries Spotlight Leading Theologians and Their Impact on the World

Five of the most influential theologians of the 20th century are featured in a series of documentaries produced by Journey Films with support from Lilly Endowment. Based in Alexandria, Va., the non-profit film company this year is compiling a set of the documentaries called “Prophetic Voices,” which is designed to encourage congregations and interfaith groups to learn more about the lives of these extraordinary religious figures.

The films are “Spiritual Audacity: The Abraham Joshua Heschel Story” (2021), “Revolution of the Heart: The Dorothy Day Story” (2020), “Bucks Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story” (above) (2019), “An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story (2017)” and “Bonhoeffer” (2003).

“It is a great challenge in our current culture to tell stories about religion and faith,” says Martin Doblmeier, who founded Journey Films. “But these characters led such compelling lives, and their prophetic voices and writings shaped public moral discourse in the 20th century. Their stories still resonate with viewers today from all different backgrounds who are challenged and inspired by their lives.”

In support of four of the five films, the Endowment made grants totaling \$2.05 million to the MPT (Maryland Public Television) Foundation, which collaborates with Journey Films. Earlier grants to ETV Endowment of South Carolina supported Journey Film’s “Bonhoeffer” about the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. All five documentaries have been broadcast through PBS stations nationwide.

The grants are part of the Endowment’s support for efforts that seek to enhance the public understanding of religion.

Also in 2021, the Endowment made a grant of \$850,000 to the MPT Foundation to support a new Journey Films project about the practice of sabbath in American faith communities in the United States and its impact on the broader culture. Journey Films expects to release the documentary in 2022.