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Vanderbilt Divinity School: Education, Contest and Change

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The Vanderbilt Divinity School is one of only four university-based interdenominational institutions in the United States, and the only one in the South. As such, its history provides a distinct vantage point for viewing what has occurred in theological education since the latter part of the nineteenth century. In this book, the contributors explore the school's history in terms of four main themes:

Engagement with southern culture, present from the beginnings of the university but taking on special significance in the mid-twentieth century around the issue of race;

The transition from an institution of the church (Methodist) to an independent and interdenominational school with a liberal Protestant orientation;

The development of the modern research university, evident in the establishment of a graduate program in religion in addition to its program for the profession of ministry;

From the 1950s, a growing concern with diversity and inclusivity, in keeping with national and international issues and developments both religious and cultural, which has broadened the school's sense of ecumenism and deepened its commitments to social justice.

Conflict has played an important part in shaping the history of the Vanderbilt Divinity School, from struggles over initial visions to questions of financial support and institutional control, from local debates over academic freedom to national issues of social justice. Especially noteworthy are the transformations the school has undergone since 1960: the "James Lawson affair," where the divinity school faculty resigned over the expulsion of an African American graduate student who was organizing local lunch counter sit-ins; the impact of social change on the school since the late 1960s; and the contributions of women and African Americans, including their appointment to the faculty.

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