from CHURCH HISTORY
Harvard owes its existence to the study of religion. In 1636, endeavoring to assure that the next generation of ministers in the fledging American colonies were properly educated, the “Great and General Court of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England” approved the establishment of a college that would soon be known as Harvard. Though its initial mandate was to train ministers, over time the institution’s purpose broadened and secularized, though the study of religion—in practice and in theory—continued.
Two hundred years later, in 1816, Harvard Divinity School was established to continue the study of Christianity, but it wasn’t the only part of Harvard that considered such matters. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the study of religion thrived in the Department of Philosophy, spearheaded by luminaries such as William James and George Santayana who considered problems of morality and the psychology of religion. Though the latter focus would fade away, the comparative study and history of religion continued to draw students eager to think about the subject in a more academic and less practical way.

Nock ensured a broad base of religions—from Greek and Roman to Jewish, Celtic, and Indian—would be taught, most notably by working with the Harvard Yenching Institute to ensure the inclusion of Japanese and Chinese belief systems.

Who Will Teach?

A concern similar to the one that established Harvard in the first place began to take shape within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences: if Harvard didn’t train scholars of religion, who would be qualified to teach the subject?

Enter Arthur Darby Nock, a Cambridge, England–educated scholar who became Harvard’s Frothingham Professor of the History of Religion at the young age of 28. Four years later, he spearheaded an effort to create a new doctoral degree within the FAS that would “permit the training in Harvard of men to fill positions in the Departments of Religion which exist in so many Arts Colleges.” In October 1934, the Faculty approved the creation of a new degree in the History and Philosophy of Religion, a unique interfaculty initiative that brought together the FAS Division of Philosophy and Department of History with the Divinity School administration feared that this new doctorate, Nock steered all would “permit the training in Harvard of men to fill positions in the Departments of Religion which exist in so many Arts Colleges.” In October 1934, the Faculty approved the creation of a new degree in the History and Philosophy of Religion, a unique interfaculty initiative that brought together the FAS Division of Philosophy and Department of History with the Divinity School. Nock ensured a broad base of religions—from Greek and Roman to Jewish, Celtic, and Indian—would be taught, most notably by working with the Harvard Yenching Institute to ensure the inclusion of Japanese and Chinese belief systems.

Though he was one member of a committee that succeeded in creating this new doctorate, Nock steered all aspects of its development and implementation, believing that religion was influential beyond the practice of faith. “The term religion must be regarded as embracing all thought and language and action which man directs towards the unknown forces around him,” he said. “It includes those proceedings and attitudes which can technically be classified as magical as well as religious; it includes much which later ripens into philosophy and science.”

In the beginning, a bachelor’s degree in sacred theology (STB) was required, mostly because the Divinity School administration feared that the focus on teaching would negatively impact its training of ministers. Students studied three common core subjects—the Bible, a religion other than Christianity or Judaism, and philosophy or the history of thought—with optional studies available in the history of religion, philosophy of religion, and church history. In the first 20 years, 53 candidates received PhDs in well-known subjects such as Old and New Testament history and the history of Christian thought, but also in lesser known areas that included Amerindian religion, Islam, and Chinese thought. From the very beginning, women studied for degrees in the History and Philosophy of Religion as Radcliffe College graduate students, predominantly for master’s degrees. Radcliffe records show that the first to earn a PhD was Susan Taubes, whose dissertation on the philosopher, activist, and Christian mystic Simone Weil was accepted in 1956.

Renewed Focus

By the 1950s, the program had become so successful that some voiced concerns about graduate placement, and leadership instituted a review process. Over the next 10 years, several reforms were enacted to address the expertise expected of graduates and the Judeo-Christian focus. This review ultimately led to the development of comparative studies of the major religions of the world, an aspect of the program that would become so popular, it would eclipse study of church history, ethics, and religion and society.

The lengthy review and implementation of new ideas also raised the issue of the program’s name. In 1963, after two years of debate, the History and Philosophy of Religion became the Committee on Higher Degrees in the Study of Religion.

After Nock’s retirement in the 1960s, the leadership of the Committee passed to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a comparative religion scholar who served as the director of the Center for World Religions at Harvard Divinity School. “Smith really made the doctoral program, particularly in compara-
Higher Degrees led the Committee on Wilfred Cantwell Smith justin knight

had always been there, but they had non-Western religions. “These people specialists in Talmudic studies and New Testament studies to incorporate from Bible study were expanding religion departments that had evolved country had been implementing.” The concentration.

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ation of a new doctorate in the combined field of History and Philosophy Willard L. Sperry, dean of Harvard Divinity School, announcing the cre-

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story of the study of religion at Harvard is one of transformation. From ministerial training to philosophical thought to focus on the religions of non-Western cultures, the field has shifted and expanded to incorporate often radical changes in thinking. The first PhD was given in 1942 to Elwyn Allen Smith, whose dissertation concerned “The realization of Calvin’s state-church theory in Geneva.” Last year, while one graduate considered Calvin’s legacy for her dissertation, five others students graduated with research in Tibetan Buddhist rituals, Sanskrit ethics, and the interaction between Arabic, Sanskrit, and Persian intellectual cultures in Mughal South Asia.

As the American religious scene has altered dramatically in the last 50 years, so has its scholarly focus. “There’s been a change that mirrors societal change, and a maturing of thinking about religion in an eclectical and international way,” says Graham. “For example, back in the 1960s, Native American religion wouldn’t have been part of religious history, it would have been exotica or anthropology. Now American religious history can include that, and Buddhism or Islam in America.”

The one thing that has not changed is the Committee’s cross-disciplinary focus. “People want to be involved with thinking about religion more broadly,” says Graham, who is a member of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. “We have about 30 faculty members who focus on religion, but they are based in history, or English, or philosophy. They serve the Committee as they always have, from within the Yard.” It is this cross-disciplinary focus, coupled with its inclusion of faith traditions throughout the world, that makes the Committee on the Study of Religion a place of constant evolution.

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For many years we have been unable to enroll in the School men wishing to prepare themselves for teaching in the field of religion on college faculties, and desiring for this purpose the PhD degree. Men in the Divinity School have not been considered eligible for candidacy for the PhD. Nor has there been in our Faculty of Arts and Sciences consistent provision for a higher degree in this field. The available PhD degrees in history, classics, philosophy, and the like, have required much material irrelevant for the needs of men seeking college posts in the field of religion. The result has been that despite all the Harvard resources in the religious area, graduate students of the type in question have gone elsewhere and have been lost to Harvard.”

William L. Sperry, dean of Harvard Divinity School, announcing the cre-

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1934 Creation of new doctorate in the History and Philosophy of Religion

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