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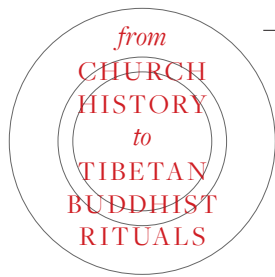
A HISTORY OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE STUDY OF RELIGION

*to*  
TIBETAN  
BUDDHIST  
RITUALS

BY ANN HALL | PHOTOGRAPH BY KRIS SNIBBE

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?



Arthur Darby Nock spearheaded the creation of a PhD in the history and philosophy of religion.

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 inter-faculty 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-



Wilfred Cantwell Smith led the Committee on Higher Degrees in the Study of Religion.



William Graham received a PhD from the Committee on the Study of Religion and eventually guided the undergraduate concentration.

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

tive religion, his focus,” remembers William Graham, PhD ’73, the Murray A. Albertson Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and former dean of Harvard Divinity School, who came to Harvard in the 1960s. “His efforts reflected what colleges and universities across the

and Jewish studies departments,” says Graham.

During this time, women also made strides at Harvard and in academic year 1962–1963, the first year women were officially admitted to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Jane Dempsey Douglass received a PhD for her research on “The doctrine of justification in the preaching of Doctor John Geiler of Kaisersberg,” a Swiss-born priest and preacher.

Smith was also responsible for developing an undergraduate concentration in the study of religion, which would ultimately pull the Committee more fully into the Yard. “When I was a student, the PhD office was over at the Divinity School, even though it was an arts and sciences degree,” says Graham. But when the concentration was created in 1974, Graham along with Diana Eck, who was hired two years later, became the first two faculty members focused on religion in the Yard. “It’s really the undergraduate

concentration that broke the ground for bringing the doctoral program into a single unit.”

## Constant Evolution

The 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 eclectic 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. 🏛️

“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.”

Willard L. Sperry, dean of Harvard Divinity School, announcing the creation of a new doctorate in the combined field of History and Philosophy of Religion, 1936.

1636

Harvard established to train ministers



1816

Harvard Divinity School established



1934

Creation of new doctorate in the History and Philosophy of Religion



1942

First PhD given to Elwyn Allen Smith



1956

Susan Taubes is the first woman to earn a PhD in History and Philosophy of Religion



1963

History and Philosophy of Religion becomes the Committee on Higher Degrees in the Study of Religion



1974

Undergraduate concentration developed