

THE HISTORY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

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The Department of Religion at the University of Illinois traces its roots to the foundation of a Program in Religious Studies in 1971. From humble beginnings the Program has come to play an active and significant role in the University's academic community, offering a substantial number of courses designed for the institution's General Education requirements, a major with a wide variety of area concentrations, and a successful Master's program. It has attracted to its faculty many talented young scholars who have become well-known for their scholarly productivity, excellent teaching, and dedication to the University as a whole. The Program in Religious Studies changed its name in the late 1980s to the Program for the Study of Religion, and it was designated the Department of Religion in 2008, although it had been functioning as a department since the late 1970s.

Before the Program

To understand the rise of the Program, one must look at the development of instruction in religion at Illinois prior to its establishment. Religion (specifically Protestant Christianity) played a significant role at the University from its founding in 1867. In fact, between 1868, the year the University opened its doors to students, and the fall of 1894, student attendance at daily morning chapel services was required. The talks at these services were intentionally non-denominational, but were certainly Christian in attitude. In spite of this rather clear violation of the separation of church and state (common in most state institutions of the day), the administration was careful not to allow academic courses that might have been considered religiously motivated into the curriculum. By the 1890s, concerns about the constitutional issue led the University to drop courses on religion that were strictly historical in nature, such as an early History of Christianity course. Such topics were placed into more general courses on Medieval cultures and history.

In the early twentieth century, several Christian denominations and the Hillel Foundation at the University began offering courses on religion for their students, in order to fill in a gap they perceived to be present. In 1919 a group of ten such foundations petitioned the University to allow them to offer some of their religion courses for university credit. The administration approved the petition the following year under the conditions that only incorporated foundations would be allowed to offer the courses, that the instructor must have a Ph.D. or equivalent, that the syllabi of the courses be approved by the University, that the foundations provide their own classrooms, and that freshman should not be allowed to take courses. The courses could be counted toward elective hours, but the grades would not be incorporated into the students' overall grade-point average. It seems fairly clear that the University did not pay much attention to the content of the courses that were offered

by the foundations. Many of them were clearly sectarian in their outlook and sometimes were obviously geared toward proselytizing students.

Although this arrangement appears highly problematic today, it seems not to have bothered many people in the University administration or elsewhere until the 1960s. The University, which constantly faced criticism across the state for being a “godless” institution, could point to these classes and partially blunt that complaint. To those who felt uncomfortable about them, it could point out that numerous other state universities were using similar systems. But following the Supreme Court’s ruling against prayer in public schools in 1963, serious discussions began to arise about whether the program was constitutional.

The Creation of the Program for Religious Studies

By the late 1960s, three primary schools of thought on the Foundation courses had developed at the University: (1) Several foundation leaders, including the Catholic Newman Center, the Missouri Synod Lutheran Foundation, and the Southern Baptist Student Center, defended the system as it stood. They argued that there were sufficient safeguards in the agreement to assure that there was no inappropriate establishment of religion at the University. They urged that the program continue. (2) The Wesley, McKinley and American Baptist Foundations on campus all believed that the foundation courses were no longer the appropriate way for religion to be taught at the University, and they began to support the idea of a Department of Religion within the University. They, along with a number of faculty members, argued that the University itself had an obligation to teach religion to its students in a fully academic manner. They insisted that religion was a critical part of human life and should be studied as an intellectual subject like any other. (3) There were also a number of professors who opposed both the foundation courses and the idea of the teaching of religion in an academic setting at all.

The University was relatively slow to make a decision about the matter, and finally the leaders of Wesley, McKinley and the American Baptist Foundations announced to the administrators that they would simply stop teaching courses, no matter what the University decided.

In early 1967 a committee was formed at the University to determine what should be done. John Bateman, chair of the Classics Department, was chosen to chair the committee, which included professors from several departments, including History and Philosophy. Members of the Philosophy Department generally opposed the formation of a Religion Department, since they felt that the Philosophy faculty already covered religion adequately, with courses on ancient and medieval philosophy, a course on World Religions, and a course on Paul Tillich, the noted contemporary theologian. However, Bateman, Winton Solberg of History and others argued that religion was much wider than what Philosophy covered (where were Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc?), and that the academic study of religion required people who had been directly trained in the field. They proposed that

senior-level persons be hired in biblical studies who could become the foundation for a Department of Religion. The proposal was approved, and work began on finding the proposed senior-level faculty members. This proved more difficult than expected, so during the 1967-68 academic year, the committee decided instead to make appointments in Hebrew Bible and New Testament at the Assistant Professor level.

In the fall of 1968, Howard Marblestone, a graduate of Brandeis University in Hebrew Bible, and Vernon Robbins, a graduate of the University of Chicago in New Testament, arrived on campus. But rather than being placed in a newly founded Department of Religion, they were appointed to the Classics Departments. The state Board of Higher Education had refused to allow a Department of Religion to be established, apparently convinced that such a department could only function as a training ground for ministers.

Faced with this obstacle, the University decided merely to set up a Committee on Religion, with no faculty lines or budget of its own. Many professors of the original committee were dissatisfied with this and pressed instead for the formation of an interdisciplinary program in religion that would possess faculty lines. By 1971, the idea had been approved, and a search was made for a senior scholar to set up the new Program in Religious Studies. William R. Schoedel, a specialist in early Christianity who was teaching at Brown University, was hired for the position. This proved to be a spectacularly good choice.

Schoedel arrived in the fall of 1971 as a professor, 50% in Classics and 50% in Religious Studies. From the beginning, he was interested in making the Program into a full-fledged department. The first order of business was to get faculty lines into the Program, and he quickly was able to shift 67% of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament appointments into the Program. Thus Marblestone and Robbins settled in joint members of Religious Studies and their original departments.

Marblestone left the University in the spring of 1972 and was replaced by David Petersen, who was two-thirds in Religious Studies and one-third in Linguistics. Then Schoedel went after some new appointments. The true founding of the Program as a virtual department came in 1973, when the University hired Gary Porton in Judaica and placed him 100% in Religious Studies. This appointment was so critical because in University policy tenure resides only in departments. Until now programs had always been understood as interdisciplinary groups of faculty whose appointments and tenure resided within the members' departments, while a percentage of their work was assigned within the Program. But now the Program had a faculty member who did not reside in any department, only in the Program. In view of the difficulty the University had had in trying to create an actual Department of Religion, the administration simply accommodated the irregularity created by Porton's appointment. And thus Schoedel had formed a virtual department, with its own budget, faculty lines and in which tenure could reside, a department that was called a program for thirty-five years and that could function without having to receive that actual designation from the Board of Higher Education.

Over the next decade, the Program was allowed to hire scholars specializing in Hinduism, Buddhism, Philosophy of Religion, and Islam, each of these as joint appointments with other departments. The early 1980s saw the rise of a second generation of faculty members that included Robert McKim (Philosophy of Religion), Rajeshwari Pandharipande (Hinduism), Valerie Hoffman (Islam), Peter Gregory (Buddhism), and Wayne Pitard (Hebrew Bible), all of whom (except Gregory) spent their careers at the University.

Early in its existence, the Program became noted for the quantity and quality of its General Education courses. Schoedel and his colleagues considered these courses to be a critical part of the Program's mission, and each faculty member taught at least one, and usually two such courses a year. For many years the number of students taught per faculty member in the Program was greater than any other department in the College of LAS, with the exception of Rhetoric (which taught everyone). By 1975, the Program had developed an undergraduate major in Religion that provided nine different possible fields of concentration.

During the late 1980s the faculty voted to change the Program's name to the Program for the Study of Religion, which it felt described the nature of its mission more clearly. The change was done cleverly, not through a long and cumbersome administrative process, but simply by placing the new title on the Program's stationary.

The 1990s and 2000s saw a slow but steady expansion of the size and scope of the Program, with the additions of positions in Sociology of Religion, American Religions, Western Religious Intellectual History, Native American Religion, Renaissance and Reformation Europe, and Japanese Religion. By the early 2000s the Program's faculty had almost doubled in size compared to what it had been in the mid-1980s.

Although several Directors of the Program occasionally asked the Deans of LAS whether it made sense to try to petition to change it into a Department, the regular answer was not to tamper with something that was working just fine. But finally, in 2008, it became clear that programs with tenured faculty lines should be converted into departments, and the Program for the Study of Religion, after over thirty years of acting like one, finally became one.

Since the mid-1970s, the Program/Department has produced hundreds of majors who have gone on to a wide range of careers. Many went on to graduate school in a variety of fields and have established successful careers in the study of religion, the ministry, law, medicine, dentistry, political science, psychology, literature, area studies, business and finance.

The Department of Religion has continued to expand with its new name. The most significant development in recent years was the establishment of a Master's Degree Program that accepted its first class in 2012. The program has been well-received and has already produced many successful graduates.