

History of the Department of Religion at Rutgers University

The Department of Religion at Rutgers University has a long history. Courses in the area of religion first appeared in the 1923-1924 Catalog of the New Jersey College for Women (which was the predecessor of the Douglass College). Two courses were listed under the rubric "Biblical Literature": Introduction to the Study of the Bible and The Social Teachings of Jesus. In the 1945-1946 Catalog of NJC, the rubric was changed to "Biblical Literature and Comparative Religions," with only one course listed: Comparative Religions. Over these early decades, the few courses that were offered were taught by only two faculty members. In the 1950-1951 NJC Catalog, the listed area of study had become "Religious History," with four courses offered but still with a single faculty member.

In 1954 Cyrus Ransom Pangborn arrived at the College. Although he was the only faculty member teaching religion courses when he arrived, Professor Pangborn led the development of the discipline at NJC/Douglass (New Jersey College for Women having changed its name in 1955 to Douglass College) for the many decades he served on the faculty. By the 1955-1956 Catalog, religion, still named "Religious History," had essentially achieved departmental status. Although no major was offered in religion, the catalog clearly indicated that students might seek a divided major between "Religious History" and some other department with the concurrence of both department chairs.

By 1958, the Douglass College faculty offered approval to individual students pursuing "special majors" with a concentration in "Religious History". The first major in "Religious History" appeared in the 1961-1962 College Catalog. Also in 1961, formal approval was given to change the title of the "Department of Religious History" to the "Department of Religion." At this point, the number of faculty members in the Department started to increase.

The Department, housed in the lower level of the Elizabeth Rodman Voorhees Chapel, continued to expand at Douglass College until 1981, when Rutgers, The State University, undertook a major reorganization of its New Brunswick campus consolidating the Religion Departments of Rutgers College and Douglass College into a single unit under the auspices of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences—New Brunswick. At this point, the consolidated department was moved to new quarters in the Loree Building on the Douglass Campus, where it continues to be located.