

Religion majors on the rise: Total enrollment in religion classes also growing

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As a teenager in a Catholic high school and church, Lauren McCormick of Toms River, New Jersey, was taught to look at the world in ways that revolved around Jesus. That was a dozen religion courses ago, including six in an esoteric field she now hopes to study for the rest of her life—ancient Near Eastern pagan religions.

A religion major at Rutgers, the state university of New Jersey, McCormick grew interested in studying all major faiths. “I could study for years on end and never get bored with it,” she said.

Her fascination has centered on 3,500-year-old Near Eastern beliefs since she learned in her freshman year that the customs of those faiths were similar to some Judeo-Christian traditions that involve seasonal rituals and certain views on divinity. “The same elements are always there, but they take on different faces throughout different societies,” McCormick said.

McCormick, who just began her senior year, is one of more than 35 religion majors in Rutgers’ class of 2006. The number of religion majors graduating in 2006 is expected to be the highest in the religion department’s history, and three times higher than it was a decade ago.

That growth reflects a national trend. A report from the American Academy of Religion said the number of religion majors increased 26 percent from 1996 through 2000, and that total enrollment in religion classes rose 15 percent. An updated national survey is due next year, and anecdotal evidence suggests it will show more large increases, said Kyle Cole, AAR’s director of college programs.

Some professors cite three reasons for the increases: 9/11 spurred many students to learn about Islam and their own religion; recent immigration has made Americans

more curious about their new neighbors' faiths; and Christian evangelical students seem more comfortable studying religion on campus.

"Since 9/11, it's been very obvious that religion is a big player in the world and national events," Cole said. "The more people understand religion, the better off our society and culture will be."

Religion departments like Rutgers's remain relatively small when measured against other departments. Yet last spring, 1,822 Rutgers students—majors and nonmajors—took religion courses, up from 1,279 in the spring of 2000. Nonmajors are taking more religion classes to round out their course loads, said Hiroshi Obayashi, who chairs Rutgers's religion department.

Many who pick religion as a major, like Kenneth Lee of North Brunswick, New Jersey, choose it as a second major. Lee's first major was psychology. "Religion addresses certain core elements of people, of humanity, that can't be addressed in any other [major]," said Lee, who graduated in May and wants to become a religion professor or a social worker.

One reason the number of religion majors has not risen even higher, professors say, is many students and their parents worry that they won't be able to get good jobs with the degree.

"There's no natural [vocational] track unless you become a professor or a priest or minister or something. But students are inventive," Obayashi said. "Some of our religion majors have become medical doctors, judges; . . . [some are] in the publishing industry, and we have one who's been a federal prosecutor."