General Description

Founded in 1890 by John D. Rockefeller, the University of Chicago is a private, coeducational institution located on the South Side of Chicago. Under the leadership of its first president, William Rainey Harper, the University introduced innovations that are now considered commonplace in American colleges and universities: the four-quarter system, extension courses and programs in the liberal arts for adults, the junior college concept, equal opportunities for women in education, and an emphasis on broad humanistic studies for undergraduates. Throughout its history, the University has sought to maintain an atmosphere of free, independent inquiry that is responsive to the needs of communities outside the University itself. Today, the University includes six graduate professional schools (Business, Divinity, Law, Medicine, Public Policy, and Social Service Administration), four graduate divisions (Biological Sciences, Humanities, Physical Sciences, and Social Sciences), the undergraduate College, and the Graham School of General Studies.

William Rainey Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago, was also a distinguished Semiticist and a member of the Baptist clergy. He believed that the academic study of religion should be a central endeavor of a great research university, to prepare scholars for careers in teaching and research, and ministers for service to the church. These commitments led him to bring the Morgan Park Seminary of the Baptist Theological Union to Hyde Park, making the Divinity School the first professional school at the University of Chicago.

The Divinity School continues to pursue Harper’s vision of an institution devoted to systematic research and inquiry into the manifold dimensions of religion, seeking to serve both those preparing for careers in teaching and research and those preparing for careers in religious leadership. For decades The Divinity School has been the single institutional educator of faculty members for theological seminaries, departments of theology, and programs in religious studies across American higher education. At the same time, the School is privileged to number among its alumni a long and distinguished list of ministers, and continues this tradition today through a Master of Divinity (M.Div) curriculum that prepares religious leaders for a life of service to the public and their religious traditions.

Overview of Curriculum

The Divinity School offers programs of study leading to the degrees of Master of Arts (M.A.), Master of Arts in Religious Studies (A.M.R.S.), Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), and Master of Divinity (M.Div.).

The M.A. program is a two-year foundational program in the academic study of religion for students who wish to acquire the requisite skills to develop a research agenda for doctoral study, or to establish a basis for a career in such related fields as education, publishing, government service, nonprofit work, etc.

The M.A. in Religious Studies (A.M.R.S.) is a concentrated program in the study of religion for those in other professions (e.g., law, medicine, business, journalism, the arts) or those who seek greater knowledge of and sophistication in the study of religion. The degree may be pursued in one year, or over a period of three years, taking one or two courses per quarter, allowing students to balance study with existing professional commitments.

The Ph.D. program is a rigorous program of advanced study and research that prepares students for a lifetime of field-defining scholarship, intellectual leadership and teaching in the academic study of religion.

The M.Div. program is an intensive cohort-based three-year course of study that prepares students for public religious leadership both in traditional ministerial professions and in new and emerging forms of ministry. Cross-disciplinary work, a long-standing hallmark of the University, is strongly encouraged. Many Divinity School faculty hold joint appointments with other departments; students regularly register for courses outside their specific academic location, and dissertation committees frequently feature coadvisors or readers from other parts of the University.

The Divinity School also offers dual degree programs with the University’s Irving B. Harris School of Public Policy Studies, Law School, and School of Social Service Administration.

The Divinity School is organized into three committees and eleven areas of study that support the School’s degree programs:
- Constructive Studies in Religion (Religious Ethics, Philosophy of Religions, Theology)
- Historical Studies in Religion (Bible, History of Christianity, History of Judaism)
- Religion and the Human Sciences (History of Religions, Anthropology and Sociology of Religion, and Religion, Literature, and Visual Culture)
- Two areas of study, Islamic Studies and Religions in the Americas, are not solely associated with only one Committee.

In addition to responsibility for the administration of the curriculum of these areas, the faculty annually offers a small number of courses designed to serve specific program requirements, e.g., the course “Introduction to the Study of Religion” required of all entering M.A., A.M.R.S., and M. Div. students (M.Div. students may
substitute Classical Theories of Religion for the Intro course); “Theology in the Public Square” and the “Arts of Ministry” sequence for the M.Div. program; and reading courses for Ph.D. examination preparation and dissertation research. According to personal interests and academic specializations, faculty members of the School may teach in one or more of these areas.

The academic year at the University of Chicago is divided into four quarters; the Divinity School offers formal courses only in the autumn, winter, and spring quarters. Students normally matriculate in the autumn quarter. Students in the A.M.R.S. program may choose to matriculate in the autumn, winter or spring quarter following admission.

In addition to accommodating students in its degree programs, the Divinity School can make arrangements to accommodate senior research fellows and non-degree students. Scholars holding the Ph.D. degree may apply to be in residence as senior fellows in the Martin Marty Center. For more information, contact the Director of the Martin Marty Center. A student pursuing a doctoral degree at a foreign university may apply to be in residence as a non-degree student if that student is sponsored by a Divinity School faculty member. For more information, contact the Dean of Students.

One of the accrediting bodies for the Divinity School is the American Theological Association (ATS). Students who are concerned that the Divinity School may not be in accord with the guidelines established by the ATS are invited to contact the association at http://www.ats.edu.