

Undergraduate Comprehensive Examination
Department of Theology & Religious Studies
John Carroll University¹

In addition to maintaining a cumulative GPA 2.00 or higher, students who wish to graduate with a major in Theology & Religious Studies must satisfy the following requirements:

- 1) Successfully complete RL493 Senior Seminar

Normally, this course will be taken in the fall of the senior year. A senior paper will be produced in this course, which must be deemed acceptable by both the RL493 instructor-of-record and the faculty advisor for the paper.

- 2) Successfully complete a written, comprehensive, four-hour examination.

The exam will cover four areas within the disciplines of Theology & Religious Studies. The first three areas are required: Ethics, Scripture, and Systematic Theology. The fourth area the student selects from either History or non-Christian Religions. The student will choose which of these last two areas to have as the fourth area. Students are given an hour to write each of the four exams.

This examination will be offered twice a year, in the fall and spring semesters. Normally the exam is administered in two sittings, the first on Friday afternoon of the third week of classes and the second on the following Monday afternoon. The results of the exam will be reported to the student within two weeks. If a student fails any part of the exam, he or she must retake that/those part(s) of the exam again within six weeks of the date of the first exam. If the student fails any part a second time, he or she must take another course in that area before trying again. Failure on a third occasion means a student cannot graduate with a major in Theology & Religious Studies.

Students will be supplied with a bank of test questions (a maximum of six for each area) at the beginning of the semester prior to the date of the exam. The exam questions will be selected from that bank of questions. One question from each of the four selected areas will be on the exam. Inquiries about the sample questions should be directed to the faculty responsible for that area. The written exams will be evaluated by the faculty in each area. Results will be reported to both the department chair and the student's advisor. The student's advisor will inform the student of the results of the exam.

¹ Last revised and updated January 2015. The Department initially approved a form of this document on April 20, 2001. Examination procedures and follow-up were modified in April 2006. Judaism questions were added December 17, 2008. In October 2012, the time allotment for the exam was raised from three to four hours. The Systematic Theology and Ethics questions were updated in November 2012. Systematic Theology questions were revised again in January 2014.

Comprehensive Examination Questions

Biblical Studies (McGinn & Spencer)

- 1) What are the four most important concepts you have learned at JCU about biblical studies? You should explain each concept thoroughly, show why it is applicable or relevant to the Bible, and show why you deem it an important concept. Make a case for the priority of the four ideas and explain why they were chosen from among other possibilities.
- 2) To what extent do you see evidence of change or development in the theology and religion of the Hebrew Bible? Provide specific evidence that supports your position. Look at several passages from different biblical materials and from different historical contexts to buttress your position.
- 3) “The Hebrew Bible was not influenced by outside historical events or religious ideas.” Defend or refute this statement. Provide specific biblical and extra-biblical evidence to support your arguments.
- 4) A common summary of Christian doctrine is that “Christ died to save us from our sins.” Discuss. Compare and contrast at least two NT authors on this subject. Is this the best way to express NT Soteriology in our time? How so? How not? How would you improve upon this statement? In your discussion, use explicit references to pertinent NT texts wherever possible.
- 5) The NT gospels and the Pauline corpus expend considerable energy justifying the claim that Jesus, the Crucified One, was the long-awaited messiah of Israel. Why is the claim of “Christ crucified” a stumbling block to their first-century C.E. audiences? In your view, which of these authors offers the best argument for this claim? Explain. How would you make a case for this claim to a contemporary audience? Remember to use explicit references to pertinent NT texts wherever possible.
- 6) Paul’s key metaphor for the church is “the body of Christ” (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12) and he speaks of the Spirit of God as living “among” the members of the church (Rom. 8:9–11). Jesus gathered a community of disciples, and proclaimed the coming of the *basileia* of God—a blatantly political (*i.e.*, communal) idea. Yet many of our contemporaries would claim that one can be a Christian apart from church membership. How would you use Paul’s ecclesiology to persuade them otherwise? What other NT evidence could you garner in support of this position? Remember to use explicit references to pertinent NT texts wherever possible.

Ethics (Lauritzen & Schubeck)

- 1) Christian ethicists usually identify a number of sources of norms for use in moral deliberation. Scripture, tradition, natural law, and experience all are cited as such sources. Discuss how these sources of moral norms could be used to arrive at a position on a particular moral issue.

- 2) Explain natural law ethics according to Thomas Aquinas. Compare this ethics with Utilitarianism. In what respect are the two ethics similar? How do they differ?
- 3) In contrast to normative ethics (as in Q. 1) that ask, “Is action X is right?” or “What are the consequences of action Y?,” virtue ethics focuses on persons and asks questions like “Who am I?” and “What sort of person ought I to become?” Explain how virtue ethics works in practice. What virtues seem essential to becoming a good human being?
- 4) State and briefly explain the just war criteria (both *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*). Using these criteria, please analyze the U.S. war against Iraq that followed the attacks of September 11, 2001. Was this a just war? Why or why not?
- 5) In the debate over the morality of capital punishment, theories of retribution and deterrence are pivotal. Using these theories, develop one position justifying the death penalty and a second position against it. Finally, what is the position of the U.S. Catholic Bishops?

History of Christianity (Kelly)

- 1) Since scholars can demonstrate that all doctrinal formulations are historically conditioned, that is, they reflect the age that produced them, does this mean that these formulations are not valid for later ages? For example, when the Council of Chalcedon (451) said that Christ is one person with two natures, the council had a primarily classical (ancient Greek) notion of person and nature, not one that modern theologians would share. Can modern theologians accept Chalcedon? If not, does this run the risk of making all doctrinal formulations relative on the principle that any formula cannot be authoritative since future generations will reject its languages?
- 2) Choose three events in secular history that affected the course of history of Christianity. Explain these events in terms of their own era and culture and then explain how they affected the history of Christianity. Be specific.

Non-Christian Religions (Nietupski, Saritoprak, & Oppenheimer)

Hinduism

- 1) The Vedanta vision of Hindu revelation is one of the best known in India. Explain the ideas of Brahman with and without qualities, commenting on the polytheistic or monotheistic elements in this type of Hindu philosophy, and how Hindus reconcile God’s immanence and transcendence. Given this, explain traditions of active and passive behavior in the world.
- 2) With reference to the Vedas, discuss the *purusa* sacrifice as a creative act.
- 3) Discuss the mythology of Lord Shiva, his hagiography, and the importance of this in Hindu worship and pilgrimage.

Buddhism

- 1) Discuss the role of Buddha's life as a behavioral and philosophical paradigm.
- 2) Discuss the nature of Buddhist revelation and the path to enlightenment.

- 3) Explain the Buddhist concept of ultimate and relative truths. Explain the Buddhist view of life in the world.

Islam

- 1) Explain the etymology of the word Islam and the emergence of Islamic tradition through the experience of Muhammad.
- 2) Discuss the roles of the four Caliphs, after the death of Muhammad.
- 3) Explain the five pillars of Islam.
- 4) Explain the six articles of Faith in Islamic tradition.
- 5) Describe the divine book of Islam, the *Qur'an*.
- 6) What is Sufism in Islamic tradition? Describe it and give some examples of Sufis in Islamic Tradition.

Judaism

- 1) State clearly and explain the two possible theological perspectives a Jew might have regarding authorship of the Hebrew Bible (reference Milton Steinberg's "traditionalist" and "modernist" concepts), and give 4 examples of how each of these perspectives is reflected in the lives of Jews today.
- 2) "Judaism has evolved/changed/developed in significant ways down its 3500 year history." Explain and discuss this statement, and present and explain 6 examples of this statement in action in Jewish history (e.g. the ordination of female Rabbis- - do not use this as one of your examples).
- 3) Before, during and after the time of Jesus, Jews could subscribe to one or more of these five groupings: Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots, Messianists. Explain the main principles and characteristics of each group; tell which could coexist, which could not, and why. Finally, explain how each group is reflected/represented in modern Jewry.
- 4) Explain and discuss the statement: "The Holocaust was a progressive, evolving, deliberate series of steps in a well thought out and planned process which encompassed the 12 years of Hitler's rule"; describe in detail 6 pieces of evidence from the events of the Holocaust supporting this statement.

Systematic Theology (Donnelly, Hahnenberg, & Nuth)

1. *Faith and Theology*—Using resource materials from your courses, answer the following questions:
 - a. What is faith? What is theology? How are they related? Is Christian doctrine fixed and unchanging? Explain.
 - b. How does context (historical/social/cultural/etc.) impact theology? Illustrate your answer with reference to two theologians (either classical or contemporary).

2. *God*—Using biblical and theological resource materials from your courses, answer one of the following:
 - a. The Christian understanding of God has its roots in Judaism. Name 3–5 characteristics of the Jewish view of God that have been carried over into the Christian concept of God, and discuss how each one has been adapted, expanded, or transformed in that process of Christian re-appropriation.
 - b. Why do Christians believe in a Trinitarian God?
 - c. Discuss the problem of evil in light of belief in a loving and all-powerful God.
3. *Christology*—Using biblical and theological resource materials from your courses, answer one of the following:
 - a. What can we know about the historical Jesus, according to contemporary biblical scholarship? How does the historical Jesus differ from the Christ of faith?
 - b. What message is learned about human suffering and death from the story of Jesus? In your answer include a discussion of Jesus' death in relation to his life and in relation to the resurrection.
 - c. What is the core of Christian faith about Jesus Christ? In your answer discuss the Christian mysteries of Incarnation and Redemption. What does it mean for Christians to believe in the resurrection?
 - d. Jesus is the savior of the world. Discuss various interpretations of this statement in contemporary Christian theology.
4. *Theological Anthropology*—Using biblical and theological resource materials from your courses, discuss the Christian understanding of human nature, grace and sin.
5. *Contemporary Theology*—Using resource materials from your course, explain the shifts in Roman Catholic self-understanding that occurred as a result of the Second Vatican Council. Include reference to specific teachings found in the council documents and concrete examples in the life of the Catholic Church.