

SAMPLE QUESTIONS:

Each set of questions will be unique, having its own instructions on time allotted, question options, etc. The following are provided only as examples of the kinds of questions students may receive.

EXAM 1. Critical Theories of Religion, general

You have eight hours in which to answer two questions from set A, and two questions from set B.

Set A Questions:

Question one is required; then, choose either question two, three, or four:

1. Experience has long been privileged as the epistemological and often as the ontological basis of religion. What is the stance of, among others, Smith, Masuzawa, and Benavides (in *Curators*) on so-called religious experience? Both Smith and Bell emphasize ritual (and practice) as the site of the religious, does ritual require some *sui generis*, ineffable experience (experience of the ineffable) or, following Durkheim, *affect*, to be *effective*? (in your answer discourse what they understand by ritual or ritualization)?

2. In his introduction to *Imagining Religion*, Jonathan Z. Smith writes: "While there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious-*there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. What does he mean by this? Do you agree with his judgment? If there were no there there, what then would be the *raison d'être* for religious studies? Is there no religion and only religions?"

3. For Lincoln, the scholar's study is not in an Ivy tower but caught up in the political, colonial, racial, sexual, gendered interests of her surrounding society. As Lincoln and a number of the contributors to the *Curators of the Buddha* collection indicate, much of the data of religious studies was gathered in concert with, to support, and/or legitimate various colonial and later imperial projects as well as European identity crises. Can the data be separated from the conditions of and reasons for its accumulation? Is religious studies (including theories of myth) hopelessly tainted by the "sins of the fathers"? Is ahistorical essentialism an orientalist imposition?

4. Masuzawa critiques classic works in the canon of religious studies as succumbing to the ideology of origins (even as their own works subvert that ideological stance): the search for origins as the search for essence. Using Girard and Eliade as foils, discuss what her problem with origins is-and how it compares with understanding of origin in, e.g., Smith, Lincoln. Then explore whether she and her contemporaries are no less prey to the lure of the origin? And if not the origin what then is their take on time/history?

Set B Questions:

Question one is required; then, choose either question two or question three:

1. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim says:

“Our entire study [of religion] rests upon this postulate that the unanimous sentiment of the believers of all times cannot be purely illusory. Together with a recent apologist for the faith [William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902] we admit that these religious beliefs rest upon a specific experience whose demonstrative value is, in one sense, not one bit inferior to that of scientific experiments, though different from them” pp. 464-465.

First, explicate Durkheim’s claims, especially clarify how the facts of religion show that it is more than illusion. What are the “real things” upon which myths and rituals focus? Second, why does he call William James an apologist for religion? How is Durkheim NOT an apologist? Third, on what grounds does Durkheim claim that his work is scientific – not “mere theology”? Fourth, where does Freud disagree with Durkheim?

2. In *Symbols of Transformation*, Carl Jung says:

“In any religious discipline it is of the highest importance that one should remain conscious of one’s difficulties – in other words, of one’s sins. An excellent means to this end is the mutual confession of sin (James 5:16), which effectively prevents one from becoming unconscious. These measures aim at keeping the conflicts conscious, and that is also a *sine qua non* of the psychotherapeutic procedure. Just as medical treatment appoints the person of the doctor to take over his conflicts of his patients, to Christian practice appoints the Saviour, “in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.” [He cites Ephesians 1:7]. p. 61

First, explicate Jung’s claims about the effects of ‘mutual confession.’ Second, why does keeping one’s internal conflicts “conscious” prevent psychopathology? Third, what is the “person of the doctor” notion, and why might patients in Jungian therapy come to associate the doctor (or therapist) with a savior figure? Fourth, if these two different modes are transforms of one another, why do “modern men” need Jungian psychotherapy, while other, traditional peoples do not?

3. In *Structural Anthropology*, Claude Levi-Strauss says:

“The modern version of shamanistic technique called psychoanalysis can draw confirmation of its validity, as well as hope of strengthening its theoretical foundations and understanding better the reasons for its effectiveness, by comparing its methods and goals with those of its precursors, the shamans and the sorcerers.” (*The Effectiveness of Symbols*,” p. 204).

First, what are the general methods and goals of psychoanalysis (according to Freud)? Second, does Levi-Strauss ascribe value to shamanism and to psychoanalysis beyond that of curiosities to modern peoples? On what grounds? Third, how might we locate Levi-Strauss in the French tradition of critique of religion that includes Durkheim? In what ways does Levi-Strauss carry out – and fail to carry out - Durkheim’s mission in *The Elementary Forms*?

Why doesn’t Levi-Strauss cite Carl Jung when he draws these parallels between shamanism and psychoanalysis?

EXAM 1. Critical Theories of Religion, general

The student has eight hours to answer three of the following four questions. No materials, notes, etc are to be consulted.

1. Describe and characterize the conflict between Mircea Eliade and J. Z. Smith. What does Sam Gill bring to this debate?

2. Robert Dejarlais has proposed an “aesthetics of experience”. He writes: “I use the term ‘aesthetics’ in a slightly irregular fashion... to grasp (and tie together) the tacit leitmotifs that shape cultural constructions of bodily and social interactions. I see such aesthetic forms... as embodied thought the visceral experience of cultural actors rather than... artistic or philosophical tenets. I refer to the tacit cultural forms, values, and sensibilities... that lend specific styles, configurations, and felt qualities to local experience.” Elaborate on the usefulness of this proposal. How can we relate it to Victor Turner’s understanding of how ritual works?

3. In his book *Structural Anthropology*, Levi-Strauss writes, "With myth, everything becomes possible. But on the other hand, this apparent arbitrariness is belied by the astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions... How are we going to explain the fact that myths throughout the world are so similar?" How does he proceed from this point? Be sure to include his use of the terms "langue" and "parole" in your answer.

4. Provide three significant criticisms of William James’ four “marks” of Mysticism: Ineffability, Noetic quality, Transiency, Passivity.

EXAM 2 Specified Method and Theory

(Theory exam area: Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson)

No books or notes are to be consulted either in preparing or in writing your answers. The provisions of the Honor Code of Vanderbilt University apply to all aspects of this examination. You have a total of six hours for preparation and writing.

Answer any three of the following four questions.

1. Recall Freud's discussion of exogamy in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*. In what ways does he argue that intermarriage is psychopathological? Give specific instances from Freud's texts and others of the debate about the rightness or wrongness of intermarriage.
2. Is psychoanalysis a *Jewish* science? Consider the history of the rise of Psychoanalysis and its earliest adherents. First, argue for the claim, that it psychoanalysis is a Jewish science. Second, argue against this claim, citing both Freud and other authorities on psychoanalysis. Does Freud believe that there is both material and psychological truth in his reconstructions of the origins of religion?
3. Freud says, "Let us return to the common man and to his religion -- the only religion which ought to bear that name. The first thing we think of is the well-known saying of one of our great poets and thinkers concerning the relation of religion to art and science: "He who possesses science and art also has religion; but he who possesses neither, let him have religion." Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930a: 74). On what grounds can Freud claim that only the religion of common man (persons) merits attention? What are the implications for theology and the dialogue between religion and science if one takes his point of view? On what grounds can you disagree with Freud?
4. From numerous studies of infants and primates, we know that mammals cannot acquire their full repertoire of behavioral skills without the mutual interaction of caring adults. How does Erikson's paradigmatic example of the "nursing pair" illustrate his fundamental ideas about infancy, mothering, and optimism? How does married/sexual love secure a more lasting bond for couples and for parenting? How does the nursing pair and later, the sexual couple, illustrate a somatic basis to benign relationship? Should we expect to find that religious traditions also reflect Erikson's insights? For example? Cite evidence from Erikson on Luther and Gandhi.

EXAM 2 Specified Method and Theory

(Theory exam area: Psychology and Sociology of Religion)

You have six hours to answer the following questions. You may not consult your notes or any other resources.

1. In *Childhood and Society*, Erik Erikson speaks about three kinds of investigation of the human subject – what are these and how does he think that each should inform our investigation of religion? Erikson says that human beings are not dominated by a fixed set of instincts (p. 95). If this is so, then how can we understand the term "human nature"? What or who guarantees that a group of persons will remain "true human beings"? What roles does religion take in this enterprise?

2. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber assesses Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, published in 1791:

“In fact, the *summum bonum* of his ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudaemonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture. It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs. This reversal of what we should call the natural relationship, so irrational from a naive point of view, is evidently as definitely a leading principle of capitalism as it is foreign to all peoples not under capitalistic influence. At the same time it expresses a type of feeling which is closely connected with certain religious ideas.”

First, explain Franklin's ethics of accumulation; second, how does Franklin represent the “spirit” of Capitalism?

EXAM 2 Specified Method and Theory

(Theory exam area: Feminism)

You have eight hours to answer the following three questions. You may not consult your notes or any other resources.

1. Discuss ways the so-called “Women's Movement” has affected the study of religion in the last thirty years. Using either *ritual* OR *cross-cultural religious studies* to illustrate the contributions of a feminist critical perspective.

2. Using the work of Mary Daly and Carol Christ, and any other scholars you find helpful, address the problem of male-dominant God language and religious experience.

3. Beginning with Rosemary Radford Ruether's question, "Can a Male Savior Save Women?", evaluate the problems and possibilities of a feminist critique of Christological doctrines.

EXAM 3 Primary Religious Tradition

(Theravada Buddhism)

Take up to four hours to prepare your notes for this exam. Take up to four hours to write your responses. Answer one question from Group 1 and one from Group 2. You are not to consult any texts at any point during this eight-hour period.

Group 1:

Thailand is a Theravadin Buddhist country that does not formally recognize a Buddhist nuns' order. Outline both sides of the debate surrounding women's ordination. How do Thai Buddhists understand concepts of gender and sexuality and how do female monastics challenge them? To what authority do opponents and proponents of women's ordination turn to validate their positions?

Do Mahayana Buddhist traditions have available to them resources for thinking about women's ordination that Theravada traditions do not? Why or why not? In your response, consider both philosophical and narrative elements of the Mahayana tradition. By narrative elements, I mean specifically what stories do Mahayanists read/tell that might help them navigate the question of gender otherwise than Theravadins do?

Group 2:

What precisely is meant by the traditional Theravada position of *anatman*? Just what is denied when the "Self" is denied, and what is preserved? How would a Theravadin who affirms *anatman* avoid the charge of nihilism? By nihilism, I refer specifically to the charge that denying selfhood is tantamount also to denying the possibility of a meaningful and especially morally meaningful life. Just how is ethical action and responsibility possible if there is no self?

The notion of "essentialism" plays a complex and contested role in Western feminisms. The notion that women are essentially different from men is both valorized and scorned by opposing feminist groups. What can Buddhist philosophy offer to such Western conversations regarding feminism? Does Buddhist feminism have to be rooted in anti-

essentialism? Why or why not? Does the variety of Buddhist philosophy under consideration determine how this question would be answered?

EXAM 3 Primary Religious Tradition

(Islam)

The student has eight hours to answer three of the following four questions. No materials, notes, etc are to be consulted.

1. The Qur'an 4:152 states, "To those who... make no distinction between any of the messengers, We shall soon give their (due) reward." In what ways has the Islamic tradition reflected (and failed to reflect) this making of "no distinction" between prophets?
2. The subcontinent had been first reached by Muslim military raiders as early as the 8th century CE, but systematic conquest began only in the late 12th century. How was Islamic rule and religion spread in this region? Include Sufism in your account.
3. Al-Ghazzali (d.1111 CE) is often portrayed as having destroyed Islamic philosophy. How is he supposed to have done that? If this perception is false, give evidence to the contrary.
4. The devotional tradition of Qawwali is restricted to the subcontinent. In what way is it Islamic? Where does this tradition see itself within Islamic religion, and how does it make those connections?

EXAM 3 Primary Religious Tradition

(Southern Christian Religion)

You have eight hours to answer three of the following questions. You may not consult your notes and any other resources.

1. Southern religious historiography has attained new levels of sophistication, maturity, and achievement since the scholarship of the mid-1960s. Discuss some of the major trends in the study of southern religion over the last four decades, giving special attention to sources, research techniques, and the application of various methodologies and/or interpretive models. Conclude with some attention to areas for future research and study.
2. The civil religion debate has advanced to new levels since the appearance of Robert Bellah's ground-breaking essay in 1967. With your focus on some of the recent

scholarship, explain how this debate has unfolded in the circles of southern religious historiography. Conclude with some attention to the efforts of certain southern religious historians to integrate southern civil religion into their understandings of the larger and more inclusive phenomenon of American civil religion.

3. Scholarship on the civil rights movement posits in the main, indeed overwhelmingly, that organized protest activities in the 1950s and 1960s figured more prominently than anything else in changing the face of southern religion and culture. On the basis of your understanding of southern life and literature of those periods, indicate whether you are prepared to accept this contention and on what grounds you affirm or reject it.

4. Since the 1970s, there has been a tremendous renewal of interest in regionalism as a source of significant diversity in American religion. Explore the various ways in which scholars have treated the regional character of southern religion and culture, focusing especially on historical roots, issues of cultural identity and distinctiveness, and various images of “Old South” and “New South.”

EXAM 4 Minor Area of Concentration

EXAM 5 Defense of Dissertation Proposal

