MA Comprehensive Exam Reading Lists and Questions

I. Scripture


Questions

1. Describe the nature of the biblical text, paying careful attention to its revelatory function, authorship, inspiration, and the relationship between the testaments. Make sure to draw on landmark ecclesial documents of the past century, such as Divino Afflante Spiritu, “Dei Verbum,” and the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church.

2. Discuss the purpose(s) of biblical exegesis. Explain the primary hermeneutical methods employed in the study of Scripture, focusing especially on the historical-critical and literary methods. Make sure to incorporate the same ecclesial documents mentioned in Question 1, and use examples from both testaments in your analysis.

3. Describe the God of the Old Testament as well as the covenantal relationship between God and human beings.

4. Construct a composite portrait of the Jesus of the canonical gospels. Discuss how the early Church understands the significance of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection in its life and letters.
II. Constructive / Systematic Theology


Theological Method:


Christology:


God:


Ecclesiology:


Theological Anthropology:

Questions

1. In his book on the Trinity, Karl Rahner observed that one could dispense with the doctrine of the Trinity as false and most religious literature would remain virtually unchanged. So what? What is the deeper point he was making? How is this relevant to the doing of theology?

2. At the Extraordinary Synod of 1985, the Bishops affirmed that the proper hermeneutic for reading the documents of Vatican II is through the lens of an ecclesiology of communion. Dennis Doyle's Communion Ecclesiology points out that distinctive ecclesiologies of communion exist. Explain the distinctions in two of the ecclesiologies. Doyle examines and indicate how they draw their inspiration from the documents of Vatican II. Which do you find most satisfactory? Why?

3. Identify at least two characteristics of the post-modern intellectual ethos that challenge assumptions of modernity. What implications do these have for doing theology responsibly?

4. Describe and analyze some of the chief characteristics of Karl Rahner and Jon Sobrino's christologies in terms of their respective starting points, methods, and thematic emphases. In what ways do their christologies compliment and/or correct each other? What are some of the implications of their work for the future of christology?
III. Theological Ethics

Fundamental Moral Theology/Christian Ethics


Choose one of the following areas of applied ethics:

On social ethics:


On family ethics:


On bioethics:

Questions

1. Briefly describe the development of Catholic social thought in the papal encyclical tradition. Comment upon the sources utilized by this tradition, and discuss this tradition's approach concerning two of the following topics: a. the understanding of the "right" to private property b. the understanding of human rights, c. the ethical critique of communism and capitalism, d. the role of the family in society, e. the understanding of justice and charity.

2. Present an analysis of how the sources of Christian ethical reflection (scripture, church tradition, natural law/human reason, and experience) are utilized for one moral issue, for example, gender, racism, homosexuality, war and peace, capital punishment, or prolonging life.

3. How distinctive is Christian ethics? Delineate and discuss the principal sources and themes that mark a distinctively Christian approach to and understanding of theological ethics. Describe the major positions on the question of distinctiveness and defend one.

4. Compare and contrast virtue ethics with the manualist natural law tradition. Illustrate via analysis of one issue in family, social, or medical ethics.
IV. Early Christian History


Questions

1. Throughout his *On the Holy Spirit* Basil refuses to call the Holy Spirit "God" explicitly. If the purpose of this seminal treatise is not to argue for the Holy Spirit as "God", what exactly is Basil doing throughout? How does Basil nonetheless argue for the divinity of the Holy Spirit and how does his method in *De Spiritu Sancto* reveal wider concerns of the latter fourth century?

2. Early thinkers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Origen are oftentimes accused of a Trinitarian subordinationism. Wilkens points out how Origen uses the language of "two Gods", you read how Origen counsels against praying to the Christ (*On Prayer, XV.4*), and you read in Justin Martyr that the Logos is God "in the second place" (*I Apol. §13*). With these early steps in mind, discuss the significance of the Nicene Symbol and how
pro-Nicene thinkers came to argue against any suggestion of subordinating the Son to the Father.

3. Augustine's *De Vera Religione* is usually considered his last work where Neoplatonism is inextricably influential. The final treatise composed before Augustine's clerical ordination, *On True Religion* argues that all true Platonists could become Christians with the alteration of only a few words (§4.7). Drawing from this watershed text, then, discuss how Platonic and Neo-Platonic principles are here used (1) to argue against the Manichaean view of evil, (2) to show Christianity's embrace of reason wherever found, and (3) to present the end of religious engagement as divine assent and appropriation.

4. Ephrem’s four *Hymns against Julian* stand as a unique chapter in the history of Syriac Christianity. While the latter is often noted for its isolation from Greek literary models and theological concerns, these *Hymns against Julian* find Ephrem intimately engaged with the religio-political concerns of the fourth-century Roman Empire. From this perspective, what is the view of Empire, and its relationship to Christianity, which these hymns articulate, and what is the role which Scripture plays in this articulation?
V. Medieval Christian History


Questions

1. Aquinas asserted that, “those who employ philosophical texts in sacred doctrine, putting it to the service of the faith, do not mingle water with wine, but change water into wine” (Exposition of Boethius’s *On the Trinity*, 2.3). Discuss the medieval understanding of the relationship of philosophy and the liberal arts to the discipline of theology.

2. Provide a brief outline of the medieval understanding of one of the following subjects, making reference in your answer to at least three of the works you studied in preparation for this exam:
   (a) the interpretation of the scriptures; or
   (b) the role and function of the papacy; or
   (c) the monastic life; or
   (d) the soul’s journey into God.

3. Discuss the significance of the Incarnation in medieval theology.

4. John van Engen claims that the “historical conjunction between the making of Europe and the spread of Christian allegiance rested upon an ever-changing mix of custom, law, and conviction, religious in coloration but political, social, and cultural in expression. Diverse practices and patterns, worked out over centuries, became so tightly interwoven that to pull on one was to stretch or unravel another” (“The Future of Medieval Church History,” p. 492). Is this an accurate portrayal of the realities of medieval Christianity, and how does it relate to medieval ideals regarding the cohesion of Christian society?
VI. Modern Christian History

*Primary texts*


Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. 
[https://archive.org/details/christianityandt028107mbp](https://archive.org/details/christianityandt028107mbp)

*Secondary texts*


*Questions*

1) Please describe and distinguish the Lutheran and Tridentine views on justification. In what ways and in what directions have these sixteenth-century theologies of justification developed over the course of the modern period? Although your response may reference any of the texts on the required bibliography, please consider at least those of Erasmus, Luther, Kant, and Rauschenbusch.
2) Please discuss the relationship between Christianity and culture in the modern period. In what ways has Christianity challenged culture? Accommodated culture? To what extent has the influence of particular cultures given rise to novel theological ideas? Material practices? Iconographical representations? Although your response may reference any of the texts on the required bibliography, please consider at least those of Cholenec, Ahlgren, Anderson, and Sanneh.
VII. Religious Education

_Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis in Our Time (Catechesi Tradendae)_**, St. Pope John Paul II, 1979

_The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School: Guidelines for Reflection and Renewal_ (RDE), Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988


(Chapter 4: “God, Religion, Whatever: On Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” and Chapter 6: “On Catholic Teens”)


Questions

1. In paragraph or outline form, map out how you would teach a section on one of the topics listed below. Indicate a particular demographic and context of your choice and feel free to broaden or narrow the topic as you see fit. At the end, or throughout, give your pedagogical reasoning for each aspect of the lesson.

  - Catholic Social Teaching
  - Church History
  - Creed
  - Ecumenism
  - Incarnation
  - Justice
  - Liturgy
  - Revelation
  - Sacraments
  - Scripture
  - Virtue

2. In chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire critiques the “banking” concept of education. Briefly, describe this concept, summarize Freire’s critique, and then evaluate it. Describe Freire’s alternative concept of
education, what he calls the “humanist revolutionary” approach, and identify its chief goal and major characteristics. What is the role of “conversion” and “conscientization” in this concept of education? And how well does Freire's model relate to the pedagogical principles laid down in magisterial and/or Ignatian documents?

3. Based on your understanding of the *Ratio Studiorum* (1599), identify the general aim of Jesuit education. Describe what current cultural realities might (1) facilitate that aim, or (2) frustrate that aim. Then analyze contemporary Catholic education in the United States in order to evaluate how the existing structures facilitate or impede Jesuit pedagogy, suggesting adaptations for making the *Ratio* more relevant for the contemporary context.

4. Juxtapose the current state of faith practice among youth and young adults in the United States with your understanding of Catholic education as expressed in relevant magisterial documents. How do you understand the educator’s role in navigating these two poles? How might different contexts influence the pedagogical strategies employed?