Comprehensive Examination 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. Please substantiate your answer with reference to 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. Please substantiate your answer with examples drawn from both testaments and with reference to the documents listed in Question 1.

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.
II. **Systematic Theology**


**Questions**

1. In *The Trinity*, Karl Rahner argues that one could dispense with the doctrine of the Trinity and most religious literature would remain virtually unchanged. So what? What is the deeper point Rahner is making here? How is this relevant to the practice of theology?

2. The bishops present at the Extraordinary Synod of 1985 affirmed that the proper hermeneutic for reading the documents of Vatican II is through the lens of an ecclesiology of communion. In *Communion Ecclesiology*, Dennis Doyle suggests that there are distinctive varieties of ecclesiologies of communion. Describe two of these ecclesiologies, explain the differences between them, 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 the assumptions of modernity. What are their implications for the practice of theology?

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


Choose one of the following areas of applied ethics:

A. Social ethics:


B. Family ethics:


C. 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 (i.e., gender, racism, homosexuality, war and peace, capital punishment, or prolonging life).

3. How distinctive are 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 the differences between these two approaches to ethics by analyzing one issue in social, family, or bioethics.
IV. Historical Theology

A. Early Christianity


Questions

1. Throughout *On the Holy Spirit* Basil refuses to call the Holy Spirit “God” explicitly. If the purpose of this treatise is not to argue for the Holy Spirit as “God,” what exactly is its purpose? 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 later fourth century?

2. Early thinkers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Origen are oftentimes accused of a Trinitarian subordinationism. Consider Origen’s reference to “two Gods,” his counsel against praying to Christ (*On Prayer*, XV.4), and Justin Martyr’s argument 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 subordinating the Son to the Father.

3. Augustine’s *On True Religion* is usually considered his last work where Neoplatonism is inextricably influential. Here, Augustine argues that all true Platonists could become Christians with the alteration of only a few words (§4.7). Discuss how Platonic and Neo-Platonic principles are used in this text 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* mark 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, the *Hymns* show Ephrem intimately engaged with the religio-political concerns of the fourth-century Roman Empire. Discuss the ways in which the *Hymns* conceive of empire and its relationship to Christianity and the role played by scripture in the articulation of this conception.
B. Medieval Christianity


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,
   b. the role and function of the papacy,
   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,” 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?
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.
V. Religious Education


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.
   a. Catholic Social Teaching
   b. Church History
   c. Creed
   d. Ecumenism
   e. Incarnation
   f. Justice
   g. Liturgy
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?