Committees of the Faculty and Areas of Study

The Divinity School is organized into three committees of the faculty and eleven areas of study that support the School's degree programs. Brief descriptions are provided here; further guidelines and exam bibliographies for each area may be found online at the Divinity School's website (http://divinity.uchicago.edu).

- AASR Anthropology and Sociology of Religion
- BIBL Bible
- DVPR Philosophy of Religions
- HCHR History of Christianity
- HIJD History of Judaism
- HREL History of Religions
- ISLM Islamic Studies
- RAME Religions in the Americas
- RETH Religious Ethics
- RLVC Religion, Literature, and Visual Culture
- THEO Theology

Committees of the Faculty

Committee on Constructive Studies in Religion

The Committee on Constructive Studies in Religion brings together faculty and students who understand their work to be largely in the service of constructive (rather than purely historical or exegetical) goals. Students will be expected to focus their work within one of the three areas comprised by the Committee, but they will also be expected to gain an understanding of the relations among these areas, and to do at least one of their written examinations outside the Committee.

The Committee on Constructive Studies in Religion supplements the written Ph.D. examinations offered in its areas with three Committee-wide examinations:

1. Metaphysics,
2. Hermeneutics and Religious Reflection, and
3. Issues in Contemporary Theory.

Subject to the requirements of his or her area of concentration, a Ph.D. student in the Divinity School may stipulate a Committee-wide examination as one of his or her four written examinations.


Committee on Historical Studies in Religion

The Committee on Historical Studies in Religion concentrates on the development of Western religious traditions, primarily Judaism and Christianity, from their origins to the present. Special areas of interest include the formation and interpretation of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the history of Jewish thought, as well as the social, cultural, and intellectual history of Christianity in all periods.

The Committee on Historical Studies in Religion supplements the written Ph.D. examinations offered in its areas with one Committee-wide examination: History of Comparative Exegesis: Jewish and Christian. Subject to the requirements of his or her area of concentration, a Ph.D. student in the Divinity School may stipulate the Committee-wide examination as one of his or her four written examinations.


Committee on Religion and the Human Sciences

The Committee on Religion and the Human Sciences engages in the humanistic study of religious traditions and phenomena, and studies literature and society in relation to religion. Faculty and students associated with the Committee give priority to humanistic and social scientific methods of study that have become established in the academic community during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They examine, evaluate, and utilize many of the analytic tools and conceptual categories of the human sciences. Though each of the areas that constitutes part of the Committee may draw on both the methods and materials of the other areas, each has its own distinctive profile. History of Religions emphasizes historical, phenomenological, and comparative studies; Anthropology and Sociology of Religion concentrates on the social and cultural context of religious experiences,
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Areas of Study

ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

The ASR area examines religious phenomena as social facts and cultural processes, using a combination of tools including fieldwork, archival research and textual interpretation.

Anthropology and sociology have long served as core disciplines of the social sciences, and social scientific work on religion has been foundational for our current theorizations of culture, society, personhood, language, knowledge and economy. Promoting critical inquiry of what is regarded as ‘religion’, anthropologists and sociologists are attendant to the categories and politics of analysis, beginning from the everyday contexts of discourse and practice that make collective institutions and competing horizons of authority possible.

Our ASR program is committed to qualitative ethnographic fieldwork, serious linguistic training, and historically sensitive research. Our core faculty are experts in contemporary Islam and Christianity, with geographic specialties in the Middle East and East Asia. We maintain a particular focus on the following topics in the comparative study of religion worldwide:

- epistemology and philosophy of knowledge
- media and materiality
- political economy, authority, governance
- colonialism, nationalism, globalization

ASR students at the Divinity School gain unique training, combining a rigorous theoretical approach with fieldwork tools as well as engaging complementary methods in the historical, philosophical, and literary study of religion. Our students are encouraged to take courses in other areas of study within the Divinity School such as History of Religions, History of Christianity, Islamic Studies and Religions in America, as well as in other university departments outside the Divinity School such as the Departments of Anthropology and Sociology. ASR is also active in fostering collaborative work with students in other areas and disciplines through our student-run Religion and Human Sciences Workshop.

Written Examinations

Students have to take two exams in the area, and two exams in other areas of the Divinity School, chosen in consultation with their advisor.

Ph.D. students in ASR are required to take four written exams: two in ASR, one in another Area of the Divinity School, and one exam in a field of the student’s choice (inside or outside the Divinity School). More information is available online: https://divinity.uchicago.edu/anthropology-and-sociology-religion.

BIBLE

The Bible area seeks to understand and interpret the Jewish and Christian scriptures and related texts in their historical and cultural settings as well as in their subsequent roles as canonical texts for Judaism and Christianity. Contributing to these goals are four distinct areas of research: the historical contexts of these scriptures from ancient Israel to the Roman empire, the history and transmission of biblical and post-biblical literature, the history and methods of exegesis, and biblical and post-biblical theology.


Written Examinations

1: History and Religion of Israel and its Ancient Near Eastern Setting
2: Literature of Israel and its Ancient Near Eastern Setting
3: Christian Origins
4: New Testament and Related Texts
5: Special field for Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East
6: Special field for New Testament and Early Christian Literature

HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

The History of Christianity area focuses on one major western religious tradition, in itself and in its interactions with other religions and cultures across time. The area fosters knowledge of the range of communities claiming an identity as “Christian” from the first through the twenty-first centuries, as well as allowing for individual specialization in a particular movement or historical moment, including ancient Christianity (to Constantine), late antique and medieval Christianity, the Reformation and early modernity,
the Puritan movement, and American Christianity and American religion in general. Coursework and guided research emphasize the acquisition of essential skills of documentary and artifactual interpretation, critical appraisal of a range of methodological approaches to the material, and a sophisticated appreciation of the tasks, goals and audiences of historiographical writing. The construction of this area is based on the assumption that there are major issues that apply and extend to all periods (such as forms of biblical interpretation, means of adjudicating “orthodoxy” and “heresy,” the relationship between Christian communities and the social order, forms of institutional and personal piety), as well as particular expressions of those dynamics in different chronological and geographical settings. It also assumes the need for integration of intellectual, social, institutional and cultural histories for interpreting the body of existing evidence and adequately addressing most important questions about this particular religious tradition in its various manifestations. Students in the HC area are encouraged to formulate an interdisciplinary approach to their research, through coursework throughout the areas of the Divinity School and the University (including the Department of History).

Written Examinations

A student in the area is expected to take three of the four examinations, and must complete at least one major course in the area of the examination they are not taking.

1. Ancient (to 600 CE)
2. Medieval (600-1300)
3. Early Modern (1300-1600)
4. Modern (1600-present)
5. Byzantine Christianity and Visual Culture (ca. 330-1453)

HISTORY OF JUDAISM

In the History of Judaism Area we concentrate on Jewish thought, from antiquity to the present. Midrash and piyyut, Biblical interpretation and belles-lettres, Sufism and Kabbalah, philosophy and theology – these are the main subjects that we explore, in historical and hermeneutical context. The main focus is textual, the study of ideas as they emerge in the vast and varied literary production of the Jews throughout time. Although students are required to gain expertise in one historical period and geographical realm, they are encouraged also to acquire a sense for the development of ideas through the ages, from Biblical to Second Temple, Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism, into the Medieval period – in the Islamic world and Christian Europe – into Modern times, in Germany, France, Italy, Israel and America.

In addition to the courses listed below, students are encouraged to consult course offerings in the Departments of History, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and Philosophy; the Committee on Social Thought; and the Law School, where deemed relevant.

Written Examinations

Ph.D. students concentrating in History of Judaism take two of the three exams and select their remaining exam from a different area.

1. Ancient Judaism
2. Medieval Judaism
3. Modern Judaism

HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

The History of Religions area approaches religion as an exclusively human phenomenon, via the methods of the social sciences and the humanities. It is concerned to theorize at a high level of generalization, informed by broadly comparative and empirical research, and to carry out high-level empirical research informed by theoretical reflection. It pays self-conscious and explicit attention to problems of epistemology, terminology, category formation, method and motive. Irreverent by temperament and sometimes on principle, it insists that:

1. the Western monotheisms should not be the only paradigms and/or objects of legitimate study,
2. religion cannot be reduced to belief, but also includes issues of practices, institutions, communities, habitus and other factors that often operate below the level of consciousness, and
3. interpretation involves critical probing and systematic interrogation of the idealized self-representations of any religious phenomenon.

Those who work within the History of Religions are expected to become thoroughly acquainted with the development of the History of Religions as an academic discipline, and to have a sophisticated understanding of the theories and methods that are relevant to contemporary research in the field. Each student must deal creatively with the tension that results from an emphasis on the importance of historically contextualized studies on the one hand, and of wide-ranging theoretical and comparative research on the other.

Students in the History of Religions develop a special expertise in the study of at least one particular religious tradition. This involves learning to read and/or speak the relevant language (or languages) and becoming familiar with the relevant historical and cultural background. In addition, each student is expected to
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become informed about a variety of other religious traditions, both historical and contemporary. Students utilize the extensive resources provided by the University as a whole, enhancing their study of particular religious traditions by work in Area Studies departments (such as SALC, NELC, EALC, and Classics) and refining their critical method by work in disciplinary departments (such as History and Anthropology).

Written Examinations
1. Special Area
2. Theory
   a. Classical Theory
   b. Contemporary Theory
3. Another special area or thematic exam
4. An exam in another area of study

ISLAMIC STUDIES

The Islamic Studies area engages in the study of Islam as a textual tradition inscribed in history and as understood particular cultural contexts. The area seeks to provide an introduction to and a specialization in Islam through a variety of expressions (literary, poetic, social, and political) and through a variety of methods (literary criticism, hermeneutics, history, sociology, and anthropology). It offers opportunities to specialize in fields that include Qur’anic studies, Sufi literature, Islamic law and theology and Islamic philosophy. In addition to the courses listed below, students are encouraged to consult related course offerings in other areas of the Divinity School and in other university departments such as History, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and South Asian Languages and Civilizations.

Students without an advanced degree apply for admission to the A.M. program of the Divinity School. Students applying from within the University of Chicago M.A. program will be expected to have completed three courses in the Islamic Studies area or the equivalent (to be established by consultation and petition) by the end of the M.A. All applicants for Ph.D. admission should have a strong preparation for the study of Islam, including reading knowledge of classical and Modern Standard Arabic, significant background in the study of the human or social sciences, and previous coursework in Islamic history, religion, civilization, or literature. The application letter should specify the applicant's background in the study of Arabic. If at the time of application the applicant has not already completed the equivalent of three years of Arabic, the candidate should indicate the program of current study (including possible summer study) that will demonstrate that at the time of matriculation, he or she will have completed the equivalent of three years of Arabic.

Students at the Ph.D. level are expected to have completed course work in advanced Arabic, in which there is a sustained engagement with Arabic primary sources, or to have carried out significant independent study at an equivalent level, before submission of a dissertation proposal. After consultation with a faculty advisor in Islamic Studies, students may petition to replace either French or German with one of the major languages of literature and scholarship within Islam.

Written Examinations

The Ph.D. qualifying examinations consist of four written examinations and an oral examination based on a research paper submitted for the occasion, in consultation with the student's advisor in the Islamic Studies area. At least two of the four written examinations should be taken in the area of Islamic Studies. At least one of the four examinations should be taken in an area outside of Islamic Studies.

Examinations in Islamic Studies include:

S1-Qur’anic Studies
S2-Sufi Literature
S3-Islamic Philosophy
S4-Islamic Modernities
S5-Islamic Origins
S6-Special Topic

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGIONS

The Philosophy of Religions area considers philosophical issues arising from various religious beliefs and practices, and from critical reflection upon them. Work in this area requires historical understanding of the discipline as it developed in the West, but students also specialize in the philosophical thought of a non-Western religious tradition, as well as to do constructive philosophical work that draws upon the resources of more than one tradition.

Written Examinations

Ph.D. students concentrating in the Philosophy of Religions area are required to take three exams offered by the area. All students are required to take PR1, “The Modern Background,” and one of two exams focused on particular thinkers and trends from the twentieth century: either PR2, “Anglo-American Philosophy of Religions in the Twentieth Century,” or PR3, “Continental Philosophy of Religions in the Twentieth Century.” A third exam emphasizing work in the field is also required, and its selection will typically be a function of the student's
particular area of focus. For students pursuing a program of comparative work, this will normally be one of
the exams under the rubric of PR4, “Comparative Philosophy of Religions” (e.g., an exam in Indian Buddhist
philosophy); for students not pursuing a program of comparative work, the third exam will normally be the
other of the two twentieth-century exams. In some cases, students not pursuing a program in comparative work
may select as the third exam one of those offered by the Committee on Constructive Studies (“Metaphysics,”
“Hermeneutics and Religious Reflection,” or “Issues in Contemporary Theory”). The student’s examining
committee should include at least four faculty examiners, three of whom should be members of the Philosophy
of Religions faculty.

1. The Modern Background
2. Anglo-American Philosophy of Religions in the Twentieth Century
3. Continental Philosophy of Religions in the Twentieth Century
4. Comparative Philosophy of Religions

RELIGIOUS, LITERATURE, and VISUAL CULTURE

Religion, Literature, and Visual Culture studies the interactions of the religions with cultural forms and
practices, with particular reference to art. It pursues this study utilizing the tools of poetics, aesthetics, and
theories of interpretation to understand both the ways that the religions harness the human imagination, and
the ways that the human recourse to imaginative expression often some would say always—engages religion.
Although this phenomenon is arguably concurrent with all of human history, the academic enterprise of Religion
and Literature is by comparison young. It took its initial explicit form in response to the conviction, articulated
most forcefully by Paul Tillich in the mid-twentieth century, that in order to understand religion we must engage
our “cultural condition.” In its relatively short life the field has witnessed the more widely recognized shifts
in the study of religion that had their advent just as Tillich’s own remarkable career was concluding, and the
field has since aimed toward more self-conscious engagements with comparison (both within a culture and
across cultures) and with history. We recognize the texts and artifacts we study to be both more knowingly
pluralistic, and often more intentionally eclectic, than had been assumed. We aim to address the pressure this
exerts on conventional rubrics of cultural study such as nation, language, “high art” and—not incidentally—the
self-proclaimed provenances of the religions. As a consequence a comparative frame of reference, both within a
culture and across cultures, has become essential. This broader compass of cultural practice has also led to
a revision of the area’s interests in the history of interpretive theory, to engage not only literary criticism but
hermeneutics, biblical interpretation, and aesthetics. The area seeks to be interdisciplinary in its work, so that
students pursue sustained work in other areas of study in the Divinity School and in other departments and
committees of the University as informed and directed by the area’s emphasis on the acquisition the skills of
close, sustained interpretive analysis and broad engagement with issues in the theory of interpretation.

Written Examinations

RLVC Examination 1: Theories of Criticism
RLVC Examination 2: Genres of Literature and Case Studies

RELIGIONS IN THE AMERICAS

Religions in the Americas is an interdisciplinary program that focuses on religious ideas, practices,
institutions, and movements in colonial North America (1600-1787) and the United States (1787-present). The
program is interdisciplinary, bringing together faculty and students with historical, sociological, ethnographic,
comparative, and theoretical interests in American religion. Students in the program can write dissertations on a
wide variety of topics: for example, Native American religion, black Muslims in America, the rise of new forms
of religious media, Jewish and Christian attitudes toward the American claim to be a ‘new Israel,’ the meaning
of American ‘secularism’ in the late twentieth century, the response of different religious communities to free-
market capitalism, the emergence of New Thought in the late-nineteenth century, and the Hindu, Muslim, or
Buddhist experience in America.

Religions in America stands at the crossroads of several other areas of study at the Divinity School, and
interdisciplinary collaboration is expected. Students who are particularly interested in American Christianity
have the choice of concentrating in either Religions in America or the History of Christianity area in the Divinity
School, which considers American Christianity in relationship to the longer Christian tradition from antiquity to
the present. Similarly, students who are interested in other global traditions in America (for example, Buddhism
or Hinduism), can choose to concentrate in either Religions in America or the History of Religions area.

Requirements for the Ph.D. in Religions in the Americas are:

1. Course Work and Residency: There is a four-year scholastic residency requirement for every doctoral
student in the Divinity School. With supervision by the primary academic advisor, students develop a course of
study that will help them prepare for comprehensive exams, taken by the end of the fourth year.

2. Languages: All doctoral students at the Divinity School are required to pass the University of Chicago
language examinations in French and German with a ‘High Pass’ (P+). (Students can petition to substitute
another language for French or German if the other language is crucial to reading scholarship in their field.) One
must pass the required language exams before taking the doctoral exams and submitting a dissertation proposal.
Students who intend to do research on non-English speaking or immigrant groups (for example, Hindus in America) must gain appropriate competency in the relevant language or languages.

3. Comprehensive Exams: All doctoral students in the Divinity School are required to take four comprehensive examinations followed by a cumulative oral examination on the written exams and a piece of their own research, the ‘orals paper.’ All students in ‘Religions in America’ will take the following two field exams:

- I. The Religious History of the United States and Colonial North America (administered by Curtis Evans).
  This exam approaches American religion from a historical perspective and includes a wide variety of books on both particular religious traditions (e.g. Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism) and themes (e.g. millennialism and missions).

- II. Secularization, Pluralism, and Migration in America (administered by Omar McRoberts).
  This exam approaches American religion from a sociological and ethnographic perspective, focusing particularly on the themes of secularization, pluralism, and migration.

The student should choose the other two exams in consultation with the advisor, and will articulate that plan in a course of study petition submitted to the Committee on Degrees. A student who plans to focus on Christian traditions in the United States must take a third exam that focuses on Christianity in another area at the Divinity School: for example, the History of Christianity, Ethics, Theology, or Religion and Literature. A student focusing on non-Christian traditions must take a third exam (e.g. in History of Religions or Philosophy of Religions) focusing on that tradition: for example, Buddhism or Hinduism.

The student must submit an ‘orals paper’ prior to taking exams that will be discussed during the oral defense. The orals paper should represent a significant piece of original research that demonstrates the student’s intellectual interests.

4. Dissertation Proposal: Upon successful completion of the comprehensive exams, the student must formulate and submit a dissertation proposal together with a dissertation committee of at least three faculty members: a primary adviser and two readers. Students interested in studying non-Christian traditions (for example, Judaism, Hinduism, or Buddhism) are strongly encouraged too have two dissertation advisors from the Divinity School—an Americanist and a specialist in the particular tradition they intend to study. The dissertation proposal is submitted to the Committee on Degrees for formal approval.

5. Dissertation: The final requirement of the Ph.D. is the dissertation, which must represent substantial and original research in the student’s chosen field of expertise.

RELIGIOUS ETHICS

The Religious Ethics Area is concerned with the meaning, merits, and validity of religion for the lives of human and non-human animals and the ordering of societies and ecosystems. As such, the Area addresses problems of the good life, justice, and the common good. Study in the history, methods, and theories of religious and non-religious ethics is essential to work in the area. All students are encouraged to pursue work in pertinent areas of the University outside of the Divinity School. For example, the examination of specific moral problems and the study of comparative religious ethics require work in the relevant languages as well as in the social, natural, and historical sciences or in the professions.

NB: Information pertains to all students accepted in 2017 and forward. Current doctoral students may opt to take the exams listed below.

Students admitted prior to 2017 may take Comprehensive Exams from the previous RETH reading lists and instructions, which can be found here (https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/imce/pdfs/Academics/ExamGuidelines/RE%20guidelines.pdf) (PDF).

Statement of Written and Oral Qualifying Examinations

A student concentrating in Religious Ethics will take three written examinations in the Area, one outside of the Area, and write a paper, all of which are to be defended at the oral examination. Students are required to take Religious Ethics I: Religious and Theological Ethics, and Religious Ethics II: Moral Theory and Philosophical Ethics. Students are to choose one examination among the remaining four examinations and one elective examination outside the Area. The elective examination may be selected from outside the Divinity School with the approval of the Area faculty.

A student concentrating in Religious Ethics will submit for the oral examination a 20-25 page paper which typically engages at least one major thinker, relevant primary materials, and also important secondary scholarship with respect to a question pertinent to the student’s scholarly aspirations. This paper should have a thesis in light of which the student explicates and assesses the thinker(s) chosen and should advance, through that engagement, a defense of the thesis. The paper should be distributed to examiners at least two weeks prior to the oral examination.
The distinctive business of the oral examination is to engage the submitted paper and pursue other lines of inquiry, especially, but not limited to, the written examinations.

Procedures

Each written examination is four hours long, closed book. The oral examination is two hours long. Successful completion of the Qualifying Examinations requires passing grades on the written examinations, the research paper, and the oral examination.

Qualifying Examinations in Religious Ethics and Faculty Supervisors

Each exam will be drafted by two members of the Religious Ethics faculty and will be read by all full-time faculty members in the Religious Ethics area for the student's oral defense. Students applying to the Area through an internal petition and students who are drafting their program of study are to have both faculty supervisors overseeing each examination sign off on their forms. Faculty who oversee the drafting of the Qualifying Examinations are:

- RETH I: Religious and Theological Ethics: Professors Miller and Schweiker
- RETH II: Moral Theory and Philosophical Ethics: Professors Fredericks and Schweiker
- RETH III: Religion and the Political Order: Professors Miller and Schweiker
- RETH IV: Religious Ethics and the Sciences: Professors Fredericks and Miller
- RETH V: Religion, Society, and Culture: Professors Fredericks and Miller
- RETH VI: Comparative Religious Ethics: Professors Fredericks and Schweiker

THEOLOGY

The Theology area is concerned with the historical study of the self-understanding of a religious tradition, mainly Christianity and Judaism, and with the constructive interpretation of its meaning and truth for the contemporary world.

Students in theology must, thereby, address questions of the history of theology, the definitive characteristics of theological claims and discourse, the criteria of meaning and of truth within a tradition, methods of theological reflection, the warrant (if any) for revision within traditions, and the manifold ways to answer or to sustain the criticism of theological ideas and religious beliefs. Students in theology thereby demonstrate their historical competence, methodological sophistication, and also grounding in some specific form of theological reflection.

Progress Conference format

The progress (or pre-exam) conference is normally held in the spring quarter of the second year, or the fall of the third year. In Theology, the progress conference is held with the student’s panel of examiners for the qualifying examinations, and will normally include assessment of coursework to date, cogency of the course of study petition, readiness for qualifying examinations, and development of the dissertation project. A report from the advisor and a timeline for the qualifying examinations is submitted to the Dean of Students following the conference.

Written Examinations

Students concentrating in Theology take three exams from those offered by the area. These choices should be determined, in consultation with the relevant faculty, on the basis of the student’s intended scholarly focus in the field. All students are required to take at least two of the three offered examinations in the History of Christian Thought (i.e., exams 1, 2, and 3). In all Theology examinations attention will be given to the use of scripture in the pertinent tradition as a theological source and norm, and the student will be expected to know the exegetical foundations of the theological positions discussed. The examinations will also test historical understanding and the ability to deal critically and, when appropriate, constructively with theological texts.

Given the purpose of the examinations in the Theology area stated above, all examinations will have “set bibliographies,” meaning that examinations are not tailored to the student’s dissertation topic. Additionally, a student may not take an examination of a perspective, theologian, or doctrine that is the principle focus of his or her intended dissertation.

1. History of Christian Thought, 150–1325 (Ancient and Medieval)
2. History of Christian Thought, 1277–1600 (Early Modern)
3. History of Modern Religious Thought (1600–1950)
4. A Constructive Theological Perspective (e.g., liberation, feminist, mystical, process theologies)
5. Theological Ethics/Moral Theology
6. A Major Theologian or Doctrine (e.g., Augustine; Christology)

Research Paper

In addition to taking the written examinations, a student concentrating in Theology will submit for the oral examination a research paper that typically engages a thinker or problem, relevant primary materials, and also important secondary scholarship with respect to the student’s scholarly aspirations. This paper is to be no longer...
than twenty-five, double-spaced pages, and must follow rubrics of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Students should consult with their adviser about the most suitable paper for submission for the examination. If possible, the paper should represent some preliminary thoughts about a possible thesis topic.

As a preface research paper, the Theology area would like each student to submit a one-page summary of the significance of the paper in light of the student’s future work in the area. This statement should include: (1) a summary of the thesis of the paper; (2) a statement of how this paper relates to the student’s current theological interests. The completed paper with preface should be distributed to all of the examiners at least two weeks prior to the time of the oral examination.