

SUBSTANTIVE AREA: Sociology of Religion
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OVERALL SCOPE OF AND EXPECTATIONS FOR THE EXAM

Students are expected to demonstrate in their exam answers familiarity with the main theoretical perspectives, central debates, and most important published empirical research in the field. In addition to whatever specific readings graduate students engage for their own personal research interests, there is a core set of readings with which sociologists of religion should be familiar in order to claim professional competence and as background to eventually teaching in the sociology of religion. The purpose of doctoral exams is to provide occasions for students to master the essential literatures of this field.

Among the core questions in the sociology of religion—which the reading list addresses in various ways and about which doctoral exams in sociology of religion will ask—are the following: 1. *Subject*: What is religion? Why are people religious? How is religion expressed in social terms and forms? 2. *Methods*: How can religion be studied sociologically? What are the strengths and weaknesses of different methodological approaches? What are the important issues in measuring religion? 3. *Causal Influence*: How does religion exert causal influences of various sorts in the human social world and at different levels? What are the causal mechanisms by which religion deploys or exercises causal powers in and on human actions, interactions, and social processes? 4. *Modernity*: How does the historical transition from “pre-modern” to modern and postmodern society affect the strength and character of religion? Is modernity secularizing? Are there multiple modernities? What might that mean? 5. *Participation and Communities*: What social factors and processes influence individuals’ religious beliefs, commitments, practices, conversions, switching, etc. and the strength and character of religious communities, traditions, and subcultures? 6. *Reproduction and Change*: What influence does religion exert in maintaining and/or challenging established social practices and institutions? Strong exam answers contain specific arguments and references, not simply opinions and unsupported claims.

General standards for exam evaluations are as follows. *Passing* exams demonstrate (a) a breadth and depth of familiarity with the relevant literatures and their intellectual questions, theories, and debates; (b) an ability in writing to organize well the theories, issues, debates, and arguments in the field; (c) a capacity to evaluate well the intellectual and evidential merits of major positions and research programs in the field; and (d) an ability to take a position on the issue or debate in question and make a reasoned argument drawing on relevant evidence. Exams *Passing with Distinction* demonstrate—in addition to clear evidence of all of those basic, essential qualities (a-d) of writing—(e) a distinctive voice of the author revealing a high level of insight and creativity concerning the theories, issues, debates, and arguments in the field; AND/OR (f) an extraordinary mastery of relevant literatures extending well beyond the standard reading list. In no way may (e) or (f) substitute for (a-d); these marks of distinction must add to and build upon the basic, essential qualities of (a-d). *Failing* exams do not adequately demonstrate to the committee the writing and reasoning qualities of some or all of (a-d) above.

EXAM PREPARATION

USE OF READING LISTS

The committee provides a general reading list for students interested in taking the religion exam (available from Rae Hoffman in the CSRS). Students should rely on this list as a guide to some of the more important pieces of literature in the field and be able to draw upon them in their exam answers. However, students are expected to read and think well beyond the provided list as they prepare for their exams, simply to expand their own breadth and depth of learning. Important literature not on the reading list may certainly be discussed in exam answers but the exam will not contain questions that cannot be answered with reference to the literature on the list alone.

The religion reading list consists of a common core of readings, readings in four different sub-specialties in the field, and a recommended set of other readings. Students taking the religion exam must choose at least one of the four designated sub-specialty areas, notify the committee which area(s) they have chosen, and will be given an exam question(s) appropriate for that area.

REQUIRED/RECOMMENDED COURSES

The department offers grad seminars on the sociology of religion on a regular basis. While the committee does not require that students take these courses before taking the exam, we strongly recommend doing so. The committee also strongly recommends regular participation in RASR and relevant 1-credit workshops as a way to prepare for the exam.

EXAM FORMAT

The exam will be comprised of two, four-hour sessions with a different set of questions offered in each of the sessions. Each session requires students to answer two or three (2-3) out of two to four (2-4) possible questions. Students may be given some leeway regarding which questions to answer; however, the committee may also require students to answer certain specific questions or may require that students answer all given questions. Some questions from past exams (perhaps with modifications) may appear again on future exams, although students should not expect the same questions to be repeated regularly. Students may submit ideas for potential new questions if they wish, but will not be responsible for constructing their own exams.

EXPECTATIONS REGARDING CITATIONS

Students do not have to follow one specific citation format or other, but references to published works in exam answers must be clear enough about the author/publication cited to make the committee perfectly clear about to who and what publication specifically the citation is referring. The point of the exam is not to memorize bibliographies but rather to master the issues, arguments, evidence, and other matters needed to be a well-versed scholar in this field. Therefore, the reading list will be appended to the exams to facilitate clarity of referencing and the focus of the exam will be on the accuracy, organization, and insight of the content of exam answers. Still, the committee expects to see clear and clean references to specific pieces of literature.

EXAM RESULTS

POLICIES REGARDING RE-WRITES

Students will be assigned one of three grades for their exam: pass with distinction, pass, or fail. Students will *not* be allowed to rewrite parts of their exams in order to change a failing grade to a passing one. They will, however, be encouraged to retake the area exam the next semester (or another appropriate time).

FEEDBACK

After the committee renders its decision, the student will be notified of the results by e-mail. The student may then ask to schedule a meeting with the committee chair to discuss both strengths and weaknesses of the students' performance. This meeting should be scheduled for all students, regardless of whether they pass or fail the exam. Other committee members may provide written feedback to each student, or they may set up a separate meeting to discuss the students' exam performance. This decision will be left to the discretion of faculty on the committee.