1. Choice of Exam Areas

Students are expected to prepare for and write three distinct written comprehensive examinations. Each exam must focus on a clearly demarcated topic area. An oral examination will be conducted after completion of the three written exams. Students are required to complete the “PhD Comprehensive Exam Approval Form” establishing a proposed writing date and the examiner’s accord prior to preparing for their exams.

The written exams are designed to provide necessary background in the field(s) of the student’s proposed doctoral thesis. Hence, the examinations should concern topics of particular relevance to the thesis. In many cases, one of the exams is broad in scope (e.g. Medieval Judaism or the Sociology of Religion), while others may be more specific to the subfield or subject matter of the dissertation. One of the three exams must include a focus on theory and methodology. It should be kept in mind that the exams establish a record of one’s expertise in particular subject areas.

Examination topics should be formulated in consultation with the supervisor, the Graduate Program Director, and prospective examiners. Normally, each of the written exams is administered by a different faculty member, though if warranted, two of the exams may be administered by the student’s primary supervisor. Given the close relationship between the examination topics and the dissertation, it is highly desirable to work on one’s dissertation proposal as early as possible, although the proposal is only formally evaluated after one passes the comprehensive exams.

2. Scope of the Exams

The bibliography for an exam will be set by the faculty advisor in consultation with the student. Students should read and comprehend sufficiently to gain competence or mastery of the subject. As a consequence of preparing for an exam, one should be able, for example, to teach an undergraduate course in the topic area. It is not possible to quantify in general terms the number of books and articles to be studied, which will vary from subfield to subfield. As a very rough approximation, students should expect to have read and understood critically at least twenty substantial works in a given topic area.

3. Meetings with Faculty Advisors

Students should schedule meetings with their faculty exam advisors in order to establish the precise subjects and bibliographies for their exams. Once a bibliography is agreed upon, a student should meet with the faculty exam advisor as often as necessary to discuss the readings, and, prior to writing the exam, to discuss the kinds of questions and concerns that are likely to figure on the exam.
4. When Exams Should be Taken

Ordinarily, students finish their exams before beginning the actual writing of the dissertation. The examination topics should be clarified as early as possible in the doctoral program, preferably by the end of one’s first year, well before coursework is completed. Students may use their reading courses and other coursework as a means of preparing for their exams. It is expected that all full-time students will complete their comprehensives before the end of their third year in the doctoral program. The three written comprehensives and the oral comprehensive should be completed within a one year period. Once the examinations have been passed, and after one’s thesis proposal has been accepted, students are formally advanced to candidacy.

5. Questions for Exams

Students may assist in the identification of relevant questions by indicating the types of questions which they are especially equipped to answer or which especially interest them. However, the questions will be prepared and finally formulated by the faculty exam advisor. The faculty exam advisor may consult with other faculty and should keep the Graduate Program Director informed concerning the questions asked.

6. The Writing of Exams

When the student is ready to take the exam s/he will advise the examiner and the examiner will provide the exam to the Graduate Program Assistant (GPA) by email. The GPA will advise the student that they have received the exam. It is then the responsibility of the student to make arrangements with the GPA to set a date for the exam.

There are two options available for conducting the exams:

a.) A three to four hour written exam, which will be written on a computer in a room at the University, with no access to books, notes, the internet, and so forth.

b.) Alternatively, with the approval of the examiner, a 24-hour take-home exam may be administered. The take-home option will entail correspondingly higher expectations, e.g. concerning precision, detail, documentation, and readability. In this case, the student will contact the GPA to have the exam questions emailed, and then return the written answers by email to the Religion Department office within 24 hours.

7. Evaluation of Exams

Faculty members are expected to read and evaluate written exams within two weeks of the time they are taken. They should write out an evaluation of the exam, usually with both an overall assessment and marginal notes, and indicate whether or not the exam is satisfactory. If the written exam is not satisfactory, the student will have to sit for a subsequent written exam. Students may take any written exam a second but not a third time. Failure to secure a satisfactory evaluation for any written exam will constitute a failure for the comprehensive exams as a whole, and withdrawal from the program.
8. Oral Part of the Exams

The Oral Comprehensive Exam will cover all three of the written exams. It will focus only on the questions that the student answered in their written exams. Students will be expected to address concerns which faculty members raised with respect to their written exams. In addition, students should be prepared to discuss other questions related to their written answers. The oral exam shall be conducted by all the faculty members who supervised the written exams, along with a chair for the oral exam, who is normally the GPD.

9. Judgement of the Exam

Students will receive a pass or fail grade for the written exams and oral, judged as a whole. After the student finishes addressing questions raised by the faculty examiners in the oral exam, the student will be excused from the room. The faculty will then reach a judgement, which they shall announce to the student. Students who do not pass may sit again for all or part of their written and oral exams. Ordinarily, if the written exams are judged to be inadequate that will be noted at the time the written exams are evaluated. Hence, if the student receives a not-pass grade after the oral examination, then it will be because the oral exam itself was judged to be inadequate. If a failing grade is assigned then the faculty should indicate the conditions under which part or all of the written and oral exams may be taken a second time. No third attempt to take these examinations will be permitted. The faculty examiners can set whatever terms they judge to be appropriate if they assign a non-passing grade. Thus, they may ask a student to repeat part or all of one or more written exams, and may or may not choose to set a second oral exam. The final grade will be assigned by majority vote of the faculty members at the oral examination. While exams are not awarded letter grades, it should be noted that the quality of one’s performance is significant in other ways, for instance being reflected in one’s academic letters of reference and nominations for potential awards.

Revised May, 2013
PhD Comprehensive Exam Approval Form

Name: ___________________________________________  ID #: ____________________

First Comprehensive Exam Title:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Proposed writing date: ______________________________________________________

Student  Professor
Signature: ___________________________ Signature: ___________________________

Second Comprehensive Exam Title:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Proposed writing date: ______________________________________________________

Student  Professor
Signature: ___________________________ Signature: ___________________________

Third Comprehensive Exam Title:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Proposed writing date: ______________________________________________________

Student  Professor
Signature: ___________________________ Signature: ___________________________

Graduate Program Director signature  Chair signature