Comprehensive Exams in Historical and Systematic Theology

PhD students are required to take comprehensive examinations in order to demonstrate their competence in and broad knowledge of systematic or historical theology, respectively, and their specialized knowledge in a particular area, usually the area in which they intend to write a dissertation.

The comprehensive examinations are intended not simply to examine students about the knowledge acquired through course work, but also to provide an opportunity to study areas not treated in their courses, as well as to deepen knowledge of areas already studied, and to synthesize and interrelate areas of theological knowledge. Consequently, it would be a misuse of the comprehensives if they were used primarily to examine students on reading lists that were used in particular courses, or if no attempt were made to take the student beyond course work. The time for comprehensives should be seen as a time for independent study in collaboration and consultation with faculty members.

1. Structure of Comprehensives


In addition to the major area, the student will select six collateral areas (from the above list), which will constitute the subject matter for two days of the comprehensive examinations. Within these collateral areas, the student should focus upon certain specific themes, problems, or topics in greater depth. These foci should be indicated on the reading lists.

On each of the three days of the comprehensive examinations, the student will be required to answer three of six questions within four hours. The student may choose the order in which the sections of the examinations are taken.

B. Historical Theology

For the purposes of the doctoral comprehensive examination, the Christian tradition is divided into three historical periods: Patristic, Medieval, and Modern. Study is to be done in each of the three periods, with one period chosen as the major area of special focus. In addition, the student will chose a thematic area to study in its development through all three periods (e.g., Christology in all three periods, anthropology in all three periods etc.).

On each of the three days of the examination the student will be required to answer three of six questions within four hours. One day will be the major historical period in which the student has chosen to specialize; another day will be devoted to the other two historical periods; and the third day will focus on the topic the student has chosen to
consider in its historical development. The student may choose the order in which these examinations are taken.

2. Procedures for Forming a Comprehensive Board:

A. When ready to begin preparation for comprehensives, a student, after consultation with his/her faculty advisor, will meet with the area director to discuss the appointment of three faculty members to serve on the comprehensive board. At least one member of this board must be a full-time, tenured STRS faculty member; the other two should come from the STRS faculty. They should have expertise in the areas under examination. After consultation with the student and the prospective faculty members of the board, the area director appoints the members of the board and designates one as chair, usually the faculty member in the exam’s major area of concentration.

B. The student should then meet with each member of the board and draw up a reading list on which the examination will be based. For the comprehensives in systematic theology, one faculty member will be responsible for the major area and each of the other two faculty members will be responsible for three collateral areas. For the comprehensives in historical theology, one faculty member will be responsible for the major historical period, and the others for the minor historical periods. All are responsible for the thematic area.

3. Guidelines for the PhD Comprehensive Examinations

A. PhD comprehensive examinations will be based upon reading lists drawn up by the student in consultation with the three members of the examining board. The list should include approximately fifty substantive titles drawn from both primary and secondary sources as well as works by authors in both Catholic and other Christian traditions. Titles may be books, or a combination of articles, equivalent to book length. While total page count may vary, depending on the density and difficulty of the material, a book should be about 200 pages. Particularly long books may count as two books.


C. The reading lists in historical theology should consist of fifteen books (or their equivalent) in the student's major historical period, ten books (or their equivalent) in each of the two other historical periods, and fifteen books (or their equivalent) in the student’s thematic area.

D. When the reading list has been agreed upon by the board and the student, the student will submit the list to the area director for approval. The area director may suggest to the board a revision of the reading lists. After receiving the area director's approval of the
reading lists, the student will distribute copies to all three professors on the board (and to the student's advisor, if the advisor is not on the board) and submit a printed copy of the list, signed by all three examining professors, to be placed in the student's file in the STRS office.

E. The examination questions will be drawn up by the examining board and a copy submitted to the area director prior to the examination.

4. Examination Format

A. The comprehensive examinations are administered on three days; the student may choose the order in which the three parts of the examinations are given. The three days are to fall within one of the eight-day periods designated for PhD comprehensives. For good reason, a student may petition the Vice-Provost for Graduate Studies to take the comprehensives in some other eight-day period. In all cases, all parts of the comprehensive examination must be completed within an eight-day period.

B. The PhD comprehensive examinations in systematic theology have the following format:


[2] Collateral Areas: six responses, one each from six sets of two questions.

C. The PhD comprehensive examinations in historical theology have the following format:


[2] Minor Historical Periods: the first response from the first set of three questions; the second response from the second set of three questions; the third response from either set at the student's option.

[3] Thematic Area: three responses, one each from three sets of two questions, one for each historical period.

5. Registration for Comprehensives

A. PhD comprehensive examinations are administered in the spring, summer, and fall according to the dates indicated by the office of the Dean of Graduate Studies; the dates may be obtained from the Associate Director for Graduate Programs.

B. A student who wishes to take comprehensives must register online through Cardinal Station (TRS 598D: Doctoral Comprehensives with classes, or TRS 599D: Doctoral Comprehensives without classes) and must also submit a written application (available on the STRS website) to the area director.

C. The comprehensive examination may be taken only after all provisional requirements in the student's program have been completed and after all language requirements for the degree have been satisfied. The student should verify with the Associate Director of Graduate Programs that all requirements have been fulfilled and recorded on Cardinal Station.
D. Preparation for PhD comprehensives should ordinarily be six to eight months of study. The time allowed for preparation may not exceed twelve calendar months without the written approval of the area director.

6. Grading of Comprehensives

The comprehensive examination is graded by the examination board. Grades will be on a four point scale, with A = 4, A- = 3.7, B+ = 3.3, B = 3, etc. A passing grade is B+/3.3.

A. Each professor on the examination board will grade all questions and assign a grade. The grade for each question is the average of the grades assigned. The board may consult together prior to submitting grades.

A. In the major area, a student must receive a passing grade on each of the three questions answered. In the other areas, the student must receive a passing grade on at least four of the six questions answered.

B. If a student fails the major area but passes the other areas, or passes the major area but fails the other areas, the examination board will decide whether the student must retake the entire comprehensive, or only the major or other areas.

C. The faculty member who chairs the comprehensive board informs the area director of the results of the comprehensives; the area director then informs the student, as well as the Dean and the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies, of the results. The student should then apply for candidacy as soon as possible.

D. If a student fails PhD comprehensive examinations, they may be repeated only once; the re-examination should be scheduled for the following semester at the earliest, and may not occur during the semester in which the failure occurred.

E. A second failure in comprehensive examinations automatically terminates a student's enrollment in the PhD program.

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