

Sample Essay Questions from Religions of the World – Family Life Emphasis:

My primary goals for student writing in Religions of the World are 1) enhancing reading comprehension of assigned texts, 2) developing critical thinking skills, and 3) developing an ability to write for someone who always knows less than the writer. The first and second year students who comprise the course population arrive from high school primed to write essays for their high school English teachers. Writing in this mode, the reader is the expert and the writer is the novice who hopes to convince the reader that his/her writing is worthy of an A. By constructing imaginative scenarios for my students, I seek to force them to assume the role of expert and to write for various embodiments of what I call the “clueless reader.” I read on behalf of that reader.

Note: I prepare a rubric for each essay exam. A sample rubric follows the Christianity essay question below. Texts on which students are writing are listed in the Religions of the World syllabus included in the sample syllabi.

Sample Buddhism Essay:

Essay: 30 points (Length: 2 1/2 pages. Less than 1 1/2 pages may not enable you to make your point; more than 3 pages may pose problems for your other responsibilities this week)

Please write a letter to *Wall Street Journal* reporter Victoria Ruan in which you discuss her recent article, “In China, Not All Practice Tough Love.” Is Ms. Ruan accurate when she suggests that traditional “tiger mom” parenting is being replaced in China by a new, Western import: compassionate parenting? Drawing on the chapter in our Neusner anthology about the Buddhist scriptures’ teachings on parenting, explain to Ms. Ruan whether the Buddhist scriptures support or do not support her argument that compassionate parenting is a new idea in China that has been imported from the West. In your letter you should demonstrate the following:

- Familiarity with four Buddhist values of parenting and their meaning (i.e., expanded definitions)
- Examples of each value from typical scenarios in the lives of parents and children
- At least one paragraph in which you ask Ms. Ruan whether she thinks that “compassionate marriage” would also be a new idea in China imported from the West. Fill Ms. Ruan in on at least two values about marriage articulated in the Buddhist scriptures, as described by Neusner, that could be of interest to her.

Sample Judaism Essay:

Essay on Attractions of Orthodox Judaism – 35 points (Length: 2 1/2 pages. Less than 2 pages may not enable you to make your point; more than 4 pages may pose problems for your other responsibilities this week)

You and your family are Reform Jews. You are not very active – you show up at the Temple for Yom Kippur and Passover. You have a twin sister who attends the U. of Iowa and has become very involved with Chabad, which is the campus organization affiliated with Lubavitcher, Chassidic Judaism (a subset of Orthodox Judaism). Your parents share their concerns with you about your sister's interest in this group and suggest that she is "going off the deep end." The mikvah, the separation of women and men in the synagogue, and arranged marriages are among the issues that have them rattled. Write a letter to your parents in which you explain to your parents that your sister has a lot of company: Orthodox Judaism is the fastest growing sector of Judaism among college-age students, particularly women. Tell your parents that you have studied this topic in class and have, in fact, seen two DVDs on Lubavitcher Judaism. Help your parents understand why your sister seems to prefer Chabad to more progressive forms of Judaism. **The DVD "Still Waters Run Deep" (and my mini-lecture on mikvah) and "Return of Sarah's Daughters" offer data you will discuss with your parents.** You will want to speak to the following:

- 1) What may your sister find compelling about Chabad and its perspective on family life? What about Chabad and its views on family life speak to her life and concerns?
- 2) How can you express understanding of your parents' concerns? What concerns did we hear about in the DVD about Lubavitcher Judaism (e.g., Rus/Darcy's parents and brother, Marcia, Miriam)?
- 3) What did the sources we studied tell us are the most important aspects of Judaism for many women such as your sister today, which can help explain why, despite the downsides your parents are seeing, your sister is opting for Chabad?

You will be graded in this essay on your ability to:

- 1) Demonstrate depth and breadth of knowledge of belief and practice among young Jewish women today and to offer a number of concrete examples for your assertions. You will recall that Rus is the Lubavitcher who loves her life; Miriam is the Reconstructionist rabbi who spent six years with the Lubavitchers. Marcia is the film maker who is exploring her Jewishness through making the documentary. The views of Rus but also those of Miriam and Marcia, who have misgivings about Lubavitcher Judaism, should be present. You also need to mention views from the video "Still Waters."
- 2) Demonstrate critical thinking skills. Can you stand back from all the data and draw some conclusions about the larger question: why is Orthodoxy winning out

today for college-age Jewish women? What about its perspective on family life is proving compelling? There is no single "right" answer for your critical reflection. I will be evaluating your comments based your ability to offer evidence and reasons for your views that draws on the DVDs.

Note: Because Chabad is the outreach of Lubavitcher Judaism, which is a subset of Chassidic Judaism, which is a subset of Orthodox Judaism, you could end up typing a long list of words throughout your essay. It is OK to use "Chabad" throughout your letter to your parents.

Sample Christianity Essay:

Essay on Christianity (35 points - Length: 2 1/2 pages. Less than 2 pages may not enable you to make your point; more than 4 pages may pose problems for your other responsibilities)

You are living in the first century and a half of the Christian era in Rome. You are part of a typical Roman family except for one thing: your father's sister-in-law (his brother's wife and your aunt) has done something surprising. She has converted to Christianity! Write a letter to your brother, who is off fighting as a soldier for the Roman Empire. Bring him up to speed on this latest family scandal which has outraged the *paterfamilia* (your grandfather). As you write, take a position on your aunt's actions: are you sympathetic or hostile toward her conversion and its impact on your family? You are free to elect one of three stances: a) pro Roman family/anti Christian family, b) pro Christian family/anti Roman family, c) ambivalent about Roman vs. Christian families.

As I read your letter, I will be looking to see if a person who unearths your letter from a Roman ruin in 2012 will be able to discern from your letter the **basic components of Roman and Christian family life in the first two centuries of the Common Era**. To be successful in meeting the evaluative goal of this essay, you will need to address five of the following topics: a) typical structure of the Roman family, b) honor/shame system, c) status of women in the Roman and Jewish households, d) origins of Christian skepticism about the family, d) ideas attributed to Jesus about the family that influenced Christian converts, e) the structure of new Christian family, f) ambivalence of Christians toward family life, g) the house church and its influence on actual households, h) the emergence of "household codes" that make the Christian family more like the Roman family than would be indicated by the teachings of Jesus alone, i) the Christian ritual meal and its contrast with the Roman banquet.

In order to add credibility to your letter, please select Roman names for your brother, your aunt, and yourself. To change the male names to female the "us" ending becomes "a" and the "ius" ending becomes "ia:" e.g., Lucius/Lucia; Decimus/Decima. Here are some common names:

**Appius Aulus Decimus Gaius or Caius Gnaeus or
Cnaeus Lucius Manius Marcus Mamercus Numerius Publius Postum
us Quintus Servius Spurius Tiberius Titus Vibius Vops**

Christianity Evaluative Rubrics

Essay is focused, clear, complete, and effective. Specifically:

1) Ideas are expressed and explained in written texts that are focused, clear, complete, and effective.	
❖	The reader is not distracted by any of the following: poor spelling, faulty grammar, missing or misplaced punctuation, sloppy organization, or sex-exclusive language.
❖	Several points are investigated systematically.
❖	Evidence is gathered and reported clearly, using assigned text.
2) Research and source materials are used critically and with understanding of their content and context.	
❖	Key terms regarding family life in early Christianity are adequately defined.
❖	Author's views from subsections of assigned text are accurately represented.
❖	Answer demonstrates attention to significant details of the text, e.g., typical structure of the Roman family, honor/shame system, women in the Roman and Jewish households, etc.
❖	The writer states the author's views in her/his own words.
❖	The writer demonstrates awareness of the critical goals of the essay and successfully addresses these goals.
❖	Assertions are supported with citations, illustrations, and/or examples.
3) Written texts demonstrate understanding of audience needs, critical context, and writing purposes.	
❖	The writer is attuned to the needs of the audience and writes in order to facilitate their understanding.
❖	The writer demonstrates a "big picture view" in her/his comments and observations (e.g. offers insights about the stresses that early Christians experienced about family values given the wider Roman culture).

Essay	Criteria
35-32	Elements are present and addressed to an excellent degree.
31-28	Elements are present and addressed to a good degree.
27-24	Elements are present and adequately addressed.
23-20	Elements are present but not sufficiently addressed.
19-	Elements are not present or, if present, are not addressed to a minimally acceptable degree.