

Paper Topics for First Critical Analysis Paper
RELI 130: Christian Tradition
Fall 2008

Focusing on one or two of the texts we have read, write a 600-800 word paper (2-3 pages) in response to one of the following prompts. The paper should present a clear, coherent analysis (not summary) of the chosen texts:

1. What is the role of gender difference in the martyr texts? How are women, their experiences, their very bodies represented – similar to men’s, different from men’s, some combination of similarity and difference?? Is what makes a martyr holy and admirable different for female martyrs than male martyrs? How do the texts use gendered language to describe these women, and what is significant about that language? How is a woman’s experience of persecution and martyrdom different from or the same as a man’s? How is the violence directed against women (and the description of that violence) different or similar?
2. How do the early Christians deal with the fact that their religion has both evolved out of Judaism (with a Jewish messiah, the same God as Judaism, and some of the same scriptures as the Jewish scriptures) and yet is no longer the same thing as the Jewish religion? How do they define Christianity in relationship to Judaism? Consider: what kind of boundaries are they trying to draw – boundaries that separate Christianity from Judaism, boundaries that are a place of exchange and interaction? boundaries between different Christians – orthodox and heretics? Is the text (or texts) you are reading for this paper addressing fellow Christians or pagans or Jews, and how does that affect the message the text presents about Christian-Jewish self-definition? You may wish to focus on a specific element of Jewish-Christian self-definition, such as scripture/canon, the Jewish God and the Christian God + the role of Jesus, the novelty or antiquity of the Christian faith, etc.
3. Focusing on one apologist: How effective are the apologists in making Christianity seem sympathetic and understandable to a pagan audience, and why are their arguments effective or not? Or, if you believe their arguments are not effective, how and why not? How do they Christian rituals, Christian morals, of Christian piety, in ways that a pagan can understand? Consider what you know about pagan attitudes from the readings by Pliny, Trajan, Suetonius, Tacitus, class discussion, and the other assigned readings in the textbook and online in constructing your essay. As with the Jewish-Christian self-definition question, you may want to focus on one aspect of Christian apology: Christianity as superstition, charges of Christian “atheism,” law and morality, etc.

The paper does not need to address every single question in the chosen prompt; the questions are to prompt your thinking.

This paper does not require a thesis (or overarching argument that holds the entire paper together). The paper can address several points without a thesis, but it should be organized coherently. Think about having a mini-thesis in every paragraph. If you feel a need to have a thesis, make it your first sentence; you do not need an introduction. Just jump in!

This paper is designed to increase your understanding of the early Christian communities we’re studying in this section of the class; it is not designed for the discussion of theology today, contemporary politics, or personal faith concerns. Those are all legitimate lines of inquiry in other contexts, just not this one.

This is a short paper, so please:

- **avoid** bland, vague, introductions – in fact, you don’t need an introduction at all
- **avoid** repetition & wordiness -- cut to the chase

- **avoid** lengthy quotations – restate key points *in your own words* as you *explain their significance for your argument*; quote only key phrases
- **avoid** excessive summary of the text – assume your reader has read the texts; explain the significance of the text for your argument rather than summarize to excessive detail
- **create specific, pointed arguments** – you do not need to try to do everything, and please avoid just listing talking points from lecture/discussion
- **stay on topic**

Additional instructions:

- Document all facts, ideas, and quotes taken from written sources using parenthetical citations (e.g., Ehrman, 29). You do not need a Works Cited page.
- You are welcome to incorporate insights from any of the “for more information” readings listed on the syllabus.
- **Do not conduct any outside research for this paper.** This paper represents your own analysis of an ancient text.
- Put your 988# (not your name) on the first page of the paper
- Post an electronic copy on Blackboard (under assignments) and turn in a hard copy in class
- Suspected plagiarism will be investigated and reported to Judicial Affairs. Documented plagiarism will result in failure of the assignment and possible failure of the course.
- Put the word-count of the paper at the end of the paper.

The paper is due in class and on Blackboard on the date you selected in class. Late penalties are one letter grade deduction per 24 hours late.

The paper will be graded according to the guidelines listed on the syllabus. I will be looking for:

- Depth and complexity of analysis and insight
- Clarity of writing (including grammar and accurate spelling)
- Accuracy, insofar as you can be expected to know something based on readings, lectures, and discussion.
- Organization and effectiveness of the analysis
- Engagement with issues raised in lecture, discussion, and the readings.

Good luck, and enjoy!



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