

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

Focusing on 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. Closely examine one of our author's ethical instructions about marriage, sexuality, and/or some other ethical issue. How does this author's views on your chosen ethical issue compare to one or more other writers we've read? What are the ethical stances and the principles and ideas *underlying* those stances? For example, what do these instructions tell us about the author's attitudes toward human nature (especially men's essential nature or women's essential nature), the relationship between this world and the next world, the position of the Christian individual in society (especially if that society is predominantly Greco-Roman, not Christian), etc.? Who in the audience would be most/least receptive, and why or why not (women, men, rich, poor, young, old, slaves, free, etc.)?
2. To what extent does the orthodox, trinitarian theology adopted at Nicaea (and defended by Athanasius and the Cappadocians) reflect *continuity* with earlier notions of the trinity, and to what extent does it reflect *change*? (You need not cover every pre-Nicene understanding of the trinity; you can choose one or two for comparison.)
3. In class, we will discuss some of the debate about whether Constantine's conversion to Christianity was "sincere," and whether or not that question would even have been meaningful in the fourth century. How fully do you believe Constantine "converted" to Christianity, and how significant was this conversion for religiosity in the Roman Empire? Consider: what do you mean by "conversion"? by what standards are you measuring this "conversion"? by what standards are you judging its significance for wider society?
4. How did the late persecutions, and the end of the persecutions, lead to unity or division among Christians? How did these persecutions and debates over how a Christian should act during persecution affect Christian community?
5. What is the understanding of sin and salvation in the texts? Some issues you may want to consider (but you need not consider all) are: is it possible to be sinless according to your authors? what happens to Christians who sin before and after baptism? how does sin affect one's soul, one's salvation, and the next life? what is the function of penance, and how does it affect a person in this life and in the next? do the authors agree or disagree on which sins can be forgiven, and how one achieves forgiveness and salvation?
6. Compare Origen's understanding of the soul, and the relationship between the soul and body (see *Against Celsus* and *On First Principles*) to one other author's understanding of the soul and the relationship between the soul and body.
7. Develop a critical, analytical paper on a concise topic of your own choosing, focusing on two texts we have read between September 24 and October 15.

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 key phrases or a sentence but not long block quotes
- **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 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!



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/us>

Christian Tradition Second Critical Analysis Paper Handout by Caroline T. Schroeder is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 United States License.

Material developed using prior work by Andrew S. Jacobs and Susan Ashbrook Harvey.