

Procedures for the oral exam in modern fields of NELC (3 March 2016)

Each PhD student in the modern fields of NELC must take an oral exam in either Islamic or Jewish Civilization as part of their comprehensive exams. The comprehensive exams (Ph.D. qualifying exams) must be taken before the end of year four of the program, but the oral portion of the exam can, at the student's discretion and with his or her advisor's approval, be taken in an earlier quarter than the written comprehensive exams.

The Oral Exam Rationale

This exam will test students' empirical command of Islamic (or Jewish) Civilization, that is the broad general knowledge base they possess of the field. To prepare for this exam, students will prepare a syllabus which they will present, explaining the narrative vision or philosophical approach to Islamic (or Jewish) Civilization that informs the syllabus. This is not a pedagogical exercise, but an organizing device to show how you have mastered a body of material, and to begin the intellectual conversation that is the exam. You should be prepared to think on your feet and to field questions, including questions that are not addressed directly by your syllabus. Students are expected to prepare for the exam by reading primary and secondary texts from the exam preparation reading list, including the primary and secondary materials taught in the Civilization sequences in NELC or Jewish Studies. The purpose of the exam is to help students prepare to broadly conceptualize Islamic or Jewish civilization (history, religion, societies, thought, and literature), beyond the specific area of expertise of their own research; it is also intended to train students in presenting arguments and orally defending their positions under probing questions from academic colleagues.

Before the exam

- 1) Students obtain approval from their adviser and DGS, and schedule their exam with the NELC office.
- 2) Students will organize their concept of Islamic or Jewish Civilization into the form of a syllabus that imagines a course taught over a full academic year of 30 weeks, covering this civilization from its beginnings to modern times. The syllabus should incorporate the problematics and theoretical frameworks of studying Islamic (or alternatively Jewish) civilization and not simply a chronological treatment of it.
- 3) For Islamic Civilization, the exam will cover the chronological span of the Islamic world from the rise of Islam, through the middle periods (1000-1800), to the modern period (1800-present), devoting 10 weeks to each period. It will broadly encompass the geographic, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity of the region. This breadth should be reflected in the syllabus students devise. The readings for the Islamic History and Society, and the Islamic Thought and Literature course sequences (or the Jewish Civilization sequence) will give an idea of the expected breadth of coverage of your syllabus and what your knowledge of the field should comprehend. All syllabi are to be individually prepared by the student taking the exam, should reflect the student's personal approach, and should not merely replicate other courses' syllabi. Above all, students must be prepared to explain and defend the intellectual decisions they have made – not only what has been included, but why certain things have been excluded.
- 4) A committee of three faculty examiners will be announced by the Department at the beginning of each quarter.

During the exam

5) The exam lasts approximately 90 minutes. The student will make an uninterrupted formal presentation of 25 to 30 minutes (approximately eight to ten minutes for each section/quarter of the syllabus). These presentations should lay out the important themes and categories, and central texts, through which the student feels Islamic (or Jewish) Civilization can be best conceptualized and taught. Students should be prepared to answer questions about the complexities of historical circumstances surrounding those themes, and provide specifics about empirical evidence (primary texts, trends, material culture, institutions, the built environment, etc.) and the major research and scholarly arguments (secondary texts and interpretations) that contextualize the information presented.

6) This presentation is followed by an hour of conversation with the faculty examiners. The examiners may question the logic of inclusion (or exclusion) of particular primary or secondary texts in the student's syllabus and probe the student's ability to cogently explain the vision that informs their syllabus, its internal logic, its disciplinary scope and assumptions, and what themes are important to highlight for new students coming to the field (however, keep in mind that this is not a pedagogical exercise, but an intellectual one – What is Islamic or Jewish Civilization, how do we talk about it meaningfully, using what evidence and what categories of thought?).

Grading

7) Students will be given the results of their performance on the day of the exam, after brief consultation by the examining committee. Grading is based upon how well students have thought about the construction and conceptualizing of the themes of Islamic or Jewish Civilization, as well as the command of the knowledge base of the field, the clarity of presentation, and the response to questions. Students who do not pass the exam will be required to re-take the exam in the following quarter (not including summer).