

## Guide to Writing a Dissertation Prospectus History of Religion in the West

Revised 10/20/04

A dissertation is a demonstration that you have become an active participant within a particular field of scholarship—familiar with a set of conversations within your field and capable of making an original contribution to them. More specifically, a dissertation is an extended argument intended to establish a thesis, answer a question, clarify a problem, test an hypothesis, or the like.

Writing a prospectus is a very helpful way of planning a dissertation, even though some of your plans are likely to change as you move forward with the project. It may help to think of it as a first exercise in the art of writing grant proposals. Two or three revisions, developed in discussion with the supervisor, are to be expected. Optimally, a prospectus will run from fifteen to twenty pages, not exceeding 5000 words. It should provide a reasonably clear indication of what you plan to argue, in what manner, and to what end. You are encouraged to include the following elements:

I. A statement of the **topic** of your dissertation, i.e. the central question or problem that you plan to investigate. Give some good reasons for choosing this topic. Reflect on its significance for scholarship in your field. Indicate the current state of scholarship on the topic.

II. A statement of your **thesis**, i.e. your proposed answer to the question or problem of the dissertation, along with a preliminary assessment of the contribution it will make to existing field of scholarship.

III. . A statement of your **material sources**, i.e. the sources on which you will rely in developing your presentation. Depending upon the nature of your project, you may, for example, include a discussion of archival materials and locations you plan to visit.

IV. . A statement of the **kind** of dissertation you propose to write, i.e. the subgenre. Some possibilities:

a historical, contextualized analysis

1) of an idea (or a pattern, connection, or trend of ideas) in a religious thinker, tradition, community, movement, or event (e.g. the reception of the Catholic Church Fathers [or a particular Father] among early Franciscans, a theme or problem in the theology of the German Catholic Counter-reformation, female spiritist theology in the English Civil War, the eschatological dimension of pro-slavery theology in the American ante-bellum South.

2) of ritual or other social practice in a religious tradition, community, movement, or event (e.g. disciplinary practices in the French Protestant Reformation, devotional techniques of the early Jesuits, methods of revivalism in frontier Kentucky, Caribbean-African-American healing magic in 20<sup>th</sup> century New Orleans).

3) of material or literary culture in a religious tradition, community, movement, or event (e.g. the role of print culture and “the book” in the spread of Calvinism in the sixteenth century, or the construction of sacred space in Lakota ceremonial).

A comparative approach is an option for any of the above.

V. An indication of the major steps of the **argument** that you plan to construct in order to make your argument. The steps of your argument become the main parts of the dissertation.

Ideally, your outline will specify subsidiary parts of the dissertation as well. For example, you might include a subsection that reviews the secondary literature on your topic, and one that reviews the history of the topic leading up to your point of entry.

VI. A statement of your **methodology**, i.e. an explanation and theoretical justification for proceeding in the way that you intend. This might include a plan for field research, including methods of observation, interviews, or the use of manuscripts or other archival material.

As a first step in the construction of an adequate Prospectus, you are asked to work out an initial outline or sketch (one or two pages suffice) within the five days after the written comprehensives and submit it to the divisional faculty. It will be discussed briefly during the oral exam.

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