

Semester Exam Mandatory Take-Home Essay! (50pts)

Requirements & Format:

- Typed, double-spaced, 10-point font (Arial, Book Antiqua, Calibri, Garamond, Georgia, Palatino, Tahoma, Times New Roman), 1 inch margins (or smaller).
- No less than one page, preferably no more than two.
- Name, Period, Date Submitted at top (single-spaced); entitled 'Semester Exam Essay.' No title page, please.
- **Due Friday, Dec 12, via dropbox.**

Imagine the following scenario:

It is your freshman year in college, and you are required to take a survey course on Western Civilization. The purpose of the course is to examine the books that have made major contributions to the foundations of the Western worldview, and the opening lecture on the first day of class begins with a discussion of the Primeval History in the book of Genesis. The professor acknowledges that while many people 'take Genesis literally,' historical and literary critics have convincingly argued that the book simply cannot be understood as historically accurate. The description of creation in Genesis is not historically possible in light of Evolutionary Theory, 'Big Bang' Theory and other scientific evidence, and the stories in Genesis have enough parallels with other ancient stories -stories that are clearly mythological in nature and predate Genesis- to suggest that Genesis is in some way literarily dependent on them. While the stories may be entertaining fictions or they may even offer some insight into questions of morality or other subjective aspects of the human condition, they offer no privileged information about the creation of the world, the origins of humanity, or the nature of 'God.'

The professor's conclusion startles you for a moment: *How do we know that what is true of Genesis is not true of the Bible in its entirety?* The Bible, he claims, is clearly a human product, just like any other great work of literature. We do not consider Shakespeare divinely inspired, nor should we think of the Bible that way.

Then he goes one step further: If the content of the Bible cannot be understood as historically accurate, then assuming it to be so is not merely naïve and erroneous, *it is immoral*. Consider, for example, the story of Moses, the Exodus, and the Conquest of Canaan. The historicity of that story is relevant to the modern world in that it is the foundation for the assumption that the Jews were entitled to the land they were given by Allied forces after World War II- land previously possessed by the Palestinians. The decision to displace them and establish the modern nation of Israel was based on the belief that the land was being given back to its original owners, and the justification for that belief was the assumption that the Biblical account of the Exodus and Conquest is historical. Consider how much of the world's population teeters on the brink of war over the legitimacy of this claim. If it is verifiably false, how can it not be immoral to continue believing it, in light of the potentially disastrous consequences of doing so?

In light of what you (should have) learned this semester, how would you respond to the professor's conclusions? You may agree or disagree, but either way you must show in your response a grasp of the ideas raised in this class relevant to the questions, and you must articulate a well-reasoned explanation for how you think the Bible should be understood. NOTE: This is NOT an 'opinion question.' It is an EDUCATED opinion question, which means that disregarding what you have been taught and substituting a personal rant against the Church, secular culture, or "having to take Theology class" DOES NOT ANSWER THE QUESTION. Demonstrate that your opinion is based on knowledge.

A few suggestions:

- **Focus on the argument.** There are exactly two issues you need to address: (1) The claim that the Bible is not historically accurate, and (2) the claim that believing it to be so is immoral. Be careful to keep your focus on these two issues. You are not explaining why you believe that the Bible is or is not divinely inspired- you are simply evaluating whether or not the Professor's conclusions are justified on the basis of the evidence he presents and in light of your own knowledge on the subject. While you may need to articulate what you believe "divinely inspired" to mean, do not get mired in that thorny debate at this point. So long as your understanding of divine inspiration is reasonably articulated and held consistently, I will accept it. For now.
- **'I don't know' is actually not an option.** If you imagine in your mind that a perpetual suspension of judgment exempts you from having to draw a conclusion, please realize that I do not share your assumption. The claim that 'I don't know' is either an admittance of ignorance, or an assertion that knowledge is not possible. The former claim answers itself. As for the latter, it will require that you evaluate all positions in this debate, and explain why none of them is more logically valid than any other, which if you think about it, just might be the most difficult position of all to depend.
- **EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION WE HAVE COVERED IN CLASS.** Only you know if you actually learned it, but if you didn't, then the time to start is NOW.