

## RST 325: Early Christianity

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### **Course Description:**

Where did Christianity come from? What sort of things did early Christians argue about? How did Romans view Christians? What led Romans at times to arrest and even execute Christians? How did Christians make sense of these experiences? What changed, for Christians and for the Roman Empire, when the emperors became Christians? How did Christians understand God and what did they mean by calling Jesus the “Son of God”? These are the sorts of questions we will talk about—and try to answer—in this course. We will do so by reading many ancient texts: by early Christians, by those later called “heretics,” and by the non-Christians who interacted with them. By reading these texts, asking these questions, and working together towards answers, students will learn how to analyze what makes Christianity a religion.

### **Learning goals:**

As part of this course students will:

- 1) Learn the historical development of early Christianity
- 2) Develop the ability to read and analyze primary texts
- 3) Develop the ability to use primary texts to analyze issues pertinent to the study of religion

### **Required books:**

The following are available for purchase at the bookstore. In addition, you will need access to a Bible; occasional readings will be made available on Angel.

1. Ehrman, Bart. *After the New Testament: A reader in early Christianity* (Oxford, 1999). (Referred to as ANT below)
2. Ehrman, Bart and Jacobs, Andrew. *Christianity in Late Antiquity: 300-450 CE* (Oxford, 2004). (Referred to as CLA below)
3. Augustine, *Confessions*. Trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin, 1961).

### **Course requirements:**

- Participation: 10% (see rubric below for how this grade will be calculated. It is **not** an attendance grade!)
- In-class writing exercises (2): 30 % (15 % each)
- Paper (1): 25%
- Quizzes (4): 35% total

## **Explanation of course requirements:**

**Quizzes:** There will be four objective quizzes as noted on the syllabus (the last is part of the final). They will be relatively short (about 20-25 questions), with a mixture of multiple choice, fill in the blank and short (1-2 sentence) identification.

**Participation:** As described above, this course teaches about early Christianity by reading what ancient people (Christians and not) had to say about Christianity. It is **essential** that you come to class having read the assigned text(s) and, if relevant, having at least thought about the study questions for the text so that you are prepared to have conversations (in small groups, with the class as whole, etc.) about what issues are at stake. Participation grades will be assigned according to the following general rubric:

90-100: You were (almost) always prepared for class, with questions about the text, and you were always willing to participate in discussions. Please note: This grade does not require that you have understood what you read, but that you are prepared to work with the text in class.

80-89: You were often prepared for class, with questions about the text, and you were often willing to participate in discussions.

70-79: You usually were prepared for class, but only participated on occasion.

60-69: You were sometimes prepared for class but often forgot your text, were absent, asleep, and/or did not have much to say.

59 or below: You were rarely, if ever, prepared for class and never participated in conversations.

Please note: My attendance policy is separate from the participation grade. You must attend class. Only illness or an emergency (not doctor's appointment, mechanic appointment, etc.) are excused absences. More than **5** unexcused absences will affect your final grade adversely. Excessive absence may result in a grade of FX.

**In-class writing assignments:** These are designed to see how well you have learned the issues at stake in the texts we have studied. Each assignment will test you on how well you can:

- 1) create a thesis (i.e. answer a question about the texts)
- 2) defend the thesis, using examples from the text
- 3) show understanding of the issues at stake in the text

The questions posed in an in-class writing assignment will ask you to develop and explain your understanding of the topic, based on the work we have done in class. More specific information—what will be required, suggestions for how to prepare, and a grading rubric for evaluation—will be given as we get closer to the first in-class writing assignment.

**Paper:** In contrast to the in-class assignments, the paper will require you to write about a text we have *not* studied in class but which is similar to those we have read together. There are two opportunities to write this paper: the first will be on martyrdom; the second will be on monasticism. In both cases, we will read texts on the topic in class. You will then choose a different text (i.e. a different martyrdom story, a different life of a monk) and write a paper on it. Like the in-class writing assignments, your paper should have a thesis and defend it, using examples from the text. However, unlike the in-class assignments, the paper is meant to have you apply the analytical skills you have learned in class to a new text.

Please NOTE: the two paper options (A and B) are listed on the syllabus below. It is **your** responsibility to write one of these papers and hand it in.

### **Schedule of Reading Assignments:**

All reading assignments are to be completed **before** coming to class the day they are assigned. You **must** bring the assigned reading with you to class since we will be reading together. Failure to bring the assigned reading will count against your participation grade.

#### **Topic 1:** Creating the Setting: The World of the Roman Empire

Monday 8/27: Introduction to the Course and to the World of the Roman Empire

Wednesday 8/29: Discussion of Judaism

#### **Topic 2:** Judaism, Jewish Christianity, and Christianity: What's the difference?

Friday 8/31: Reading: Acts 8-15; Galatians 1-2

Wednesday 9/5: Jewish-Christian texts

Reading: The Gospel According to the Ebionites (ANT: 19), Letter of Peter to James (ANT:20), The Homilies of Clement (ANT:21)

Friday 9/7: Anti-Jewish texts

Reading: Epistle of Barnabas (ANT:15), Justin: Dialogue with Trypho (ANT:16), Tertullian: Answer to the Jews (ANT:18)

#### **Topic 3:** Types of Christianity: What's the Difference?

Monday 9/10: The Role of Women

1 Timothy; *Acts of Thecla* (Angel)

Wednesday 9/12: Gnosticism

Reading: The Secret Book According to John (ANT:22); The Gospel of Truth (ANT:24)

Friday 9/14: Us vs. Them: The Language of Heresiology

Reading: Irenaeus: Against the Heresies (ANT: 31), Tertullian (ANT: 32 and 33), The Gnostic Heresiologists (ANT 35 and 36)

Monday 9/17: Creating an Orthodox Bible  
The Muratorian Canon (ANT:51), Irenaeus, Against the Heresie (ANT 52); Eusebius: Ecclesiastical History (ANT:54), Athanasius: Easter Letter (CLA:51)

Wednesday 9/19: **QUIZ 1**

**Topic 4:** How did Early Christians explain their beliefs, and why did they have to?

Friday 9/21: Justin Martyr  
Reading: First Apology (ANT: 10 and 62)

Monday 9/24: Apologists  
Reading: Athenagoras: Plea Regarding the Christians (ANT:11), Tertullian: Apology (ANT: 13 and 63)

Wednesday 9/26: A Pagan view of Christianity  
Reading: Against Celsus (ANT: 14, plus additional readings on Angel)

Friday 9/28: REVIEW

**Monday 10/1: In-class writing assignment**

**Topic 5:** Martyrdom, or Why the Romans Killed the Christians and Why the Christians Chose to Die

Wednesday 10/3: The Government's view of Christianity  
Reading: Pliny's Letter to Trajan; Trajan's reply (Fordham Internet Sourcebook)

Friday 10/5: Martyrdom  
Reading: The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas (ANT: 8)

Wednesday 10/10: Martyrdom (Cont.)

**Topic 6:** How to Run a Church

Friday 10/12: Leadership  
Reading: The Didache (ANT: 56); Hippolytus: The Apostolic Tradition (ANT:58); Cyprian: On the Unity of the Church (ANT: 60)

Monday 10/15: Liturgy  
Reading: The Didache (ANT: 346); Hippolytus: The Apostolic Tradition (ANT: 353); The Didascalica (ANT: 59, 66)

Wednesday 10/17 : **Martyrdom Paper due (option A)**  
Film: From Jesus to Christ

**Topic 7:** What did early Christians believe about God and Jesus? (part I)

Friday 10/19: Reading: Tertullian: On the Flesh of Christ (ANT 33) and Against Praxeas (ANT: 34 and 73); Novation: On the Trinity (ANT 75); Dionysius of Rome: Letter to Dionysius of Alexandria (ANT:76).

**Topic 8:** Constantine versus Julian: Does an Emperor make a difference to Christianity?

Monday 10/22: A “Christian” Emperor

Readings: Eusebius: The Life of Constantine (CLA: 4); Zosimus: The New History (CLA: 5)

Wednesday 10/24: A “Pagan” Emperor

Readings: Julian: Letters on Religion (CLA: 6)

Friday 10/26: **Quiz 2**

**Topic 9:** What did early Christians believe about God and Jesus? (part II)

Monday 10/29: Christological Controversy texts I

Reading: Arius: Thalia (CLA: 20); Alexander of Alexandria: Letter to Alexander of Constantinople (CLA: 21); Arius: Letter to Alexander of Alexandria (CLA: 22); Creed and Canons of Nicaea (CLA: 33) and Constantinople (CLA: 34)

Wednesday 10/31: Christological Controversy texts II

Reading: Nestorius: Letter to Cyril of Alexandria (CLA: 24), Cyril of Alexandria: Third Letter to Nestorius (CLA: 25); Canons of Ephesus (CLA: 35) and Definition and Canons of Chalcedon (CLA: 36)

Friday 11/2: Catch-up

**Topic 10:** Monks: Their Sayings and Lives, or What does it mean to be holy?

Monday 11/5: Reading: Life of Antony (CLA: 46)

Wednesday 11/7: Reading: Sayings of the Desert Fathers (CLA: 39) and Life of Symeon (CLA: 47)

Friday 11/9: Life of Macrina (Angel)

**Topic 11:** Bishops and Emperors: Contesting an Empire

Monday 11/12 : Ambrose, Symmachus, and Theodosius (CLA 8 and readings on Angel)

Wednesday 11/14: Lecture: Jerome and John Chrysostom

Friday 11/16: **Quiz 3**

Monday, 11/19: NO CLASS but **Monasticism Paper due (Option B)**

**Topic 12:** Augustine

Monday 11/16: Reading: *Confessions*, Book 1, 2

Wednesday 11/28: Reading, *Confessions*, Book 6, 7

Friday 11/30: Reading, *Confessions*, Book 8

Monday 12/3: Reading: Against the Donatists (CLA: 29)

**Topic 13:** The “end” of early Christianity

Wednesday 12/5: Christian Rule: CLA 9 and 10

Friday 12/7: Wrap-up lecture and discussion

FINAL EXAM: This will combine the fourth quiz and the second IN CLASS WRITING ASSIGNMENT