

Birth of the Christian Tradition

RLGS 254

Prof. Wakoh Shannon Hickey
Alfred University Spring 2013

Class Meets: 2:20 - 3:10 p.m. Tue., Wed., Thur., Fri., 357 McMahon Hall

Dr. Hickey's Office: 2nd floor Kanakadea Hall, last office on left.

Office Hours: Tuesday & Thursday 5:30-6:30 p.m.; Wednesday 4-6 p.m., or by appointment.

Please note: The *worst* time to catch me is immediately before class, especially if you have significant questions or concerns. I will be focused on getting organized for class, and unable to give you adequate attention. Please come during office hours or make an appointment.

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OVERVIEW

In this course we will explore the first three centuries of Christian history, to see how events during that time shaped the many forms of Christianity present today, in the United States and around the world. We will focus on texts produced from about two decades after the death of Jesus to the fourth century CE, including: the four Gospels of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John); five letters from the apostle Paul to early Christian churches (1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans); some gospels that were excluded from the Christian scriptures (the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas); and other important early Christian texts (e.g., the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the Didache). By studying these texts, using a variety of analytical methods, we will see that Christianity always has been very diverse. Some ideas became orthodox — official doctrine of the Christian church, surviving to this day — and other ideas became heretical, suppressed for nearly two thousand years. After focusing on the church from the time of Jesus to the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, we will fast-forward 1500 years, skimming medieval Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the Protestant Reformation. We will finish the course by reading some contemporary Christian theology. Students will work in teams, explore multiple interpretations of New Testament texts, and practice leading small-group discussions. They will be invited to listen thoughtfully and draw their own conclusions.

Why This Course Matters:

I cannot say it better than Bart Ehrman, Ph.D., the author of our textbook:

“Christianity is the largest religion in the world today, with some 2 billion adherents. Throughout the history of Western civilization of the past 2,000 years, the Christian church has been by far the most powerful and influential institution — not just religiously but also socially, culturally,

economically, and politically. And the New Testament is the book that stands at the foundation of this religion.”

It “is the most frequently purchased, commonly read, passionately believed, and widely misunderstood book in the history of Western civilization.”

“Whether you are a Christian believer or not, whether you have a personal attachment to the New Testament or not, whether you base your life on the teachings of Jesus or not, the New Testament has profoundly affected your life and will continue to play an enormous role in the world in which you, and all of us, live.”

— *Brief Introduction to the New Testament, 1.*

Methods

The course will employ a variety of methods: lecture, discussion, video, audio, reading and writing assignments, self-assessment, peer evaluation, and teamwork. Students will study a course textbook and primary sources, consult reference works in Herrick Library, and lead small-group discussions.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Level 1, Remembering:

- Define key terms: gospel, apocalypticism, synoptic, Hellenization, diaspora, epistle, Protestant Reformation, etc.
- Briefly describe important Jewish & Christian rituals (e.g., circumcision, sacraments), holidays (e.g., Passover, Christmas and Easter), and other observances (e.g., Sabbath, Lent).
- Identify major sub-groups within the broad religious traditions we study (e.g., Pharisees, Saducees, Essenes; Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Gnostics).

Level 2, Understanding:

- Explain how Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures shaped the early Christian church.
- Explain how and when the Synoptic Gospels were composed, by whom and for whom.
- Explain Paul’s role in shaping the early Christian church: how he conducted his missionary activities, problems he faced in the churches he founded, and conflicts he had with other leaders of the Jesus Movement.
- Explain the roles of women in the early Christian church.
- Explain how Christianity and Judaism diverged, beginning in the mid- to late First Century.
- Describe the role of Constantine and other Roman emperors in developing the institutional Church, and in establishing and enforcing Christian orthodoxy.

Level 3, Applying:

- Apply different methods of analysis to New Testament texts: historical-literary, comparative, thematic, redaction, feminist, post-colonial, etc.

Level 4, Analyzing:

- Develop critical questions about the reading materials for the class to discuss.
- Compare similar passages in the Gospels, and compare the canonical gospels with those excluded from the New Testament, showing how they portray Jesus differently.

Level 5, Evaluating:

- Explain why you think particular arguments or claims made by authors, your classmates, or the professor are or aren't persuasive to you. Identify strengths and weaknesses, citing specific evidence to make your case.
- Assess your own learning: strengths, areas for improvement, and insights, and evaluate your own performance in class.

Level 6, Creating

- Discuss how your perspective on Christianity and the Bible have changed since the start of the semester.

SKILLS YOU WILL PRACTICE:

- **Read critically.**
Prepare answers to study questions at the end of each chapter of the textbook, and by write clear, concise summaries of Bible commentaries produced from various cultural perspectives.
- **Write clearly and succinctly.**
Answer study questions, summarize contemporary commentaries on assigned New Testament texts.
- **Ask and answer questions at various levels of learning.**
- **Lead a discussion.**
Prepare for, plan, and lead a small-group discussion of a Biblical text in class.
- **Assess and evaluate performance.**

GRADING

Grades will be based on the following:

- **16** sets of answers to Reading Guide questions, one set for each of the 16 chapters of the textbook we will read. 48 percent of final grade. Answers for each chapter will be graded ✓+ (good), ✓ (adequate) ✓- (poor). Good means A to B range, adequate means B- to C range, poor means C- to D range. These will be due *in class* on Tuesdays, the week after the chapter material is discussed.
- One teaching self-assessment, with notes. You will lead a small-group discussion of a Biblical text for approximately 40 minutes. Your report, due in class on the Tuesday after you lead, should include: your notes on the Biblical text, based on Ehrman's discussion and your own observations; your notes on at least one additional commentary on the text; the discussion questions you developed from your small group; and your self-assessment of what you did well, what you could have done better, and what you learned from the experience. 26 percent of final grade.
- A final reflection on the course and your own learning. 26 percent of final grade.

The professor reserves the right to adjust grades based on attendance (see policy below) and a subjective assessment of how actively you participate in class.

COURSE POLICIES

Academic or Other Difficulties: If you are having academic or personal difficulties that affect your ability to do your work, and/or need information about support services available on campus, please see the professor right away. She will help you find appropriate resources on campus.

Disability: If you have a disability and need an accommodation to help you succeed in class, please let the professor know right away. All such information will be treated as confidential.

A Note from Special Academic Services re: Students with Disabilities:

Alfred University is committed to upholding and maintaining all aspects of the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. If you are a student with a disability and wish to request accommodations, please contact Dr. Aubrey Elmore at the Office of Special Academic Services located in Crandall Hall, or call (607) 871-2148. Any information regarding your disability will remain confidential. Many accommodations require early planning; therefore requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible. Any requests for accommodations will be reviewed in a timely manner to determine their appropriateness to this setting.

Tutor Services/Requests:

The office of Special Academic Services offers personalized help in the form of individual and group tutoring. Please contact Beth Niles at (607) 871-2148 for more information. Also, contact your instructor for additional support.

Writing Help:

Whether you are having trouble getting started on a writing assignment or need a little help with editing along the way, the Writing Center offers individual assistance to meet your needs. To make an appointment, go to my.alfred.edu/writing and click on the link “sign up here.”

Religious Concerns: Students who need to miss class in order to participate in the religious observances of their own traditions may do so, but they must make arrangements with the professor *in advance* to make up any required work.

Athletes: Students who must miss class to participate in athletic events must notify the professor at the beginning of the semester *and* by e-mail at least one week before each class to be missed, and must make arrangements to get notes from class, contribute to class teamwork, and submit assignments timely. The one-week requirement will be waived in case of unscheduled playoff, but you should let the professor know as soon as possible of an expected absence.

Lateness and Absences: You are expected to arrive in class on time and attend all class meetings. If unforeseen circumstances will make you late, please make every effort to notify the professor before class, or ask a fellow student to do so. After the first week of class, you will be allowed **two** unexcused absences. After that, every unexcused absence will reduce your final

grade by one increment, e.g., from a B+ to a B. (Missing four classes is equivalent to missing a week of the course.) *It is possible to do all the work and still fail the course because of unexcused absences.* If you know in advance that you must miss a class, notify the professor by phone or e-mail at least 48 hours in advance. Prearranged absences will not affect your grade (but you should ask classmates or the professor to inform you about class discussions, and complete assigned work timely). If you are ill, contact the professor by phone or e-mail as soon as you know you are too ill to attend class. Do not attend if you have a fever or are contagious.

Mobile Phone: Turn volume off and put it away before class begins. If you send text messages or otherwise use your phone without permission during class, the professor will collect and hold it until the end of class.

Reading Schedule: Complete the assigned readings *before* we begin discussing it in class.

Ground Rules for Class Discussion: The classroom must be a productive and respectful environment for everyone, and religion can be difficult to discuss. Participants hold a wide variety of religious, moral, and political beliefs. In both the academy and society at large, human knowledge and community depend upon our ability to engage in civil discussions of such differences. You should be able to argue for your own positions on the basis of evidence and reason. You are *encouraged* to question or disagree with one another and the professor, respectfully. Insulting others' character, beliefs, or practices is not acceptable.

Because personal integrity is fundamental to both good scholarship and good citizenship, you are also expected to uphold the university's standards for academic and personal integrity. Cheating, plagiarism, or harassment of any kind *will not be tolerated*.

All reference sources must be completely and correctly cited. If you have questions about how to cite a particular type of source, please ask. Writing assignments must be submitted to www.turnitin.com before they are submitted to the instructor.

First violations of the Academic Dishonesty policy will result in a failing grade on the assignment. If the violation is severe, or if there is a second violation, it will be reported formally, in writing, to your dean and the University Provost, and will become part of your permanent academic record (unless you appeal and are exonerated). If your dean and the provost receive two formal, written reports of academic dishonesty from one or more instructors, you will be dismissed from the university. Two violations *in this course* will result in automatic failure of the course. *You are expected to inform yourself about and abide by school policies regarding academic integrity, plagiarism, and harassment.* If you have questions about these policies, ask the professor right away.

Alfred's Student Code of Conduct may be viewed here:

http://my.alfred.edu/index.cfm/fuseaction/student_policies.code_of_conduct_0708.cfm

Alfred's policy on Academic Dishonesty may be viewed here:

http://my.alfred.edu/index.cfm/fuseaction/academic_policies.academic_regulation_ug.cfm#700

Other campus policies and resources can be found here:

<http://my.alfred.edu/index.cfm/fuseaction/policies.menu.cfm>

REQUIRED TEXTS

A Brief Introduction to the New Testament, 2nd or 3^d ed., by Bart Ehrman

A copy of the New Testament, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Saving Salvation: The Amazing Evolution of Grace by Stephen Smith

Other materials distributed in class.

SCHEDULE

		Topic	Assignments
Week 1	Jan. 22-25	Introductions, Syllabus, Teams, NT Bkgd	Ehrman Ch. 1 , Qs 1, 5, 7, 8; Ch. 2 Qs 2, 6, 7
Week 2	Jan. 28-Feb. 1	Ancient Judaism, Trads. Of Jesus	Ch. 3 Qs 1, 4, 7; Ch. 4 Qs 2, 4, 7
Week 3	Feb. 5-8	Mark	Ch. 5 , Qs 1, 2, 4, 9; Mark
Week 4	Feb. 12-15	Matthew	Ch. 6 , Qs 1, 3, 4, 10; Matthew
Week 5	Feb. 19-22	Luke	Ch. 7 , Qs 1, 5, 7, 9, 10; Luke
Week 6	Feb. 26-Mar. 1	John	Ch. 8 , Qs 1, 2, 4, 8; John
Week 7	Mar. 5-8	Historical Jesus, From Jesus to Gospels	Ch. 9 , Qs 1, 4, 7; Ch. 10 , Qs 3, 5, 6
Week 8	Spring Break		Read ahead!
Week 9	Mar. 19-22	Acts	Ch. 11 , Qs 1, 2, 3, 9; Acts
Week 10	Mar. 26-29	Paul, 1 Thessalonians, Galatians	Ch. 12 , Qs 1, 2, 3, 8; Ch. 13 , Qs 2, 4, 8; Ch. 15 pp. 233-241, Qs 4, 5, 6; 1 Thessalonians or Galatians
Week 11	Apr. 2-5	Corinthians	Ch. 14 , Qs 1, 2, 7, 8; 1 or 2 Corinthians
Week 12	Apr. 9-12	Romans	Ch. 15 , Qs 1-4; Romans
Week 13	Apr. 16-19	Women, Gnostics, Constantine	Ch. 18 , Qs. 1, 2, 5, 6, 10; Gospel of Mary, Infancy Thos.
Week 14	Apr. 23-26	Saving Salvation	Chapters 1-4
Week 15	Apr. 30-May 3	Saving Salvation	Chapters 5-8
Finals Week	Wrap-up, Final Reflections Due		