

An Introduction to Christianity:

Defining Moments That Shaped a Faith.

Asynchronous Online Course: Spring 2021 Canvas Support Hotline 1-877-249-4494

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Description:

In this course, we will visit some of the most critical moments in the History of Christianity, moments of crisis that shaped its very nature. Some of these defining moments produced shared understandings that have endured for centuries, while others fractured Christianity into divergent and often opposing forms.

To investigate both the unity and diversity of Christianity, we will search out Christians of many times and places, looking in ancient Roman catacombs and North African caves, medieval cathedrals, storefront churches, and open-air meetings. We will look to historical narratives, original writings, works of art, and sacred songs to help us to experience the moments that defined and diversified Christianity. Along the way, we will pay particular attention to tensions and near-paradoxes in the story of Christianity, such as the recurring pattern in which forms of Christianity have been used to legitimate oppression, even as other forms of the faith have been used to resist that oppression.

Audience:

This course provides an introduction to the history of Christianity that can also serve to introduce Christianity as a religion. It is suitable for all who wish to deepen their understanding of Christianity, regardless of how much personal knowledge or cultural familiarity they may have with Christianity.

Pace and Schedule:

This course stresses weekly engagement that is primarily conducted through text-based, asynchronous discussions. Because of that weekly rhythm of interaction, this class requires a steady, consistent engagement on the part of students, so it may not be suitable for students who will not be able to provide consistent attention to the course throughout the semester; however, the advantage of our steady pattern of interaction will be that this course will cease making any demands of students late in the semester when other courses require them to write papers.

Course Learning Outcomes:

Through this course, students will be able to:

- Explain the significance of key precursors to the rise of Christianity occurring before the common era, including: Greek Religion & Philosophy, the spread of Hellenistic

Civilization, the rise of the Roman Empire, the rise of the Persian Empire, the long history of the Jewish people, and the development of Jewish religion and scriptures.

- Students will be able to explain what is known of the very earliest foundations of Christianity, including its canonical scriptures, paying particular attention to the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and to the contribution of Paul to the growth of early forms of gentile forms of Christianity.
 - Explain what is known to history concerning the life of Jesus of Nazareth and explain how historical memory of him, his first followers, and his teachings are portrayed in the canonical Christian Gospels.
 - Describe the rise of first-century Christianity in Judea as a Jewish sect, how it related to other contemporary Jewish movements, and the pivotal role that the Apostle Paul played in promoting the rise of Gentile forms of Christianity as a leader at Antioch and as a missionary throughout the Roman empire.
 - Explain the impact of the destruction and massacre of Jerusalem in 70 CE on the development of Christian scriptures and theology.
- Describe the process through which Christians gathered their scriptures and created emergent organizational, liturgical, and theological norms in the first three centuries of Christian growth and expansion within the Roman Empire, the Persian Empire, and the buffer states between them.
 - Explain the early formation of Christian theology in terms of the challenge of reconciling local religious norms, dualistic Hellenistic Philosophies, and distinctively Christian inheritance from scriptures, teachings, and rituals.
 - Explain the relationship between developing “Orthodox” groups of Christians and their Gnostic rivals.
 - Explain the main centers of Christian thought and practice that produced the rival orthodoxies of the first three centuries and what local forces helped to produce their divergent emphases.
- Describe the adoption of Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine I and the resultant transformation of Christianity from persecuted minority within the Roman Empire to the persecuting faith of the Roman Empire. Explain the calamitous effects his patronage of Christianity had on the many Christians within the Persian Empire and for Jews.
 - Describe the rise of Christianity in Syria, Persia, Egypt, and Ethiopia.
 - Name the four most important ecumenical church councils and the issues that they dealt with, paying particular attention to the relationship between the Roman Empire and divergent Christian Orthodoxies.
- Describe the process through which monks and rulers, including Charlemagne, brought Roman Catholic Christianity through a new conquest of Western Europe, along with innovations in art, law, and learning that created the long-lasting ideal of “Christendom.”

- Explain some of the distinctive cultural, religious and artistic characteristics of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) empire and how the persecution of divergent orthodoxies within the empire helped to create the conditions for its rapid conquest by Muslim rulers.
- Explain how the Renaissance helped prepare the way for the Protestant Reformation, the Radical Reformation, and the Catholic Reformations, noting the way the political, cultural and social changes that came about through the splintering of Europe into competing visions of Christendom and principled objections to the ideal.
- Explain how the Enlightenment, and later reactions to the Enlightenment such as Romanticism were born out of the horrors of the religious warfare of the era of dueling Reformations, creating a massive epistemological shift in Western societies from philosophical idealism toward empiricism.
- Map how the rapid rise of European power, the conquest of the Western hemisphere, and the institutionalization of transatlantic slavery, radically reshaped the economic, political, and religious map of the world, paying particular attention to the paradoxical role of Christianity in legitimating both conquest and resistance to colonial hegemony.
- Explain how new forms of Protestantism, including Pietism, Evangelicalism, and forms of more radical Protestant belief such as Unitarianism, created privatized forms of Christianity that could thrive while delinked from governments, creating highly popular, populist, forms of Christianity that were adopted and adapted by the Black Church, as well as by those who oppressed them before and after the Civil War in the US.
- Students will be able to name some of the leading figures in the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, explain the main issues at stake, and explain how the legacy of the controversy shapes current cultural and religious controversies around the world.
- Students will be able to describe the precursors, origins, and global significance of Pentecostalism and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, while explaining commonalities and differences they have with each other and with the many indigenous, postcolonial Christian movements that stress ecstatic spiritual experience.
- Students will be able to explain critically important events and developments in the recent history of Roman Catholicism, such as the Second Vatican Council, the rise of Liberation Theology in Latin America, and the recent sex-abuse scandal.
- Students will be able to explain the extraordinary demographic shifts in world Christianity that took place in the 20th and early 21st centuries which made Latin America, Africa, and East Asia the largest and most rapidly growing centers of Christian population in the world.

Required Texts:

Atlas of Christian History, Tim Dowley, Fortress Press (November 1, 2016) ISBN-10: 1451499701; ISBN-13: 978-1451499704

Exploring Christian Heritage: A Reader in History and Theology, 2nd Ed. Weaver, C. Douglas. Baylor University Press (December 7, 2011) ASIN: B08D4W58HJ

To Whom Does Christianity Belong? Critical Issues in World Christianity, Dyron B. Daugherty, Fortress University Press, 2015. ISBN-10: 1451472277 ISBN-13: 978-1451472271

Recommended Texts:

Christianity: An Introduction, McGrath, Alister E., Wiley-Blackwell; 3rd edition (January 27, 2015). ISBN-10: 1118465652; ISBN-13: 978-1118465653

Assessment:

1. Weekly Online Discussions: (70%): Each student will write weekly contributions to two different online discussions and will substantively engage with the original posts of other students. Creating original discussion posts and responding to one another and to the professor constitutes the single most important form of “attendance” for this course.
 - a. Reaction Papers (60 %): Each week students will be required to write a “reaction paper” post. These posts, which will be approximately 1.5 pages in length, will respond to specific prompts provided by the professor, and they will require students to think carefully about the readings and materials covered. Substantive, written responses to the posts of at least three other students are also required.
 - b. Raising Questions (10 %): The second required weekly discussion forum is the “raising questions” forum. Participation in this discussion board will require students to pose, in 1-2 paragraphs, (or in a sound or video recording), a significant question of clarification or analysis for the professor and fellow students. For specific weeks, participation in this collaborative forum may take an alternate form, as specified by the instructor.
2. Flash Checks & small assignments: (10%) These short, ungraded quizzes will be embedded throughout the course in order to help students process complex material such as lectures. As long as students fully complete Flash Checks, they will receive full points for them.
3. Essay Exams: (20%) Students will complete a midterm and a final essay exam. These exams will require students to articulate their understanding of course content and to form their own thoughtful responses and interpretations.

Instructions in how to use Modules and read Weekly Summaries:

There is one module for each week of the course, and the modules will appear the Friday before each instructional week begins. The modules will begin with a summary that explains the activities for that week, plus a lecture, assignments, supplied readings, and readings from your course texts.

Each week the Summary section of each module will summarize what we will be doing for that week, and it will always, always be more reliable and up to date than the syllabus.

The "Assignments" portion of the summary will list all the written work for the week.

"Supplied Readings" will list all of the materials, other than my lecture, that I am providing for you to read or view for the week.

"Readings from Course Texts" will provide the precise reading assignments taken from your four required texts, which will be referred to by the author's name and page/chapter numbers. In general, the secondary (explanatory) readings will be listed first, followed by primary sources from our Source Book, followed by the particular pages to consult in our Atlas.

Please note: Aside from the fact that I do recommend listening to the lectures first, the order I am listing items in the summary for the week does not necessarily tell you the best order in which to consume the materials. For example, even though I will list Atlas pages last, you may well want to start out each week by glancing at the assigned Atlas pages, so that you can keep the maps and explanations found there in mind as you look through the remaining materials.

Electronic Communication Policy:

Students will be expected to use their Hartford Seminary email for communication in regard to the course. In addition, all students will need to log into the course site several times per week in order to take part in discussions and to access readings, videos, mini-lectures and other course materials.

Late Work:

Written assignments must be submitted by the date and time specified. Except when specifically excused by the instructor, each day of lateness will result in the loss of 5% of the points for the assignment. Late quizzes and exams will only be accepted if prior arrangement has been made with the instructor.