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HIS500

Christianity in Greco-Roman Antiquity

Fall Term 2026

Office Hours: Wednesday 12-1 PM

“To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it, no matter how elegantly he may look down on our coarse and graceless needs and distresses. That is, we need it for life and for action....” Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life”

PURPOSE:

This course introduces students to the disciplines of history through a consideration of emerging traditions of Christianity in the first six centuries of the Common Era. Its chief aim is to invite students to experience the joy and rewards of historical study through a living encounter with a seminal period of Christian tradition.

The course aims for an increasing sophistication in understanding the multiple practices of history as a discipline. It seeks history in the service of life that seeks to address the past as a resource for considering the complexities of modern society, and how amidst those complexities we project ourselves into the past. Accordingly, it seeks to accomplish two things. First and foremost, it will furnish students with a working knowledge of the chief historical, cultural, philosophical, theological and political events, ideas, and figures in the construction of Christian tradition in the period. Specific attention will be given to historical formulations concerning creed, code, cultus, and community – beliefs, ethical practices, ritual, and religious self-definition. Here special attention will be given to the sources, social processes, uses of history, and political and cultural developments that facilitated the emergence of self-defined normative Christian traditions. It will give students knowledge and skills to name and discuss key social, historical, theological, and political influences in this period. The course will invite students to consider ways in which early Christianity was internally fluid and diverse and the various influences and developments that contributed to its self-definition. They will develop the ability to recognize and identify ways in which what we today name early Christianity and represents socially constructed traditions that bear the marks of its social and cultural environments. Varying forms of religious life and

spiritual and theological devotion will be considered as students encounter the faith and commitments of a variety of thinkers of Christian traditions.

Throughout, emphasis will be placed on engagement of primary texts in order to teach students how to read historical sources and where to find them. Through a short essay oriented chiefly around primary sources students will demonstrate an elementary historical competency in a methodologically disciplined and critically informed consideration of a topic of interest from the period. A final exam will assess ability to identify a series of primary texts and their significance in the period under consideration. Second the course will develop the student's ability to use history as a means of thinking critically about the past and the contemporary practices of history and religious leadership. It will introduce students to representative approaches to and resources for the scholarly study of the period. To name only a few these will range from more traditional empirically based modes of enquiry to narrative, feminist, post-structuralist, post-colonial, and history of culture methods. This will enable students identify their working assumptions in the practices of historical study and in their understanding of what constitutes history more generally. In a written exercise students will identify their "working history," its assumptions, and their chief warrants for their understanding of history.

COMPETENCE OBJECTIVES:

- An ability to identify, discuss, and compare at a level consistent with a first year of historical study the disciplines of history and at least two approaches to the study of the past.
- An ability to identify and discuss one's own understanding of history and its operating assumptions.
- An ability to offer a basic outline of and Christianity in the first five centuries of the common era and the relation of that history to the events and chief turning points of the Roman Empire in the same period.
- An ability to identify and discuss in a preliminary fashion the chief philosophical schools of the Greco-Roman world and their contribution to unfolding thought in emerging Christianity and Judaism.
- An ability to identify the basic social worlds, historical contexts, and ideological currents at work in a selection of primary Christian texts from the period.
- An ability to identify the social, cultural, political, and theological sources of self-definition of emergent Christianity of the period.
- An ability to summarise the main ideas and methods of different forms of historical investigation represented by a cross-section of critical studies.

- An ability to take up in an extended essay a historical description and analysis of a primary text, a Christian phenomenon, and, as appropriate, represent the implications of that understanding on contemporary identity.
- An ability to discuss the main contours of early Christian debates concerning communal self-definition, Christological and theological debates as these relate to the emergence of Trinitarian theology, and the debates ancient modern concerning the unity and diversity of early Christianity.
- An ability to identify web resources, published collections, scholarly tools, and representative secondary discussions of the Christianity of the period.
- An ability to reflect upon the relevance of elements of Christian tradition for the religious self-understanding and the contemporary life of Christian communities.

COURSE DESIGN:

One 3 hour session weekly divided into lecture and seminar discussion of set reading and writing assignments centred around primary sources and the discussion of them in a cross-section of secondary literature.

COURSE EVALUATION:

Use of social media during lectures is strictly prohibited. If a student has need for family or other reasons to be available for text messages s/he is required to confer with me before class.

1. 80% attendance and active participation in the course. Without prior arrangement with the instructor, failure to attend more than two classes will constitute a Not Approved for the course. Students who miss a class are required to write a 2-3 page single-spaced précis of the lecture due by the start of the class after the one missed.
2. A 500 word initial statement and a revision of the student's working history due near the start of term and the first class after Reading Week, respectively.
3. **DUE 11 December.** A third revision of the 500 word working history; a 3500 word (exclusive of bibliographical citations) paper on a primary text from the period with a minimum of 9-12 bibliographical citations outside the course texts from the scholarly literature on a topic of the student's interest related to the period. Papers that utilize less than 9-12 sources beyond the course texts will be returned for resubmission before being graded. The bibliographical style used is to be listed at the top of the bibliography. Bibliographies or footnotes not consistent with the selected style guide will be returned for correction before being graded. The paper is to demonstrate competence in the application of a model of historical method and inquiry. Please note the word limit; papers that exceed the limit by less or more

than 10% will be turned back for resubmission. The 500 word working history, bibliography and footnotes DO NOT count toward the 3500 word limit of the paper. The due date is strict and only in exceptional circumstances will an extension be given.

4. A discussion of primary texts and their secondary treatments that will include a brief single-spaced 1 page summary of the primary text and the use of it in a representative scholarly treatment. In order to gain credit for this course assigned exercises must be handed in on each meeting date except in cases of illness or other personal reasons and any missed assignments must be completed by the last day of class. E-mail submissions are required. Please attend to the rubrics outlined in the guide to email submissions, which will be distributed early in the term.
5. Four postings onto the Populi site of an Internet resource related to the content of the course, two before Reading Week and two after Reading Week.
6. A final exam that will include identification questions as well as short essays that relate to primary texts.

Asynchronous Distance Students:

In addition to the above, a 2-3 single-spaced précis of the lecture due by the start of the following class.

Rewrites:

Rewrites of Not Approved papers for other students are due 15 January. Medical Extension papers for non-graduating students are due 5 February.

Certificate Students:

Students taking the course for a certificate in theological studies are required to read each of the weekly primary texts (roughly 20 pages/week) and to write a 8-10 page double-spaced reflection on an aspect of the content of the course material.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Fredriksen, Paula. *Ancient Christianities: The First Five Hundred Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024. ISBN 978-0691157696.

Hall, Stuart G. *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, 2nd Edition. London: SPCK, 1991. ISBN 9780281055098 (students should avoid purchasing an earlier used edition as cross-

referencing will be different and assignments/examination will be based on the cross-references to Stevenson/Frend [below]).

Stevenson, S. and W.H.C. Frend (eds.). *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337* (London: SPCK, 1987). ISBN 9780281042685 (students may elect to buy an older used version not re-edited by Frend, but the pagination and numeration of sources will be slightly different; a hand-out cross-referencing both texts will be furnished in class). The most recent edition is available as an ebook at the VST library.

Stevenson, S. and W.H.C. Frend (eds.). *Creeds, Councils, and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, AD 337-461*. London: SPCK, 1989. ISBN 9780281043279 (students may elect to buy an older used version not re-edited by Frend, but the pagination and numeration of sources will be slightly different; a hand-out cross-referencing both texts will be furnished in class). The most recent edition is available as an ebook at the VST library.

RECOMMENDED TEXTS:

Williams, Rowan. *Why Study the Past: The Quest for the Historical Church*. Ann Arbor: Eerdmans, 2005. ISBN 13-9780802829900

McHaffie, Barbara J. *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*, 2nd Edition. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006. ISBN 0800838263