RELG 326: CHRISTIANS IN THE ROMAN WORLD

Prof. Heidi Wendt | HCS & School of Religious Studies | Birks Building 005 | 514.398.5320

Teaching Assistant Ms. Esther Guillen, PhD Student, History
Email heidi.wendt@mcgill.ca; esther.guillen@mcgill.ca
Course Meetings Tuesday and Thursdays, 11:35 AM–12:55 PM in Birks 205
Office Hours Wendt, Mondays 11 AM–12:30 PM; Guillen (Birks 014), Wednesdays 10:30–11 AM
Course Webpage myCourses
Course Weight 3 credit hours
Prerequisites None
Language Lectures will be in English. In accordance with McGill University’s Charter of Student’s Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or French any written work that is to be graded.
Late Policy Written assignments are considered late if they are submitted after the due date and will be penalized five points per day beyond the original deadline. Exceptions will only be made for unusual circumstances.

Course Description & Learning Outcomes

This course explores the historical development of Christianity from its origins in the first century through the rise of Constantine in the fourth. We will consider a number of events, circumstances, and dynamics that shape our understanding of this history, including but not limited to the spread and diversity of teachings about Christ, debates among rival Christian authorities (orthodoxy and heresy), so-called Gnostics, the formation of the New Testament, and Roman efforts to investigate and punish Christians (martyrdom or persecution). Given the complexity of these topics, priority will be given to second- and third-century evidence. Readings consist of primary sources and scholarship that lend different perspectives on and improve our understanding of the Greco-Roman context in which Christianity took shape.

Learning Outcomes

• Students will gain a firm grasp of the academic study of early Christianity and become familiar with a variety of critical methods and scholarly perspectives.

• Students will read a variety of primary sources for early Christianity with consideration of their literary, socio-cultural, historical, and religious dimensions.

• Students will also consider alternative perspectives on early Christians by reading the work of (or reading about) their critics and by theorizing the place of Christian figures and phenomena in the wider religious environment of the Roman Empire.

• Students will learn the interpretive challenges and limitations of this evidence and will learn to make judgments about historically plausible readings of difficult texts.

• Students will gain an appreciation of the tremendous diversity and instability of earliest Christianity, as well as the factors that led to its spread and regularization.

• Students will be able to read ancient texts from multiple perspectives, considering questions of social location, interest, cultural context, and the various applications of this literature in both the ancient world and in later periods.

• Students will hone critical thinking and research skills through readings, written assignments, and section and class discussions.

• Students will gain an appreciation for how the history of earliest Christianity aligns with and stands to contribute to the wider academic study of religion.
Required Texts

The following two books are required for the course and are available for purchase at Le James bookstore. Reserve copies are available at the Humanities and Social Sciences Library and Wilken is available in the e-collection. All other readings are available on myCourses, either as pdf files or through links to e-items held in the library collection.


Course Requirements

Each of the following requirements will determine a percentage of the final grade:

1. Attendance & Participation 10%
2. Section Reflections (3 x 5%) 15%
3. Papers (2 x 15%) 30%
4. Midterm Examination 20%
5. Final Examination 25%

1. **Attendance & Participation (10%)**: Regular attendance and participation, especially in conferences, are essential components of the grade for this course. Attendance is mandatory, since much of the content of this course is delivered only in lecture. If you must be late to or absent from class, please email me in advance or as soon as is practically possible; a maximum of three absences resulting from extreme illness or emergency situations will be excused with appropriate documentation. Be forewarned: students who miss class regularly risk receiving a significantly lower final grade for the course than a mere deduction in this category of assessment.

2. **Conference Reflections (15%)**: Three times over the course of the term, we will divide into hour-long conferences to discuss challenging scholarship that delves more deeply into recent themes. On these days, to ensure that you have completed and reflected thoughtfully on the readings, you are asked to write a one- to two-page response, double-spaced (no more, no less), to the readings assigned for that day. While you may wish to situate these amidst broader considerations or place them in dialogue with other readings, again, it’s important to engage substantially with the section readings. The writing should be sharp, organized, and should advance a unifying idea or thesis. While this is not a formal paper with respect to structure, it is also not a place for streams of consciousness. Think of it this way: if you were to make two to three cogent, insightful comments about the readings in conference discussion, what would they be? What evidence would you offer in support of your points? Reflections are graded on a 1–10 scale and must be submitted on paper. **Due Dates**: Thursdays, January 30, February 20, and March 26.

3. **Papers (2 x 15%)**: You will write two papers for this course, each 5–7 pages, double-spaced, in regular font and with regular margins. The papers will respond to pre-circulated prompts that engage major themes of the course, although you will need to develop an original thesis and select evidence pertinent to the theme in question. Outside research is not required for these papers, although we certainly expect you to draw on the assigned primary sources and scholarship that are relevant to the topic. However, you may find it beneficial to consult a fuller version of a primary source excerpted in Ehrman’s sourcebook, or, if you’ve developed a specific thesis, to conduct some additional research. Both papers should be submitted electronically to the appropriate Drop Box on myCourses, and in a format that allows for comments, editing, and track changes (the full Microsoft Office suite can be downloaded for free by all McGill students). **Paper Due Dates**: Sundays, February 16 and March 22, at 11:59 PM.

4. **Midterm Exam (20%)**: The midterm will be an in-class examination comprised of two sections—IDs and primary source analytical essays—each of which will require students to draw on course readings and lecture notes. A review guide will be circulated in advance of exam. It is the responsibility of any student requiring accommodation for either exam to make advance arrangements through McGill’s Office of Disability Services.

5. **Final Exam (20 + 5%)**: The final will consist of an examination comprised of three sections—IDs, primary source analytical essays, and a longer essay. A review guide will be circulated in advance of this exam, too.
All readings are to be completed **before the class** under which, and preferably in the order, they are listed.

**WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND & CONTEXT**

**Tuesday, January 7:** Emplacing Christians and “Christianity” in the Roman World  
**Topics:** A history told by the victors; general sketch of key events in the history of early Christianity.

**Thursday, January 8:** Religion in the Roman Empire, Categories and Sources  
**Topics:** Defining “religion” in antiquity; problems and possibilities of the evidence for ancient religious practice; the significance of the empire in the history of religion.  

**WEEK 2: JESUS & JUDEA IN THE ROMAN PERIOD**

**Tuesday, January 14:** The Historical Jesus  
**Topics:** Judea in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds; the Gospels as historical evidence; source problems.  
**Readings:** Paul Duff, *Jesus Followers in the Roman Empire* (Eerdmans: 2017), 39–79.

**Thursday, January 16:** External Witnesses to the Historical Jesus  
**Topics:** Flavian Testimony; Josephus; Judean War and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.  

**WEEK 3: OUR EARLIEST WITNESS TO JESUS CHRIST**

**Tuesday, January 21:** Paul, A Steward of Christ’s Mysteries  
**Topics:** Religious options; the rise of self-authorized religious experts; Paul as an expert in Judean religion.  
**Readings:** Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 158–81; Pauline Epistles (all entire chapters): Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 2, 10, 15, 2 Corinthians 9, 11, Philippians 1–2; Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, 3–51 (odd only).

**Thursday, January 23:** The Spread of Christianity  
**Topics:** Flavian Testimony; Josephus; Judean War and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.  

**WEEK 4: EARLY ROMAN RESPONSES TO “CHRISTIANS”**

**Tuesday, January 28:** Pliny & Trajan  
**Topics:** Early Roman actions against Christians; prosecution v. persecution; Pliny as a witness to early Christian practice; emic justifications for punishment.  
**Readings:** Wilken, *CARST*, 1–30; Ehrman, **ANT**, 26–33 (4–5); Justin, *Second Apology*, 271–83 (odd only).

**Thursday, January 30:** Conference I, Early Roman Actions Against Christians?  
**Topics:** The status of Christians in the first two centuries; the singularity of “Christian” punishment.  
**Submission:** Reflection paper due at the beginning of conference.
WEEK 5: CRITICS & CARETAKERS

Tuesday, February 4: Galen v. Justin Martyr
Topics: Christians as and among other Roman intellectuals; Galen’s critique of Christians; Justin’s social aspirations.

Thursday, February 6: Celsus v. Origen
Topics: Chastening “fraudulent” religious actors; Christians and Neo-Platonists.

WEEK 6: A PARTING OF THE WAYS?

Tuesday, February 11: Athenagoras, Tertullian, and the Epistle to Diognetus
Topics: Intra- and extra-mural opponents.
Readings: Ehrman, ANT, 82–110 (14–17).

Thursday, February 13: Jews and Christians in the Second Century
Topics: Flavian Testimony; Josephus; the Judean War.

Sunday, February 16: Paper 1 Due to myCourses by Midnight

WEEK 7: CATEGORIZING EARLY CHRISTIAN DIVERSITY

Tuesday, February 18: Hunting “Heresy”
Topics: Heresiology; orthodoxy and heresy as discursive categories; Irenaeus and Tertullian on “heresy.”

Thursday, February 20: Conference II, “Heresy” in a Wider Intellectual Landscape
Topics: Literary composition and religious authority; heresiology as ethnography.
Submission: Reflection paper due at the beginning of conference.

WEEK 8: HERESY AS A BILATERAL CHARGE

Tuesday, February 25: An Incomplete Record of Theological Diversity
Topics: A partial evidentiary record; voices from across the aisle; “Gnostic” heresiology.

Thursday, February 7: In-Class Midterm Examination
WEEK 9: STUDY BREAK, MARCH 2–6

Tuesday, March 3: No Class

Thursday, March 5: No Class

WEEK 10: THE PROBLEM OF “GNOSTICISM”

Tuesday, March 10: The Evidence and Debates
Topics: Modeling early Christian diversity; “Gnosticism” as a category; the Nag Hammadi Codices.

Thursday, March 12: So-Called Sethian (So-Called) Gnostics
Topics: Apocryphon of John; Trimorphic Protennoia; Revelation of Adam.

WEEK 11: FLAVORS OF “GNOSTICISM”

Tuesday, March 17: So-Called Valentinian (So-Called) Gnostics
Topics: Valentinus and his circle; Gospel of Truth; Gospel of Philip.

Thursday, March 19: Thomas the Twin; Diverse Christian Social Formations.
Topics: Thomas as textual authority; textual dynamics; Thomasine tradition?

Sunday, March 22: Paper 2 Due to myCourses by Midnight

WEEK 12: CLAIMING THE PAST FOR THE PRESENT

Tuesday, March 24: “Apostolic” Authority
Topics: Gospels of Judas, Peter, and Mary; lineages and contestations of apostolic authority; canonicity.

Thursday, March 26: Conference III, Categorizing Christian Diversity
Topics: Christian historiography; the stakes of categorization.
Submission: Reflection paper due at the beginning of conference.
WEEK 13: CHRISTIANITY & EMPIRE

Tuesday, March 31: Martyrdom, Phenomenon or Discourse?

Topics: Gendering martyrdom; martyrdom and historiography; Roman legislation against Christians?


Thursday, April 2: Constantine, the First “Christian” Emperor?

Topics: Constantine’s “conversion;” Christianity as Roman religion; a Christian empire?


WEEK 14: THE LAST “PAGAN” EMPEROR

Tuesday, April 7: Eusebius of Caesarea

Topics: Christian historiography; compiling a coherent past; from persecution to power.


Thursday, April 9: Julian, the Last “Pagan” Emperor?

Topics: The emergence of paganism; dismantling Christianity as an imperial religion; Julian’s challenges.


FINAL EXAMINATION

Date: To be determined by the University