

Reli 208
The Birth of Christianity
Fall 2025

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Course Description and Objectives

For most of the past 1600 years, the Christian church has been the most important institution of Western Civilization, not just religiously, but also socially, culturally, politically, and economically. It has radically affected nearly every realm of human life: art, music, literature, and philosophy; social norms, personal ethics, and governmental policy. This is true for all of us in the West, not only those who identify as Christian. From the time Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century, through the Middle Ages, into the Renaissance, the Reformation, and on to Modernity, no other institution has rivaled its influence.

Where did this religion come from? It is obviously an incredibly important question for anyone who wants to understand our world.

In this class we will focus on the rise and development of the Christian faith from immediately after the New Testament up to when it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, at the end of the fourth century. Most people know very little about this formative period in the history of Christianity, and a good bit of what people think they know is simply modern myth.

You, however, will soon advance beyond such widespread ignorance and misunderstanding! By the end of the course, you will be well-versed in the historical realities of early Christianity by having reading the ancient sources themselves and becoming bona fide, budding authorities. At least that's my goal.

This class does not presuppose any previous knowledge about early Christianity and does not assume you have any particular religious commitments, or none at all. It will not be taught from the perspective of faith, but also not from a perspective of disbelief. My goal is to provide a solid historical overview that will prove helpful to anyone interested in the subject.

More specifically the objectives of this course are to help you:

1. Become familiar with some of the most important Christian writings of the second and third centuries, including significant church fathers and apocryphal Gospels.

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2. Understand how Christians grew from a tiny group of twenty or so illiterate lower-class peasants from a remote part of the empire to become the religion of the West.
3. See why Christians were often considered weird and possibly dangerous by some (many? most?) "pagans," leading to persecutions and martyrdoms (but how many?).
4. Form an opinion on why the followers of the Jewish Jesus eventually came to oppose Jews and their religion.
5. See and appreciate the roles women played in the early years of the Christian religion.
6. Explain the significant diversity of early Christianity - that is, the startling differences among the intriguing "heresies" that arose. Have you ever heard of Gnosticism? You will.
7. Understand how "orthodox" Christian leaders formulated important doctrinal beliefs (including the Trinity), established the canon of the New Testament (why these books?), and promoted ritual practices (such as baptism).
8. Explain how the Christian "triumph" over the other religions actually happened and how it forever changed the history of Western Civilization.

Texts:

Bart D. Ehrman, After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity 100-300 CE, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). This will be our primary text for the class. It is an anthology of ancient early Christian writings organized topically, with brief introductions to all the readings.

Bart D. Ehrman, The Triumph of Christianity: How a Forbidden Religion Swept the World. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018). This is a book written for a general audience that explains how and why the Christian church spread so far and wide and, against all odds, eventually took over the Roman world.

Additional Readings posted on Canvas.

Attendance

Yes, indeed, you must grace us with your presence at all class meetings. Please let me know in advance if you have a legitimate excuse for missing a class (a visit to the hospital counts; a bad hair day doesn't)

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Position Papers

As you will see in the class schedule below, each week we will have a class discussion on an aspect of the writings, history, or religion of early Christianity. To facilitate these discussions, you will be expected to prepare a two-page (no more!) position paper on each assigned topic. Written instructions for each paper are included on Canvas (under Resources).

These papers are not meant to be a "finished and polished product" ready for publication in the Harvard Theological Review. But I do want them well-thought out and well-written.

Their main objective is to help you to consider the issues and reflect on the problems raised by the topic before we discuss it in class. For this reason, they will not be given a letter grade, but simply marked "S" (= Satisfactory) if you have done the assignment adequately and "U" (= Unsatisfactory) if you have not. Please note: papers not turned in on time will automatically be marked U, no questions asked.

Papers are to be submitted prior to the class itself under the Assignment section on the Canvas site for the class. Please submit them as a PDF.

You are not allowed to use AI or any electronic help of any kind for our papers. See AI policy below.

Quizzes and Exam

There will not be a midterm exam in this class. Instead, throughout the semester, there will be four short take-home quizzes. The quizzes will be short-answer, and will be based on the lectures and/or the reading. You are NOT allowed to use AI, the Internet, or any other assistance for these quizzes. At the bottom of each quiz, you are to write "On my honor, I have not used AI, the Internet, or any other assistance for these quizzes - only my notes from class and the assigned readings."

I may also have occasional pop quizzes in class, just to keep life interesting, since I know how dull it can be otherwise.

There will also be a three-hour in-class, hand-written (in bluebooks) final exam, consisting of short identifications and essay questions; the final exam will be cumulative,

covering everything in the course from Day One. The Final is set in stone by the Registrar's office; ours is Friday, December 12, 8:00 am. Seriously, 8:00 am.

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Grading

Grading Breakdown: Attendance, participation, position papers: 30%; quizzes: 40% (so 10% for each quiz); 30% final exam.

Grading Scale: We use a 100-point scale, as follows:

A 93-100
A- 90-93
B+ 87-89
B 83-86
B- 80-82
C+ 77-79
C 73-76
C- 70-72
D+ 67-69
D 60-66
F 59-0

Office Hours

My office hours are easy. Let me know if you want to talk (viva voce or email behrman@email.unc.edu) and we'll figure out a time; so too with Jonathan: jarach@unc.edu

As to which of us is best to see concerning the class.... If you want to talk about the content of the lectures, the structure of the class, or the inequities of the universe, either of us will do.

If you want advice on your papers, or studying for quizzes or the final exam, or if you want to express concerns about a grade, you should first approach Jonathan (since he will be doing the grading). If for some reason you want to go to the top, however, the boss will be happy to see you.

Honor Code

All students must be familiar with and abide by the Honor Code, which covers issues such as plagiarism, falsification, unauthorized assistance or collaboration, cheating,

and other grievous acts of academic dishonesty. Violations of the Honor Code will be taken with incredible seriousness.

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AI Policy

AI can be a useful tool for acquiring information, but if you let it think for you, you might as well not learn how to think. In this class I want you to focus on developing your own thinking skills, learning better how to read for comprehension, take notes on lectures, remember what you've read and heard, advance in your ability to analyze arguments and evaluate evidence, and progress in your ability to make up your own mind about complicated issues.

Moreover, even though AI is fantastic for some kinds of information, it is NOT yet fantastic for providing reliable and trustworthy information about earliest Christianity. It may be in a year or two, but it ain't there yet. I'll illustrate the point and explain why it is that way in class.

For these reasons, I have a strict NO AI rule for the class. Your position papers, quizzes, term paper, and Gospel are to provide information from your own brain directed to your own fingers that do their own pecking at a keyboard. All assignments will be based on the reading you have done in class and the lectures in class, not on general information about the topics (making it more difficult to try using AI without being caught out). If I suspect you have used AI rather than YI (Your Intelligence) I will pursue the matter with you, probably through a conversation about your views expressed in the paper. Anyone who turns out to have yielded to the AI temptation will be cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Or, barring that, will be given a failing grade on the assignment.

Reasonable Accommodations Policy

If you have a disability that may prevent fully demonstrating your abilities, you should contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible to discuss accommodations. I will do everything I can to help out.

Title IX Resources

Any student who is impacted by discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking is encouraged to

seek resources on campus or in the community. To discuss your specific needs, please contact the Director of Report and Response Rebecca Gibson rmgibson@unc.edu (919) 445-1578; Report and Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office (reportandresponse@unc.edu); Counseling and Psychological Services (confidential); or the Gender Violence Services Coordinators (gvsc@unc.edu). Additional resources are available at www.safe.unc.edu

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Class Schedule and Assignments

Aug. 19 Introduction to the Class. And Pop Quiz! (Not graded...)

21 The Pagan World of Early Christianity.

Reading: Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, ch. 3 "The Greco-Roman World of Early Christian Traditions" (on Canvas)

Position Paper One. Getting Started!

26 The Jewish World of Early Christianity.

Reading: Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, ch. 4 "The Jewish World of Jesus and His Followers" (on Canvas)

28 The Birth of Christianity: A Bird's Eye View.

Reading: ANT (= After the New Testament), "General Introduction," pp. 1-7.

Position Paper Two. Jesus and the Other Divine Men.

Sept. 2 The Beginning: The Life and Teachings of Jesus

Quiz 1: Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity

Reading: Bart Ehrman, *The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction*, ch. 21, "The Historical Jesus" (on Canvas)

4 The Spread of Christianity: How Did It Succeed So Spectacularly?

Reading: ToC (= Triumph of Christianity), ch. 4 "Reasons of the Christian Success"

Position Paper Three. A Pagan, a Jew, and a Christian Walk Into a Bar...

9 The Early Persecutions: First- and Second-Century Opposition to Christians

Reading: ANT, ch. 3 (pp. 26-55)

11 Later Persecutions: Third- and Fourth-Century Opposition to Christians Reading:
ToC, ch. 7 (pp. 178-206)

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Position Paper Four. Incentives for Conversions. Miracle Stories in Christian Legend

16 The Conversion of Constantine

Reading: ToC, ch. 1 (pp. 13-39); Eusebius, "Life of Constantine" (On Canvas)

18 Christian Apologies

Reading: ANT, ch. 4 (pp. 56-87; 92-98); ToC ch. 7b (pp. 206-16)
Position Paper Five. The Martyrdom of Polycarp

23 The Rise of Christian Anti-Judaism

Reading: ANT, ch. 5 (pp. 111-47)

Quiz 2: Christianity in the Roman Empire

25 Heresy and Orthodoxy: An Overview.

Reading: Bart Ehrman The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture, pp. 3-16 (on Canvas)

Position Paper Six. The Letter of Barnabas

30 The Infancy Gospels

Reading: ANT, pp. 267-82; Ehrman-Plese The Other Gospels pp. 3-7; 18-23 (on Canvas)

Position Paper Seven Was Jesus a Superbrat?

Oct. 2 Jewish Christianity

Reading: ANT, pp. 148-61 ("Jewish Christian Gospels")

7 Wellness Day! Get well!

9 Gnosticism

Reading: ANT, pp. 162-74; 189-95. (DIG DEEP! "Secret Book of John," "Gospel of Truth," "Treatise on the Resurrection")

14 Marcionism.

Reading: Entries on Marcion in Canvas

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Position Paper Eight. The Coptic (Gnostic) Apocalypse of Peter 16 Fall Break. Take

a Book. Don't Break Anything.

21 The Gospel of Thomas

Reading: ANT, pp. 283-92; Ehrman-Plese The Other Gospels pp. 155-60 (On Canvas)

Position Paper Nine. The Gospel of Thomas

23 The Heresiologists

Reading: ANT, pp. 224-59

28 The Gospel of Mary

Reading: ANT, pp. 302-05; Ehrman-Plese The Other Gospels pp.313-15 (On Canvas)

Position Paper Ten: The Gospel of Mary

30 How We Got the New Testament Canon

Quiz 3: Other Christianities and Gospels

Reading: ANT, pp. 365-72

Nov. 4 Women in Early Christianity

Reading: ANT, pp. 475-504

6 Ethics and the Rise of Asceticism

Reading: ANT, pp. 505-28

Position Paper Eleven. The Acts of Thecla

11 Christological Controversies

Reading: ANT, pp. 529-44

13 The Trinity

Reading: ANT, pp. 548-555

Position Paper Twelve. The Greek Apocalypse of Peter

18 The History of Christian Evil and Good

Quiz 4: Christian Practices and Theologies

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Reading: Bart Ehrman, *Love Thy Stranger: How the Ethics of Jesus Transformed the Moral Conscience of the West*, pp. XX-XX (on Canvas)

20 Christianity and Empire

Reading: "The Political Economy of the Roman Empire" (on Canvas),
ANT, pp. 432-435, Parable 1 of The Shepherd of Hermas (on Canvas), "The Occasion of the Shepherd" (On Canvas)

25 No Class

27 Thanksgiving Break

Dec. 2 Early Christianity in a Nutshell

Position Paper Thirteen. Who Cares?

