

University of North Texas
Early Christian Thought
PHIL 3520

Fall 2026

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Time: T/R 12:45-2:05PM
Location: Wh 217
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I. Rationale and course outline:

This course will follow the diverse expressions and development of early Christian thought from the first through fifth centuries. Readings will begin with the earliest thought of the “Jesus movement” in the form of oral traditions—hymns and creeds—cited in the letters of Paul of Tarsus and conclude with the sophisticated writings of highly educated fourth and fifth century Christian authors. Reading Christian thinkers of antiquity and late antiquity will allow us to trace the development of Christian thought and beliefs that remain influential for Christians to the current day.

Throughout, the course will emphasize the surprising diversity of Christian thought—even from its very beginnings which have often been portrayed as pure and unified. In order to get an historically accurate view of early Christian thought it will be important to take seriously the diversity of nascent Christianities—this variety made all the more evident by remarkable twentieth century archeological discoveries (especially the Nag Hammadi library in 1945). Course readings will therefore encompass this spectrum of Christian thought, including groups and thinkers later deemed heretical (Christian gnosticism, for example) as well as those whose thought became orthodox (“right belief”) and continues to be influential for many current expressions of Christianity (Athanasius, the Cappadocians, or Augustine, for example).

Readings will cover themes on the identity, role, and significance of Jesus, the development of a canon of scripture, the articulation of a Trinitarian deity, church structure and practices of piety, important councils and creeds, and the relation of emerging Christianity to Judaism and Roman culture. Following Christian thought through the fifth century will allow us to get a rich sense for Christian thought as it follows the religion’s dramatic change in fortune in the Roman Empire: from a Jewish sect, to illegal and persecuted religion, to a tolerated religion among many, to the official religion with all of the benefits and trappings of the support of an empire.

II. Course Outcomes:

By the end of the course students should:

- Be able to differentiate between the distinct (but not necessarily incompatible) *practice* of a religion and the critical historical *study* of a religion.
- Be able to identify key historical influences on the development of early Christian thought.
- Be familiar with influential thinkers, creeds, and councils in early Christianity.

- Be able to demonstrate the ability to support their interpretation of a primary text with evidence from that text as well as supporting background information from authoritative, scholarly, secondary sources.
- Demonstrate the ability to locate and identify accountable, authoritative, academic sources to support an original and clearly developed argument.

III. Format and Procedures:

This is a class about early Christian thought. Because of the cultural influence of this religion, many students may be quite familiar with various aspects of the religion. This comes with benefits but also liabilities; many may approach the study with already formed beliefs, assumptions, and significant (negative and positive) baggage. Therefore, it will be important to defamiliarize ourselves with the subject matter and continually be on the watch for biases and assumptions that may taint the interpretation of our primary texts. For this reason, *this class will strongly emphasize building important skills for close and accountable readings of primary texts*. Some class time will be devoted to lecture or even video content where available and helpful, but significant class time will be devoted to large and small group discussion of our assigned primary texts. This will be a key time where skills for close, self-conscious readings—checking our interpretations and distinguishing between exegesis (interpreting *from* a text) and eisegesis (reading our biases and assumptions *onto* a text)—will develop.

This class time will work well only if students come to class well prepared, having closely read and/or watched the assigned material and taken time to reflect on it before class. The class will require consistent participation and engagement during class time. Class participation is key since skills for coming up with your own unique ideas and communicating them clearly and persuasively will develop in class discussion as we test ideas and have them challenged or built upon by other classmates. This means students should expect to do more than just show up for class. Be prepared to be an active participant in class (having completed readings, reflected on them with critical thinking skills, and finished any assignments), contribute to class discussion, take notes during class, and bring appropriate materials (*especially the assigned readings and notes on the reading*) to class.

IV. Course Requirements:

1. Attendance and participation:

Given the importance of class participation, *on time attendance each week is mandatory* and any *unexcused absences will reduce your participation grade (attendance grade can be viewed on Canvas. See statement below in case of illness). Excessive tardiness will similarly affect your grade.

More than physically being present, class participation entails:

1. coming to class having read the assigned readings and any other assignments completed.
2. critical reflection on the text.
3. bringing the assigned reading and notes to class every day.
4. taking notes in class on lectures and class discussion.

5. contributing to class discussion with your observations and opinions on the topic being discussed.

*An unexcused absence is 1) when you don't show up in class without first communicating with the instructor and/or 2) don't have an acceptable reason for missing class (even if you first communicate with the instructor).

* If a student misses a class (whether it is an excused or unexcused absence) that student is responsible for class content, assignments missed, and upcoming due dates. Any time a class is missed the student is responsible for arranging with a classmate to take good notes and notifying of upcoming due dates and announcements.

*Exceptions will only be made for emergency situations. In all cases, timely communication with your professor is key.

* In case of illness: If you are ill please stay home! Contact the professor before class and arrange for a classmate to take notes to share.

Course Materials for Remote Instruction

Remote instruction may be necessary due to community health or weather-related events. You will need access to a webcam and microphone to participate in fully remote portions of the class. Information on how to be successful in a remote learning environment can be found at <https://online.unt.edu/learn>

2. Course readings:

- Required readings will be from the following required text (for purchase at college book store):
 - Joseph Lynch, *Early Christianity: A Brief History*
 - Primary source selections available on UNT library digital reserves

3. Assignments

Class discussion/participation/posts

- Each week you will be asked to respond to a reading/listening reflection question, bringing your response to class and then posting on Canvas by midnight of that class day. Your participation grade will reflect the quality, not just quantity of your participation and reading responses.
- 1-2 page reflections with at least 2 citations (MLA, in-text style) from assigned readings

4. Quizzes

- Four low stakes (credit/no credit) quizzes will be given to help you gauge your reading/listening comprehension and study for the midterm and final.

5. Midterm essay exam

6. Final research paper

- Choose a text we have read in class. Find relevant scholarly literature on that text (historical background, interpretations, history of interpretation/influence).
- Write a thesis driven paper on the text
- The paper should demonstrate a close reading of a primary text with interpretive support from reliable, scholarly secondary sources.
- Engage at least 4 sources, at least two that weren't assigned in class

In sum, final grades will consist of the following:

Class participation (Including attendance and participation in class discussion)	20%
Discussion response (weekly responses to assigned readings, lectures and videos)	25%
Quizzes (4, graded credit/no credit)	5%
Midterm essay exam	25%
Final research paper	25%

V. Grading Policies and Procedures

Grading rubrics will be used to evaluate class participation, assignments, and exam essays.

GRADING SYSTEM: GRADING SYSTEM: A: 90-100%, B: 80-90%, C: 70-79%, D: 60-69%, F: 0-59

LATE ASSIGNMENTS:

All work is expected to be submitted by the designated due date. Late assignments will be docked 5% for each day late (2 days late: 10% deduction, 3 days late: 15% deduction, etc.). Late assignments should be emailed to the instructor as soon as they are completed in order to avoid further grade penalty. If a student is absent from a class when an assignment is due, the student must email the assignment to the instructor the same day it is due in order to avoid penalty. No late material will be accepted after the last day of class.

* As with attendance, exceptions will only be made for emergency situations. In all cases, timely communication with your instructor is key.

AI policy

In this course, I want you to engage deeply with the materials and develop your own critical thinking and writing skills. For this reason, the use of Generative AI (GenAI) tools like Claude, ChatGPT, and Gemini is not permitted. While these tools can be helpful in some contexts, they do not align with our goal of fostering the development of your independent thinking. Using GenAI to complete any part of an assignment, exam, or coursework will be considered a violation of academic integrity, as it prevents the development of your own skills, and will be addressed according to the [Student Academic Integrity policy](https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003) (<https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003>).

All essays, including drafts and revisions, should be written in a program like Google Docs which saves the evolving history of the document. If the final essay is suspected of being AI generated the student may be asked to submit their notes, outlines, and doc history as evidence that their work is their own.

VI. Academic Integrity

“UNT promotes the integrity of learning processed and embraces the core values of trust and honesty. Academic integrity is based on educational principles and procedures that protect the rights of all participants in the educational process and validate the legitimacy of degrees awarded by the

university. In the investigation and resolution of allegations of student academic dishonesty, the university's actions are intended to be corrective, educationally sound, fundamentally fair, and based on reliable evidence." (UNT Academic Integrity Policy description, <https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003>)

Students caught cheating or plagiarizing will receive a "0" for that particular assignment or exam. Additionally, incidents will be reported to the UNT office of Academic Integrity which may impose further penalty. Further incidents may result in failing the course.

According to the UNT catalog, the term "cheating" includes, but is not limited to:

- a. use of any unauthorized assistance in taking quizzes, tests, or examinations;
- b. dependence upon the aid of sources beyond those authorized by the instructor in writing papers, preparing reports, solving problems, or carrying out other assignments;
- c. the acquisition, without permission, of tests or other academic material belonging to a faculty or staff member of the university;
- d. dual submission of a paper or project, or resubmission of a paper or project to a different class without express permission from the instructor(s); or
- e. any other act designed to give a student an unfair advantage.

The term "plagiarism" includes, but is not limited to:

- a. the knowing or negligent use by paraphrase or direct quotation of the published or unpublished work of another person without full and clear acknowledgment; and
- b. the knowing or negligent unacknowledged use of materials prepared by another person or agency engaged in the selling of term papers or other academic materials.

VII. Acceptable Student Behavior

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The university's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including university and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. The Code of Student Conduct can be found at <http://deanofstudents.unt.edu>.

Cell phone policy: Cell phones must be on silent or vibrate mode during class. Calls, texting, or

headphone/earbud use are not appropriate during class. If an emergency situation arises, communicate this with your instructor and step outside the classroom.

Computer policy: Computer and internet use should *aid participation* in class. If their use becomes a

distraction from class for you or your classmates this will affect your participation grade and you may be asked to leave these devices outside the classroom.

AI policy: see above, section V

Recording policy: all visual and audio recording is prohibited in the classroom without instructor and classmate consent.

VII. Accommodations for students with disabilities (ADA statement)

"The University of North Texas is on record as being committed to both the spirit and letter of federal equal opportunity legislation; reference Public Law 92-112 - The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended. With the passage of new federal legislation entitled Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), pursuant to section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, there is renewed focus on providing this population with the same opportunities enjoyed by all citizens."

Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide you with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding your specific needs in a course. You may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided by the fourth week of class. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the Office of Disability Accommodation website at <http://disability.unt.edu>. You may also contact them by phone at (940) 565-4323.

IX. Drop Information

Schedule available here: <http://essc.unt.edu/registrar/schedule/scheduleclass.html>

X. Inclusivity, chosen names, and pronouns

UNT students represent a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. The professor is committed to providing an atmosphere for learning that respects diversity. Therefore, a portion of the student's participation grade will reflect their ability to:

- share their unique experiences, values and beliefs
- be open to the views of others
- honor the uniqueness of their colleagues
- value each other's opinions and communicate in a respectful manner
- keep confidential discussions that the community has of a personal nature

Chosen Names

A chosen name is a name that a person goes by that may or may not match their legal name. If you have a chosen name that is different from your legal name and would like that to be used in class, please let the instructor know.

Pronouns

Pronouns (she/her, they/them, he/him, etc.) are a public way for people to address you, much like your name, and can be shared with a name when making an introduction, both virtually and in-person. Just as we ask and don't assume someone's name, we should also ask and not assume someone's pronouns. You can [add your pronouns to your Canvas account](#) so that they follow your name when posting to discussion boards, submitting assignments, etc.

[Texas Senate Bill 17](#), the recent law that outlaws diversity, equity, and inclusion programs at public colleges and universities in Texas, does not in any way affect content, instruction or discussion in a course at public colleges and universities in Texas. Expectations and academic freedom for teaching and class discussion have not been altered post-SB 17, and students should not feel the need to censor their speech pertaining to topics including race and racism, structural inequality, LGBTQ+ issues, or diversity, equity, and inclusion.

XI. Retention of Student Records

Student records pertaining to this course are maintained in a secure location by the instructor of record. All records such as exams, answer sheets (with keys), and written papers submitted during the duration of the course are kept for at least one calendar year after course completion. Course work completed via the Blackboard online system, including grading information and comments, is also stored in a safe electronic environment for one year. You have a right to view your individual record; however, information about your records will not be divulged to other individuals without the proper written consent. You are encouraged to review the Public Information Policy and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws and the university's policy in accordance with those mandates at the following link: <http://essc.unt.edu/registrar/ferpa.html>

XII. Succeed at UNT

UNT endeavors to offer you a high-quality education and to provide a supportive environment to help you learn and grown. And, as a faculty member, I am committed to helping you be successful as a student. Here's how to succeed at UNT: Show up. Find Support. Get advised. Be prepared. Get involved. Stay focused. To learn more about campus resources and information on how you can achieve success, go to <http://success.unt.edu/>.

XIII. Student Evaluation of Teaching (SETE)

Student feedback is important and an essential part of participation in this course. The Student Evaluation of Teaching (SETE) is a requirement for all organized classes at UNT. This short survey will be made available at the end of the semester to provide you with an opportunity to evaluate how this course is taught.

XIV. Course Schedule

(May change to accommodate guest presenters, unexpected events & student needs)

Week / Date	Theme	Readings to be discussed	Assignment due
Unit 1	The Jesus Movement within Judaism		
Class 1 T(8/18)	Intro and overview of the course	• Read the syllabus	
Class 2 R(8/20)	The quest for the historical Jesus	• Lynch, ch. 1 (1-9)	• discussion post due on Canvas
Class 3 T(8/25)	Early Christian sources: The canon of scripture and early interpretation	• Canonical Lists in Early Christianity • The Interpretation of Scripture in Early Christianity • Origen and the Scriptures (Lynch, 98-102) • Origen, <i>On First Principles</i>	
Class 4 R(8/27)	The parting of the ways of Judaism and Christianity	• Lynch, ch. 2 (13-22) • <i>Acts</i> 21-22 • Paul, <i>Letter to the Galatians</i> 1-2 • Paul, <i>Letter to the Romans</i> 9-11	
Class 5 T(9/1)	Oral traditions and intertextuality: Paul's letters	• Lynch, ch. 4 • <i>Philippians</i> 1-2 • <i>Romans</i> 10	• discussion post due on Canvas
Class 6 R(9/3)	Paul's letters	<i>Romans</i>	

Class 7 T(9/8)	A diversity of gospels, a diversity of Christs	• <i>The Gospel of Mark</i>	
Class 8 R(9/10)	A diversity of gospels, a diversity of Christs	• <i>The Gospel of Matthew</i> (selections)	
Class 9 T(9/15)	A diversity of gospels, a diversity of Christs	• <i>The Gospel of Luke</i> (selections) • <i>The Gospel of John</i> (selections)	• Discussion post due • <i>Quiz 1 due</i>
Unit 2: Early Christian Self-Definition			
Class 10 R(9/17)	Christianity as insight: Pursuing gnosis	• Lynch, ch. 5 (53-61) • <i>The Gospel of Truth</i>	
Class 11 T(9/22)	A diversity of gospels, a diversity of Christs	• <i>The Proto-Gospel of James</i> • <i>The Infancy Gospel of Thomas</i> • <i>The Gospel of Thomas</i> • <i>The Gospel of Peter</i>	• Discussion post
Class 12 R(9/24)	Combatting error: Christianity as orthodoxy	Lynch, ch. 6 (62-78)	
Class 13 T(9/29)	Combatting error: Christianity as orthodoxy	• Irenaeus, <i>Against the Heresies</i> • Tertullian, <i>On the Flesh of Christ</i>	• Discussion post
Class 14 R(10/1)	Cleansed by the spirit: Christianity as ritual practice	• Lynch, ch. 9 (105-120) • ANT 429-31	
Class 15 T(10/6)	Cleansed by the spirit: Christianity as ritual practice	• Hippolytus, <i>Apostolic Tradition</i> • <i>The Didache</i> • Justin, <i>First Apology</i>	
Class 16 R(10/8)	Midterm writing (no in person class)		Midterm due 10/11
Class 17 T(10/13)	Persecution and martyrdom: Christianity as suffering witness	• Lynch, ch. 7 (79-90) (ch. 3 recommended) • Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Romans</i>	

Class 18 R(10/15)	Persecution and martyrdom: Christianity as suffering witness	• <i>Martyrdom of Polycarp</i> • <i>Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne</i> • <i>Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas</i>	
Class 19 T(10/20)	Philosophy and apologetics: Christianity as truth	Lynch, ch 3, 8 (33-35, 91-104)	
Class 20 R(10/22)	Philosophy and apologetics: Christianity as truth	• Justin, <i>First Apology</i> • Celsus, <i>The True Word</i> • Origen, <i>Against Celsus</i>	• <i>Quiz 2 due</i>
Unit 3: Imperial Christianity			
Class 21 T(10/27)	Constantine's conversion	• Lynch, ch. 10, (11 recommended) • Eusebius, <i>Life of Constantine</i>	
Class 22 R(10/29)	The Trinitarian debates	Lynch, 13 (160-169)	• Discussion post
Class 23 T(11/3)	The Trinitarian debates	• Arius, <i>Thalia</i> • Alexander of Alexandria, <i>Letter to Alexander of Constantinople</i> • Arius, <i>Letter to Alexander of Alexandria</i> • Creeds and Canons of Nicaea and Constantinople	• post idea for final paper
Class 24 R(11/5)	The Christological debates	• Lynch, ch 14 (170-176) • Nestorius, <i>Letter to Cyril of Alexandria</i> • Cyril of Alexandria, <i>Letter to Nestorius</i> • Recommended • Canons of Ephesus • Definition of Canons of Chalcedon	• Discussion post
Class 25 T(11/10)	Holy lives: desert fathers	• Lynch, ch. 16 (191-210) • Athanasius, <i>Life of Antony</i>	• post working bibliography

Class 26 R(11/12)	Holy lives: virgins and harlots	• Women and Gender • <i>Acts of Thecla</i>	• Discussion post • post working thesis statement
Class 27 T(11/17)	Holy lives: virgins and harlots	• Gregory of Nyssa, <i>Life of Macrina</i> • <i>Life of Pelagia</i>	• <i>Quiz 3 due</i>
Class 28 R(11/19)	4th and 5th century Christian thinkers	• Lynch, ch. 17 (212-222) • Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> (selections)	• Discussion post
Thanksgiving Break (11/23-27)			
Class 29 T(12/1)	Workshop/make-up/flex day		• Post outline
Class 30 R(12/3)	Workshop for final paper		
Finals week 12/5-11			Final paper due midnight, 12/8

Class Participation Evaluation Rubric

	10 —9 points	8 —7 points	6 —5 points	4 —3 points	2 —1 point
The student participates in the discussion in timely and substantive ways	The student participates in class discussion every day with comments that are on task and contribute in a substantive way to the conversation	The student participates in class discussion most days with comments that are on task and contribute in a substantive way to the conversation.	The student participates in class discussion less than half the time with comments that are on task and contribute in a substantive way to the conversation	The student participates in class discussion rarely with a comment that is on task and contributes in a substantive way to the conversation	The student does not participate or is not on task

In class discussions and writing responses the student demonstrates a substantial knowledge base from the assigned readings, presentations, and course content	The student's contributions to discussions are clearly built on familiarity with and comprehension of assigned materials displaying higher levels of learning (analysis, synthesis)	The student's comments are clearly built on familiarity with assigned materials but comprehension is slightly limited	The student's comments are clearly built on some familiarity with assigned materials but comprehension is limited	The student's comments are built on varying degrees of familiarity with assigned material and comprehension is quite limited	The student's comments demonstrate a lack of familiarity with assigned materials and comprehension is severely limited
In class discussions the student demonstrates respect for different opinions and an engaged attitude	The student always demonstrates respect toward instructor/classmates/invited guests and consistently maintains an engaged attitude	Most of the time the student demonstrates respect toward instructor/classmates/invited guests and is engaged the majority of the time	About half of the time the student demonstrates respect toward instructor/classmates/invited guests and is engaged some of the time, but may be distracted by phone or internet use	Less than half the time the student demonstrates respect toward instructor/classmates/invited guests, is generally not engaged, and may be distracted by phone or internet use	The student has failed to demonstrate respect toward instructor/classmates/invited guests, is generally not engaged, and/or is consistently distracted by phone or computer use

Adapted from Mark A. Maddix, "Generating and Facilitating Effective Online Discussion," in *Best Practices of Online Education* (ed. Mark A. Maddix, James R. Estep, and Mary E. Lowe; Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing, 2012), p. 119