

Syracuse University, Department of Religion, Spring 2009

### REL 309: EARLY CHRISTIANITIES

Prof. Patricia Miller ([plmiller@syr.edu](mailto:plmiller@syr.edu))  
Office: 520 Hall of Languages Hours: Thursdays 3:30 – 5:00



The topic of this course is the emergence of Christianity as a distinct religion within the Roman Empire. The focus will be on the diversity that marked the development of this religion—the conflicts, individuals, social movements, texts, and theologies that shaped Christianity during its formative period from the late first through the sixth centuries. Issues and topics that will be studied include:

- Competing understandings of Christian belief and practice in antiquity
- Conflict with the broader Roman society – persecution and martyrdom
- Heresy and orthodoxy
- Asceticism and the body
- Rise of the cult of saints and relics
- Theological conflicts – Trinitarianism and Christology
- Art

Emphasis will be placed on reading ancient texts and situating them within their broader historical and cultural contexts.

Overall learning goals:

1. To achieve an historical overview of early Christian history, including major thinkers, texts, and events
2. To learn how to study religion from an analytical and historical perspective
3. To learn how to interpret primary texts from antiquity

**Required Texts:** available at Follett’s Orange Bookstore and on reserve in Bird Library; get call numbers through Blackboard (REL.309.M001.SPRING09, “course reserves”)

Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*

Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (ANT)

Bart D. Ehrman and Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christianity in Late Antiquity* (CLA)

Virginia Burrus, *Late Ancient Christianity* (LAC)



Bible: if you do not already own one, you may check one out of the library or go to the following website: <http://www.bible.org/netbible/index.htm>

## Schedule of Readings

**Please note: always read the introductions to the chapters in ANT and CLA**

Jan. 13: Introduction

### I. Beginnings and Context

Jan. 15: Read and discuss LAC, “Introduction: Shifting the Focus of History”

Jan. 20: The Graeco-Roman World

Reading: 1) PBS “From Jesus to Christ”

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/>

Click on “Portrait of Jesus’ World”, then click on the following:

“Jews and the Roman Empire”; “Judaism’s First Century Diversity”

2) “The Jewish Roman World of Jesus”

<http://www.religiousstudies.uncc.edu/jdtabor>

Click on both “The Roman World of Jesus: An Overview” and “The Jewish World of Jesus: An Overview”

3) Chadwick, 9-18

Jan. 22: Pauline Christianity

Reading: 1) PBS site, click on “The First Christians,” then click on the following:

“Diversity of Early Christianity” and “Paul’s Mission and Letters”

2) “The Jewish Roman World of Jesus” site: scroll down to “Christian Origins and the New Testament,” and click on “The Message and Mission of Paul” and “The Problems in Corinth”

3) 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians (in the New Testament)



Jan. 27: Pauline Christianity and Heavenly Journeys

1) “The Jewish Roman World of Jesus” site: under “Hellenistic/Roman Religion and Philosophy,” click on “Ascent to Heaven in Antiquity”

2) 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12: 2-4 (in the New Testament)

3) Apocalypse of Paul (ANT 8.50)

4) Chadwick, 18-31

Jan. 29: Early Narratives about Jesus

Reading: 1) Gospel of John (in the New Testament)

2) PBS site, click on “The Story of the Storytellers,” then click on the following: “What are the Gospels” and “Gospel of John” and “An Overview of the Four Gospels” (read about all four)

Feb. 3: Early Narratives, continued

Reading: 1) Gospel of Thomas (ANT 8.37)  
2) PBS site, click on “The Story of the Storytellers,” then click on “The Gospel of Thomas”



Feb.5: “Let There Be Light”: film by Prof. Elaine Pagels on the Gospels of John and Thomas (no position statement due)

## II. The Second and Third Centuries

Feb. 10: Early Christianity and Social Critique

Reading: 1) ANT 8.44 and 45  
2) LAC, Ch. 2: “Fictional Narratives and Social Critique”

Feb. 12: Attacks on Christianity

Reading: 1) ANT 3 (all)  
2) LAC, Ch. 3: “Martyrdom as Exaltation”  
3) 1<sup>st</sup> book jam session

Feb. 17: Defense of Christianity

Reading: 1) ANT 4.10, 11, 14  
2) Chadwick, 66-79  
3) 2<sup>nd</sup> book jam session



Feb. 19: “Gnosticisms”, I

Reading: 1) Gospel of Mary  
<http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm> (translation) 2) Chadwick, 32-41  
3) 3<sup>rd</sup> book jam session

Feb. 24: Final book jam session

Feb. 26: “Gnosticisms, II: Group presentations on the Gospel of Judas; short papers due

Mar. 3: “Gnosticisms”, III

Reading: Apocryphon of John (ANT 6.22)

Mar. 5: Reaction to “Gnosticisms”: Heresiology

Reading: 1) ANT 7.31, 32, 33, 34 2) Chadwick, 80-93

### **Spring Break March 8 - 15**

Mar. 17: Christian Anti-Judaism

Reading: 1) ANT. 5.15, 17, 18  
2) LAC, Ch. 10: “Jewish Christians, Judaizers, and Christian Anti-Judaism”

Mar. 19: Emergence of Orthodoxy

Reading: 1) ANT 14.73 and 74 2) Chadwick, 94-115

Mar. 24: Early Christian Ritual

Reading: 1) ANT 11.61, 62, 63, 65, 66  
2) LAC, Ch. 6: “Food, Ritual, and Power” 3) Chadwick 45-66



### **III. The Fourth and Fifth Centuries**

Mar. 26: The End of Persecution and the Constantinian Revolution

Reading: 1) CLA 1 (General Introduction) and 2 (introduction only);  
2) CLA 3.4 3) Chadwick, 116-32

Mar. 31: Theology, I: Human Nature and Christology

Reading: 1) CLA 7.26-27 and 7.24-25 2) Chadwick, 192-212, 219-35

Apr. 2: Theology, II: The Trinitarian Controversy

Reading: 1) CLA 7.20, 21, 22 2) CLA 8.33, 34 3) Chadwick, 133-51

Apr. 7: Asceticism

Reading: 1) **CLA** 9.37 2) **LAC**, Ch. 1: “Asceticism, Class, and Gender”  
3) Chadwick, 174-91

Apr. 9: Asceticism in Action, I

Reading: 1) **CLA** 11.49 2) **LAC**, Ch. 8: “Personal Devotions and Private Chapels”

Apr. 14: Asceticism in Action, II

Reading: **CLA** 11.46, 47

Apr. 16: The Beginnings of Monasticism

Reading: **CLA** 9.38, 39 and **CLA** 11.48

**Apr. 21: Mayfest, no class**

Apr. 23: Baptism and Architecture

Reading: **LAC**, Ch. 5: “Baptismal Rites and Architecture”  
(no position statement due)

Apr. 28: Pilgrims, Relics, and Holy Places

Reading: 1) **CLA** 10.42, 43, 44 2) **LAC**, Ch. 7: “Saints, Identity, and the City”



**FINAL PAPER DUE MAY 5 BEFORE 5 P.M. IN 501 HALL OF LANGUAGES. NO EXCEPTIONS! (Please put your papers in my mailbox.)**

## Requirements

1. This is an upper-level course; students are required to do the reading and to come to class prepared, with notes and questions, to discuss the reading material. Bring the relevant ancient texts with you to class! *Please arrive in class on time; lateness is disruptive for everyone. Also, once you are in class, please stay in your seat for the entire class session.*
2. Attendance is mandatory and will be recorded. More than three unexcused absences will result in lowering your final grade by a whole grade (e.g., from B+ to C+). Provide an official note from your dean, health services, coach, etc., to excuse missed classes. Take notes in class, and make friends: if you must miss class, you should get notes from a classmate before meeting with the instructor to go over missed material.
3. The name of the first requirement is “Position Statements.” For each class session of the course, beginning on Jan. 24, you are required to compose a one-page interpretation of one of the ancient texts assigned for that session. Select some aspect of the text that you want to argue is crucial for understanding the significance of that text as representative of a dimension of early Christianity. You must use the modern readings to help you compose your statement (be sure to make full use of the introductions to the major sections and the individual texts in ANT and CLA as well as the readings in Chadwick and LAC). Please be prepared to read your statement to the class in order to kick off discussion. These statements will be collected and graded (on a scale of 1-5) and as a group will be worth one-third of your final grade. There are 21 possible Position Statements. You must complete 19. **This assignment begins with the readings for January 22.** Position statements must be typed and submitted in class on the day they are due. Emailed papers will not be accepted, except in the case of excused absences.
4. The second requirement is a group project. I will divide the class into four or five groups (depending on how many students there are in the course). Each group will be assigned a book on the Gospel of Judas  
[\[http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/\\_pdf/GospelofJudas.pdf \(the text\)](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/_pdf/GospelofJudas.pdf)  
[\[http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/index.html \(for information about the text and its discovery and interpretation\)\].](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/index.html)

This is a controversial text, and the books on it take different positions on its meaning. The task of each group will be to read its book (all of the books are on reserve in Bird Library), and to determine the book’s basic themes and arguments. Your major task is to determine what your book wants you to know about the Gospel of Judas, as well as how the book positions this gospel in the history of early Christianity. Everyone must read his or her group’s book by Feb. 12. Beginning on Feb. 12, time will be set aside in class for the groups to get together to discuss their books and plan their presentations. There will be a final, all-class-period jam session on Feb. 24. On Feb. 26, each group will present its findings to the class (approximately 15 minutes will be allotted to each group), and the presentations will be followed by discussion and debate over the meaning and historical significance of the Gospel of Judas.

In addition, each student will submit a 2-3 page (typed, double-spaced) write-up of the group’s findings (due Feb. 26). Your grade for this assignment will be based both on the group presentation as well as the individual write-up, and is worth 1/3 of the final grade.

5. One short research paper is required (6-8 pages; typed, double-spaced, with standard margins and fonts). This paper is due on **Tuesday, May 5, before 5 p.m. in 501 Hall of Languages**. For this paper, choose one of the ancient texts we've read following the Gospel of Judas (that is, any text beginning with the material on March 3 through April 28), and analyze it in terms of which dimensions of early Christianity it discloses. What does one know about early Christian thought and practice from the text? Show how your text represents important facets of early Christian life, belief, practice, or thought-world.



Although these are not major consult books and articles in the strong case for your presentation

resources in the library that you may want to consult: Encyclopedia of Early Christianity, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, and, hot off the press, The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies. There is also a good website of the North American Patristics Society that will take you to translations of early Christian texts, online encyclopedias, and academic sites dedicated to early Christian studies (click on "Links") (<http://moses.creighton.edu/NAPS/>). See also <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com> for an alphabetical list of early Christian texts, authors, and information about them. For a very full list of websites connected with late antiquity, see <http://www.sc.edu/ltantsoc/#disc> and scroll down to WEB Sites. Also, **ANT**, **CLA**, and **LAC** all have suggestions for further reading that are extremely helpful. Finally, the Journal of Early Christian Studies has great articles and is available online through JSTOR and also in hard copy in the library. This paper is worth 1/3 of the final grade.

research papers, I expect you to library (at least 3) to help you make a of your text. There are three handy

#### **A word of caution about your papers:**

Always give the ideas of others credit: that is, be careful not to plagiarize; this includes information drawn from websites. Papers must use proper footnotes, including footnotes to websites. Plagiarism means presenting the ideas of others as though they were your own, without giving proper credit to your sources. For Syracuse University's rules in this regard, see <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>. If you have questions about plagiarism, please ask! Plagiarism will result in an automatic "F."

**Please note: I am not able to accept late work; it is bad for you and bad for me. Schedule your time carefully. Also, I do not accept work submitted by email (except in cases of excused absence). Any work submitted by email apart from an excused absence will receive an automatic zero.**

Students who are in need of disability-related academic accommodations must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS), 804 University Avenue, Room 309, 315-443-4498. Students with authorized disability-related accommodations should provide a current Accommodation Authorization Letter from ODS to the instructor and review those accommodations with the instructor. Accommodations, such as exam administration, are not provided retroactively;

therefore, planning for accommodations as early as possible is necessary. For further information, see the ODS website, <http://disabilityservices.syr.edu/>.