RELST-UA 840 (CLASS-UA 856): Engaging Early Christian Theology
[PLEASE CONTACT PROFESSOR IF COURSE IS CLOSED]

Adam H. Becker
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Monday/Wednesday 9:30-10:45 am
Location: GCASL_383
Office Hour: Tuesday 11:00 am-12:00 pm (or by arrangement)
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Course Description
What does it mean to say that Jesus Christ was both human and divine? How can the Christian divinity be one yet three? How are the sacraments such as baptism effective? Do we have freewill? These were some of the pressing questions the Church Fathers addressed in the early centuries of Christian history and their answers contributed to the Christian theological tradition for centuries to come. In this course we will examine some of the classic works of early Christian theology. Despite the often highly rhetorical and polemical character of their writings the Church Fathers developed an intellectually rigorous field of knowledge, one that has had a significant intellectual historical as well as socio-political impact in the history of the Church and beyond. This is not a theological course but rather an introduction to some of the key texts in a historically significant mode of theological inquiry.

Theology was held by many in the Middle Ages to be the foremost of the disciplines or sciences, all fields of knowledge eventually leading to it. It was treated as the acme of knowledge and the keystone upon which all other knowledge was thought to be based. The Western university was founded in part simply for the study of theology and into the nineteenth century, in some locations into the twentieth, a knowledge of Christian theology was considered essential in education.

Nothing like this course has been taught in the past at NYU (with the university’s nineteenth-century Presbyterian businessmen roots). It is in fact not common for this literature to be studied in its own right at a secular university at the undergraduate level. The study of early Christianity is usually taught as a mix of social and intellectual history in religious studies contexts with a focus on anthropological issues, gender, power, doctrinal diversity and dispute. Although this course is not opposed to such a historicist approach we will try to avoid reducing theological argumentation to an ultimate social function or source. To be sure, context will be provided for the readings and lectures will point to some of the sources of the texts’ arguments, for example, in philosophical logic or ancient physics, but this is not a history course in the traditional sense. It is about engagement with arguments and immersion in the conversation of the classical Christian tradition. This course offers an encounter with normative Christian thought, a kind of “great books” introduction to theology.

Course goals
  1. To develop skills in reading complex, often rhetorical texts for their arguments.
  2. To consider the quality of certain kinds of arguments and to consider counterarguments.
  3. To practice in selecting apt portions of a text for closer analysis.
4. Based upon some short secondary readings and the professor’s guidance, to consider these texts within their historical context.
5. To use the ideas and arguments in these texts to think about ourselves and ideas prevalent in our own society.

Caveat: This is a course on Christian theology, but it is not confessional, that is, it does not require or depend upon any particular religious belief or disbelief. This is an opportunity to grapple with complex issues which have concerned many Christians. It will be all the more intellectually exciting if these issues are a concern to some of the students in the classroom, but we are here to think about and with theology, not to do it.

Final Evaluation:
Class Participation and Attendance    15%
Six short writing exercises (20 pages in total) 30%
Midterm Exam                        25%
Final Exam (date and time TBA)    30%

Attendance
You are expected to attend all classes. It will be extremely difficult to successfully complete the written assignments if you do not attend class. I would be happy to discuss missed material in office hour or at some arranged time provided that class was missed due to illness or some serious personal emergency.

Writing
In order to think about something well it is often necessary to write about it. Students will be given a series of short writing assignments with specific prompts directed toward the readings.

Written assignments are penalized for being late (please email late assignments as soon as possible). There will be no extensions without a medical excuse or some demonstrable and objective personal disaster. Do not leave things to the last minute. Except for in extreme circumstances late assignments will not be accepted more than four days after their due date.

Reading
The amount of reading varies from week to week. Plan ahead. The lectures and class discussion will be less useful if the material has not been read beforehand. Note that many of the readings on the syllabus are from the “Popular Patristic Series,” which has small format pages, that is, the reading will sometimes be less than it may appear.

Please always bring the reading to class.

To provide further background for the source readings students should read the short encyclopedia articles provided from the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (marked as EEC in Classes). For further discussion see the articles in the *Encyclopedia of Early Church* and the *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature*. These are all provided on Brightspace.
Those readings marked with an asterisk (*) will be provided online. Please purchase the following (approximate prices are given):


WEEK BY WEEK SCHEDULE

**Week 1**
Sept. 6 Introduction: What are the Limits of Theology? Is Theology Necessary?

**Week 2**
Sept. 11 The Argument with Judaism and Engagement with the Biblical Past

Sept. 13

**Week 3**
Sept. 18
*Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 178-212.
***3-page writing exercise due in class***

Sept. 20 The First Systematic Theology: Origen of Alexandria

**Week 4**
Sept. 25 NO CLASS: Yom Kippur

Sept. 27

**Week 5**
Oct. 2
*Origen, *On First Principles*, Bk II.i-iii.3 (pp. 93-108), II.iii.7 (pp. 114-115), II.vi (pp. 135-144), II.viii-II.xi (pp. 151-192) (notes pp. 445-453).
Oct. 4
*Origen, On First Principles, Bk III.i.1 (pp. 195-205 [left column]), III.ii-iii (pp. 275-299), III.v.1-5 (pp. 311-316), III.vi (pp. 321-332, notes 453-457, 459-462).
***3-page writing exercise due in class***

Oct. 9 NO CLASS on Monday

Oct. 10 (TUESDAY) The Nature(s) of Christ: Incarnation

Week 6
Oct. 16 The Nature(s) of God: The Trinity
*Selection from Athanasius, Orations against the Arians in Khaled Anatolios, Athanasius (London: Routledge, 2004), 89-110 (notes 252-257).

Oct. 18

Week 7
Oct. 23
***4-page writing exercise due in class***

Oct. 25
***Midterm Exam***

Week 8
Oct. 30 The Nature(s) of Christ: Christology

Nov. 1
Cyril of Alexandria, On the Unity of Christ, 70-133.
*** 2-page writing exercise due in class***

Week 9
Nov. 6 Free will and Evil

Nov. 8

**Week 10**
**Nov. 13 Augustine’s *Confessions***

**Nov. 15**
Augustine’s *Confessions*, Books 3-5.
***4-page writing exercise due in class***

**Week 11**
**Nov. 20**
Augustine’s *Confessions*, Books 6-7.

**Nov. 22 NO CLASS: Thanksgiving**

**Week 12**
**Nov. 27**
Augustine’s *Confessions*, Books 8-9.

**Nov. 29**
Augustine’s *Confessions*, Book 10.

**Week 13**
**Dec. 4**
Augustine’s *Confessions*, Books 11-13 selections.

**Dec. 6 Social Ethics**

**Week 14**
**Dec. 11**
***4-page writing exercise due in class***

**Must theology be done at all?**
**Dec. 13**
*Short selection from contemporary theologian Stanley Hauerwas*

**FINAL EXAM at university scheduled time (TBA)**
SHORT ESSAY FORMAT AND STYLE SHEET

The Question(s): You will be asked a question or a series of questions. Please specifically to them in your essays. This is a short writing assignment and therefore there is no room for anything extraneous.

THERE ARE NO RIGHT ANSWERS—only well-made arguments. A well-made argument requires a beginning, a middle, and an end. By “argument” I mean what your point is in the essay. You should be able to make this point in one clear sentence. “Points” do not have to be radically innovative, but they do require thought. Write as if it were going to be read by someone who does not know much about the subject. Don’t write it for me. That is, do not allude to things and assume that I will know what you mean. Be specific and concrete. Avoid hyperbole and excessive generalization. Follow the prompt. Edit! Please edit. Read it aloud to yourself in a typical conversational pace.

Double-spaced at 12 point font. No giant fonts. No deep margins. Quote from your sources, but not too much. Only quote what is necessary. Indent and single-space any quotations over two lines.

Provide an original title of your own devising for the essay—DO NOT call this “Essay 1”!!! Staple the work. Number the pages.

Please include a word count at the end of the essay.

If you feel the need to go over the set number of pages, do so, but remember that it is often good to work within genre.

An important criterion by which your work will be judged is the extent you are able to integrate the material from the syllabus into your essay. The less of the source or author addressed in an essay, the greater detail is expected of you. Because you may not use material from outside of the syllabus (in “syllabus” I include any material provided in class) there is no need for a bibliography. Citations should be to the page numbers of the readings in internal citation (Smith 5, or Mt 5:12, or Justin Martyr 73). You may cite class notes by date (only cite class notes for points that can not be made from the reading itself).

Use numbered footnotes if you have commentary to add, using the same parenthetical reference style within the footnotes.

Please avoid colloquialism. Use a formal, academic writing style.

Be careful in making linguistic points in your argument because you are using translations.

Please follow these directions closely.