Course Description

This course will introduce students to the history and theological development of the early church from the post-apostolic period through late antiquity. Throughout the course students will be introduced to and explore the teaching and circumstances of the primary figures in this theological period and selections of their writings.

Course Goals

- To survey the history of the early church as a context for understanding the writings of the Church Fathers
- To survey the lives, teachings and selections from the writings of the major Church Fathers
- To introduce the varying styles of theological exposition used by the Fathers
- To introduce students to the models of scriptural interpretation used by the Fathers
- To develop an adequate understanding of the Father’s theology and theological method for students to incorporate in their theological studies

Required Texts

Cyril Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers*

Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*

Christopher Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*

Course Outline

Introductory matters: the study of (church) history

The emergent Church:
The Bauer-Ehrman Thesis
   Video lecture: Bart Ehrman

The Church emergent from Judaism

   READ Chadwick *Early Church*, ch. 1

Introduction to the Church Fathers

   READ Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*, ch. 1

The Apostolic Fathers

   READ *Early Christian Fathers*: Letters in Crisis (1 Clement, Ignatian Letters, Polycarp)
   READ *Early Christian Fathers*: The Martyrdom of Polycarp, The Didache

The Apologists

   READ Chadwick, ch. 2, 3 & 4
   READ *Early Christian Writings*: First Apology of Justin
   READ Hall, ch. 9

Clement of Alexandria and Origen

   READ Chadwick, ch. 5 & 6
   READ Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, Ch. 5: Celsus: A Conservative Intellectual (Xerox: Library reserve)

   Christian martyrdom: St Catherine of Alexandria

The Constantinian church

   The Desert Fathers and Mothers
      READ Chadwick, ch. 12
      Video lecture: “Graven Images: Christianity’s Visual Arts

Trinitarian controversies

   READ Chadwick, ch. 8 & 9
   READ Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*
      Athanasius, “On the Incarnation of the Word” pp. 41 - 110
      Gregory of Nazienzus, “The Theological Orations” pp. 113 - 214
Some scholars argue that one should speak of “Gnosticisms” rather than a singular “Gnosticism”. Other scholars have stressed the diversity detectable in “Gnosticisms” to the point of questioning whether the label is any longer viable and should be given up.

In short, this is an area of scholarship that is in a fluid state, with disagreements about whether a writing such as the Gospel of Thomas really should be classified as “Gnostic” or whether a teacher such as Valentinius should really be considered a representative of Gnosticism.

Looking at and commenting on recent scholarship on Gnosticism, find an approach that defines the phenomenon in a way that you find persuasive. What characterizes this approach and what argues in favor of this way of understanding Gnosticism? (4 - 5 pp.)

Assignment #2: Desert spirituality. Choose one of the sayings from the Desert Fathers/Mothers. Explain what form of spirituality the saying represents. Conclude with a paragraph on why this particular saying appealed to you. (Include the saying you chose in your text.) (2 - 3 pp.)

Assignment #3: Choose one of the Church Fathers up to Augustine. Begin with a brief characterization of the writer (no more than a half page). Then, characterize the spirituality represented in his work; give a succinct summary. What is “living” in the spirituality of the writer/text you have chosen? That is, what is there that speaks to you/to
people in the present? Every spirituality/spiritual writing has a context; while a healthy spirituality transcends its historical context, it can also be limited by its context: that is, it can apply very well to its own time, but less so to another, later time. How would you evaluate the spirituality in light of limitations? (7 - 8 pp.)

MAT: paper: 10 – 12 pp. research paper on a topic to be approved by the instructor.

Multi-volume church histories

Hubert Jedin, History of the Church 10 vols.
Justo Gonzalez, The Story of Christianity. 2 vols. 2nd ed.

The Ancient Church


The Church and Judaism


The Bauer-Ehrman Thesis

Walter Bauer, Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity [1934, 2nd ed. 1964] (Eng. trans. 1971)
Andreas J. Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger, The Heresy of Orthodoxy (2010)
Paul Hartog, ed., Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts. Reconsidering the Bauer Thesis

Gnosticism

Christoph Markschies, Gnosis: An Introduction (Eng. trans. 2003)

The Fathers: Surveys

Johannes Quasten, Patrology 4 vols. (reprinted)
Berthold Altaner, *Patrology* (1960)

Website Resources

Early Church Fathers: [www.ccel.org/fathers2/](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/)
The Fathers of the Church (New Advent) [www.newadvent.org/fathers](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers)

Introductory

Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (1985)

Thematic study

Maurice Wiles, *The Christian Fathers* (reprinted)

The Apostolic Fathers


Christian martyrdom


Constantine


The Arian Controversy

Frances Young, *From Nicea to Chalcedon* (1983)

The desert fathers (and mothers)

Augustine

Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (reprinted)
Robert O’Connell, St. Augustine’s *Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul* (1989)

See also the series Classics of Western Spirituality—introductions are generally good.