

Standard Syllabus

Christianity Through The Ages

Theology 281

COURSE DESCRIPTION: The course is a survey course in the history of Christian thought. Not a course in Church history, this is a course whose primary goal is to investigate the major interactions between Christian thought and practice and the cultures that it has been a part of in its two thousand year history. Thus the course will include investigation of conceptual and doctrinal issues (e.g. the history of the development of the Christian doctrine of a Trinitarian understanding of God), as well as institutional and social histories (e.g. the history of papal authority or of the Inquisition), and the history of selected cultural issues, (e.g. the history of the relation of Christian thought to the development of western science). Students will learn the characteristics of major patterns within Christian thought (e.g. early local communities, the Patristic era; the medieval synthesis, the Reformation), major figures within these patterns (e.g. Paul, Tertullian, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther), and major cultural interactions (e.g. missions, the development of universities, religious wars and Inquisition, non-western forms of Christian thought). The student who successfully completes this course will be familiar with the major events and figures in the history of Christian thought and will be able to form a perspective on the effect of Christian thought on several cultural periods.

Knowledge Area satisfied: Theological and Religious Studies Knowledge

Skills Developed: Critical Thinking Skills and Dispositions

Values Requirements satisfied: Understanding Spirituality and Faith in Action in the World

Learning Objectives:

Knowledge Area (Theological and Religious Studies Knowledge)

This course will develop competency in the area of Theological and Religious Studies Knowledge. By successfully passing this course, students will be able to:

- a) analyze and interpret religious texts, beliefs and practices using standard scholarly methods and tools.

Since Christian life through history invariably takes its direction from the central Christian texts (Bible, Church statements, writings of other Christian thinkers), beliefs (Church doctrines; traditional beliefs of various Christian communities) and practices (ethical, political, artistic, ritual, spiritual) of the Christian tradition, and since the course is structured to investigate how Christians have lived from these sources and practices through time, the student will be studying Christian texts, beliefs and practices. The methods of study will utilize standard historical, literary, philosophical and theological techniques and concepts for investigating the thinkers/movements chosen. Students will learn what historical knowledge we currently have about various periods and figures in the Christian tradition as well as how Christian thought has been evaluated in regard to its literary (e.g. the effect of the ‘gospel’ on western literature), philosophical (the effect of Christian thinking on the notion of ‘truth’) and theological (the Trinitarian notion of monotheism) impact, primarily in the west.

- b) demonstrate knowledge, with attention to historical development, of the central texts, beliefs, ethical understandings, and practices of the Christian tradition.

Since this is an historical survey of Christian thought this learning outcome is in many ways a course description. The student who successfully completes this course will be able to demonstrate knowledge, with attention to historical development, of the central texts, beliefs, ethical understandings, and practices of the Christian tradition, by being able to recognize, summarize and accurately locate in sequence major figures, events and ideas of the Christian tradition.

- c) demonstrate knowledge of the intersections between religion and selected contemporary issues.
The history of Christian thought is the history of a living tradition. By studying how important elements of a typically Christian position have developed and changed through history (e.g. the understanding of a Christian's role in the military; the understanding of Christianity's relation to modern science, the understanding of the role of women within ecclesial history), the student will be encouraged to make informed connections and evaluations regarding the relation of selected Christian perspectives and contemporary issues.
- d) evaluate one's own religious perspective and the religious perspectives of others.
Students will engage the ideas and positions which characterize the Christian tradition in this course. The student will learn how Christian thought has been evaluated throughout history. In doing this the student will be able to better understand how he or she might also evaluate this religious tradition, either as one's own, or as a major world religious tradition.

Skills (Critical Thinking and Dispositions):

This course will focus on critical thinking and dispositions. In light of this the student will develop the following competencies:

- a) Comprehend, paraphrase, summarize and contextualize the meaning of various forms of communication:

The student will learn to comprehend various forms of written documents (e.g. sacred texts{ e.g. a gospel}, ecclesial documents {e.g. the Nicene Creed}, sermons {e.g. Luther's sermons on Romans}, etc), first by reading and summarizing the major issues that the document is dealing with; second, by locating these texts and issues in the context of the history Christian tradition as well as the various culture issues of the time (e.g. how the Protestant Reformation needs to be placed in the context of both the rise of Renaissance scholarship and the concerns of late medieval nominalism); and third, by acquainting the student through lecture with the appropriate information on the genres of production (e.g. differentiating the literary structure of a 'gospel' from "biography" or 'chronicle') so that the student may place the issues of the written communication within genre constraints and possibilities.

- b) Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of varying points of view.

Since the course is primarily a course in the history of a living religious tradition, the student will be able to see the effects of various actions, events, documents, concepts and practices over the course of time. This effective historical approach (Gadamer) affords the instructor and student the opportunity to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of various historical positions by observing both the intended and the unintended consequences of positions that have been taken by various Christian communities throughout their histories. For example, Christian thought has been characterized as 'sacramental,' that is a form of thinking which has a high regard for the sign value of the material world. By studying the history of Christian thought in this light, the student will be able to evaluate how such a perspective encourages certain forms of education and art while at the same time can lead to the excesses that have historically accompanied events like the Crusades and practices like the veneration of relics.

- c) Recognize the critical value of gaining accurate historical knowledge.

One of the essential elements of critical thinking is knowledge. In the study of religion, ideological histories sometimes seems to displace the knowledge gained by current historical methods. The student will learn the major events and persons in the history of the Christian tradition using the best historical information available. Through lecture, reading, exams and research the student will acquire the ability to discriminate between ideological or ‘institutionally official’ histories and historical accounts subject to the demands of contemporary historical methods.

- d) Monitor individual thinking or behavior in order to question, confirm, validate or correct it.

Since the course will be dealing with a survey of major events, people, texts, and trends in the history of Christian thought, the student will be encountering instances of how the Christian communities have dealt with recurring human issues: e.g., war, education, social roles, relation to the holy, the relation of church and government. Students will be encouraged to investigate, confirm or correct their own thinking on the issues encountered in relation to the major position in the history of Christianity.

Values Area (Understanding Spirituality and Faith in Action in the World):

Understanding spirituality or faith in action in the world: The entire Christian history has been the history of a theistic perspective engaging and adapting to a wide variety of cultures. Since the Christian perspective is a faith informed worldview, the history of Christianity must also be a history of faith in action in the world—sometimes in ways which might be critically viewed as advancing various human and world values, sometimes in ways that might be critically viewed as destructive of these values. For example, the strong emphasis on the value of compassion versus the value of courage in the Christian encounter with the Roman world may have created a tradition of justice which paid greater attention to the social outcast; but at the same time this history of compassion has often been limited to those who are understood to be fellow Christians. Investigating these kinds of value issues within the Christian tradition allows the student to better understand spirituality and faith in action in the history of the world.

Learning Activities:

Possible Array of texts:

Bible
Selected Church Creeds and Documents
Gonzalez, Justo. *The Story of Christianity*
Clebsch. *Christianity in European History*
Note: Instructors may vary the textbooks

Learning activities will include reading of assigned textual material; lectures on the assigned topics by the instructor; group participation by panel presentation, class discussion; and small group activities; written assignments in accordance with class topics; various media presentation in accord with class topics (e.g. video or internet); examinations and quizzes

Possible Evaluation Methods:

Discussion
Group Participation
Examination
Quizzes

Research Paper
Discussion Preparation papers
Film and Video Review
Class participation

Sample Semester Schedule:

- Week 1 Syllabus; Introduction to ‘Christian Thought’
- Week 2 The World of Early Christianity: 50-300 C.E.; The diversity of the early Christian world
- Week 3 The World of Early Christianity: 50-300 C.E./ Exam
- Week 4 The Christian World from 300 to 1400 C.E.; Christianity in North Africa
- Week 5 The Christian World from 300 to 1400 C.E.; Christianity and the Medieval West
- Week 6 The Christian World from 300 to 1400 C.E.; Christianity and interactions with Islam/Exam
- Week 7 Reform, War, Denominations and Missions
- Week 8 Reform, War, Denominations and Missions; Western Christianity and the encounter with Non-Western Cultures
- Week 9 Reform, War, Denominations and Missions; Denominations, Rites and Religious Diversity within Christianity
- Week 10 Reform, War, Denominations and Missions/Exam
- Week 11 Christian Thought in the Modern World: the Rise of Science and its Impact on Christian Thought
- Week 12 Christian Thought in the Modern World; The Modern encounter of Western Christianity with Non-Western Cultures
- Week 13 Christian Thought in the Modern World; Encountering new and Diverse Ethical Problems in the 20th C.
- Week 14 Christian Thought in the Modern World: Modern Form of Catholic Life/Exam
- Week 15 Class Presentations: Student Research papers/projects

Note: Instructors may vary the presentation of methods, theories and religious traditions, but all of these items will be covered in this class.