

Introduction to Christianity Fall 2016

Paul A. Dietrich

Course information and Contact information:

- Office: LA 150
- Phone: 243-2805
LA 243 11:00-11:50
- Office Hours: MW 3-4 and by appointment LA 150
- 3 credits

Religion has been defined as “a *system of symbols (creed, code, cultus)* by which people (a *community*) orient themselves in the world with reference to both ordinary and extraordinary powers, meanings, and values.” We will try to bring this dry formulation to life by attending to major moments in the formative (ancient), medieval, and early modern (renaissance & reformation) history of Christianity with special reference to:

the “autobiography” of the most influential thinker in the western Christian tradition, the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, the sacred poem of the West on sin, reparation, and beatitude, the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, and the most famous work of the “Prince of the Humanists” during the tumult of the Renaissance and Reformation, *The Praise of Folly* by Erasmus of Rotterdam.

We will conclude with a reading of a modern (nineteenth-century) but timeless parable from the world of Eastern Christianity by an anonymous author, *The Way of the Pilgrim*, rediscovered in our time by the novelist J.D. Salinger. Along the way we will attend to foundational narratives and sacred stories and the diverse literatures, beliefs, doctrines, ethical codes, sacraments and rituals, art and aesthetics, and communal structures by which Christians have responded to matters of ultimate meaning and daily existence.

Required Reading:

- St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, Maria Boulding, trans., (Vintage)
- Dante, *Purgatory (The Divine Comedy)*, Mark Musa, trans., (Penguin)
- Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly & Other Writings*, Robert Adams, trans., (Norton)
- Anonymous, *The Way of the Pilgrim/Pilgrim Continues His Way*, Olga Savin, trans., (Shambhala)
- Selected handouts and readings on Moodle

Course Syllabus:

8/29,31, 9/2

- Introduction to the Study of Christianity: Approaches, Texts and Contexts

9/5

- Labor Day – no class

9/7,9

- Canon, Creed, and Community – from the Jesus Movement to Imperial Christianity and Beyond-
The Story of Early Christianity

9/12,14,16

- “The Unfinished Man and his Pain and the Finished Man Among his Enemies” (W.B.Yeats) :
Augustine’s Odyssey (*Confessions* I-V) in Late Antiquity

9/19,21,23

- The Poetics of Conversion – Augustine’s *Confessions* VI-IX

9/26,28,30

- Memory, Time, and Genesis – Augustine’s *Confessions* X-XIII

10/3,5,7

- The *Commedia* of Dante Alighieri: The Circles of Hell and the Logic of Damnation – *Inferno*
(selected cantos)

10/10,12,*17,19,21

- *Purgatorio* - Re-fashioning the Soul: the Seven Deadly Sins and the Process of Purification

*10/14

- Midterm Exam

10/24,26,28

- Ascension through the Heavenly Spheres and the Anatomy of Bliss in *Paradiso* (selected cantos)

10/31,11/2,4

- Renaissance Christian Humanism, Satire, and Holy Fools – *The Praise of Folly* of Erasmus

11/7,9,*14,16

- Catholic Reform and Protestant Reformation : Erasmus and Luther on the Word of God – *New Testament Forewords, Ninety-Five Theses, Freedom of a Christian (On Christian Liberty)*

*11/11

- Veterans Day – no class

11/18,21

- War and Peace in Renaissance Christian Thought – *The Complaint of Peace, Julius Excluded*

11/23-25

- Thanksgiving travel day and break

11/28,30,12/2,5,7

- Russian Orthodox Christianity, the Jesus Prayer and *The Way of the Pilgrim*

12/9,12

- Conclusion and review

12/14

- **Final Exam (Wednesday, 10-12)**

Course Requirements:

1. Attendance and participation are crucial (10% of grade). My hope is that we can combine lecture and seminar formats. You will be allowed three unexcused absences. Beginning this

semester classes start promptly on the hour. Three absences (or persistent tardiness) will lower your grade one letter grade. Six absences will result in failure of the course.

2. Completion of the assigned reading in a timely fashion is also required. I will assume that you have completed the reading by class time unless you inform me otherwise beforehand.
3. There will be a midterm exam on October 14 and a final exam on December 14. (40% each).
4. A term paper or research paper on an approved topic may be submitted in lieu of the final exam. Due on December 14. Evidence of plagiarism will result in failure of the course.