

RELS 1440: From Jesus to Muhammad: A History of Early Christianity

Spring 2024 | Tuesday 1:45–4:45 | Place tbd

Draft. All readings and assignments are subject to change.

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Office Hours: Thursday 12pm – 2pm or by appointment

Course Description

“Jesus and Muhammad walk into a bar ...” We can think about multiple ways to complete the joke. They could talk about prophecy and prophetic succession, God’s word, women, pagans and Jews, state authority, among others. This course traces the long arc of religious history, from the Jesus movement to the rise of Islam. Through texts, objects, buildings, and artistic representations we will study the time period that connects these two significant developments that majorly changed world history. Lectures and discussions will consist of close reading, analysis, and discussion of primary sources, analysis of non-literary media, and engagement with modern scholarship. We will raise questions about ancient (and modern) perspectives on religious practice, representation, authority, gender, race/ethnicity, memory, and interreligious encounters.

Why should you take this course?

There are myriad reasons to take any course. Let me offer two reasons to take this course. Firstly, it matters. We live in a world that is deeply immersed in the symbols, institutions, concepts, and relations that are the products of these seven centuries. Think about the three billion adherents of these religions, architecture of state buildings, antisemitism and xenophobia, the calendar we use, to name just a few. Having a knowledge of the historical context within which these entities were first defined and debated makes a great impact in one’s participation in the world. Secondly, everyone likes a good challenge. Accepting simplistic narratives, totalistic views of history, one-sided privileged perspectives are easy. By taking this course, you will challenge yourself to approach a time period from many different perspectives, with the help of various literary and material sources. Being a critical consumer of historical information is important, and this course will help you become one. If you would like to speak more about the benefits of taking this course, do not hesitate to e-mail me.

Course Goals and Objectives

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Appreciate the breadth and diversity of early Christian history and culture.
- Have a clear understanding of Christian and early Islamic history, key persons, institutions, and concepts.
- Critically engage with a selection of Christian and Islamic texts, and historically contextualize them.

- Understand the scholarly arguments regarding the study of Christianity.
- Tie these discussions to the modern-day religious practices, cultural production, and modes of expression.

Assessment

Attendance and participation %20

Weekly quizzes %20

Object biography %20

Final project plan %20

Exit interview %20

Quizzes: At the beginning of every class (except for the first class and the museum visit on April 16) we will have a 10-minute quiz based on readings. Each of them is worth 2pts in total, consisting of 10 simple questions. At the end of the term, I will eliminate two of your lowest-grade quizzes and take only 10 of them toward your final grade.

Final project and exam: You will choose a topic for your final project after the Spring Break, and will submit a brief plan consisting of an abstract, outline, and bibliography. At the end of the semester, instead of fully developing and writing this paper, you will take a verbal exam on it. This “exit interview” will substitute for the final exam for the course.

We will read all of the primary sources in English translation. For biblical passages we will use the New standard Revised Version (NRSV), available online at www.biblegateway.com. There are no prerequisites for this course, only your enthusiasm!

Grade Scale

98-100: A+	87-89: B+	77-79: C+	67-69: D+
95-97: A	83-86: B	73-76: C	63-66: D
90-94: A-	80-82: B-	70-72: C-	60-62: D-

Statement on Inclusion and Diversity in the Classroom

University of Pennsylvania and the Department of Religious Studies considers the diversity of its students, faculty, and staff to be a strength and critical to its educational mission. Accordingly, all participants in this course are expected to contribute proactively and constructively toward creating an inclusive and respectful climate for everyone involved, both inside and outside of the classroom space. Dimensions of diversity can include sex, race, age, national origin, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, intellectual and physical ability, sexual orientation, income, faith and non-faith perspectives, socio-economic class, political ideology, education, primary language, family status, military experience, cognitive style, and communication style. As part of our shared academic endeavor as a community of scholars, it is essential that we honor the intersection of these experiences and characteristics as a core value. In this context, please note that Title IX specifically prohibits sex discrimination, including sexual misconduct, violence,

harassment, and retaliation. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you can find confidential resources and information concerning reporting options at <https://www.diversity.upenn.edu>. In this context, this course is also firmly committed to supporting the work of the Office of Student Disabilities Services, which aims to “ensure equal access to all University programs activities and services.” For further information and resources, see <https://www.vpul.upenn.edu>. If you need to request academic accommodations, feel free to speak with me after class, during office hours, or via email. For all participants in this course, the cultivation of the classroom as a healthy, equitable, and inclusive workspace is a first priority.

Statement on Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity in this course. The Pennbook contains our Code of Academic Integrity. These standards include the responsible use and citation of sources, as well as robust intellectual engagement with others in the academic conversations fostered by the course. For more information, please see: <https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/code-of-academic-integrity/>

A Note on Course Content

The primary sources we will read in this class and the material culture we will analyze include racist, sexist, misogynistic, patriarchal, antisemitic, Islamophobic, sexually explicit, violent, and otherwise disturbing material. If you are uncomfortable with discussing such material, please make an appointment with me to talk about it before enrolling in the course.

Class Format and Structure

The regular classes consist of three parts:

- 1- A 10-minute, simple quiz on the assigned readings. These will test your knowledge of the very basic information on the topic, such as important dates, names, places, events.
- 2- Lecture incorporating but not summarizing the readings (hence it is important to do carefully read the assigned material in advance).
- 3- Primary source reading. In the second half of the class, we will deep dive into an ancient text. No prior preparation needed; we will read and discuss these texts and objects in class.

Schedule and Weekly Readings

Week 1
Jan 23

Introduction: Hellenism and the Roman Empire
No readings, no assignments.

Week 2
Jan 30

We start with a 10-minute quiz on the assigned readings. Bring a pen.
Leadership and authority
Lynch, *Early Christianity*, “The Jewish context of the Jesus movement.”
Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, “Spread of Christianity,” “‘Apostolic’ writings outside the canon,” “Eusebius.”

Week 3
Feb 6

Heresy and orthodoxy

Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, “Diversity of early Christianity,” “Gnostic Christian texts,” “The internal conflicts of Christianity.”
Lynch, *Early Christianity*, “The new prophecy.”

Week 4
Feb 13

Church, state, and society: The era of martyrs

Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, “The attack on Christianity,” “Martyrdom of Polycarp,”
Coakley and Sterk, *World Christian History*, “The Pliny Trajan correspondence.”

Week 5
Feb 20

Imperial Christianity

Lynch, *Early Christianity*, “The creation of a Christian empire.”
Gray, *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, “The Legacy of Chalcedon.”

Week 6
Feb 27

Household and family in late antique Christianity

Harvey, *Syriac World*, “Women and children in Syriac Christianity.”
Horn, “Children's play as social ritual.”
Chin, *Melania*, “Apostles and Aristocrats.”

Spring Break March 2 – 10

Week 7
Mar 12

Monasticism and asceticism

Ehrman and Jacobs, *Christianity in Late Antiquity*, “Asceticism and monasticism.” “Pilgrims, relics, and holy places,” “Saints’ lives.”
Lynch, *Early Christianity*, “The ascetic movement.”

Week 8
Mar 19

Pagans, Jews, others

Fonrobert, *Late Ancient Christianity*, “Jewish Christians, Judaizers, and Christian Anti Judaism.”
Wilken, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, “Julian the Apostate.”

Week 9**Mar 26****The Simple Believer**Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East*, “The simple believer.”**Week 10****Apr 2****Muhammad and the rise of Islam**Kennedy, *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post Classical World*, “Islam.”Donner, *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, “The background to Islam.”**Week 11****Apr 9****The Qur’an as a late antique text**Neuwirth, *In the Shadow of Arabic*, “The Qur’an as a late antique text.”**Week 12****Apr 16****Penn Museum visit****Your object biography is due next week, on April 23!****Week 13****Apr 23****Umayyad Middle East**Fowden, *Qusayr ‘Amra*.Weitz, *Between Christ and Caliph*.**Upload your object biography on Canvas.****Week 14****Apr 30****Conversion and Concluding Remarks**Papaconstantinou, Schwartz, and McLynn, eds., *Conversion in Late Antiquity***Exit Interview: Final Exam Period**