

# REL 2930: INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIANITY

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**Online Office Hours:** Thursday, 1-3 pm (on Canvas chat - you can also set up an appointment, phone call, etc. Don't hesitate to reach out if you need help!)

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will introduce students to the Christian religion, providing an overview of the religion's origins, and to some of the artistic, intellectual, and political traditions which it has inspired. We will begin by looking back, to the sources which gave birth to the Christian tradition, and also to the way the tradition was shaped and developed through the centuries, by its adherents and also by its contract with other worldviews. We will then focus on core beliefs and rituals shared by Christians across centuries and cultures, before considering the Christian religion in its diverse global settings today. We will then examine some of the literature which this religion inspired, before concluding with a look at the way in which the Christian religion has engaged with cultural issues such as science, race, and the environmental crisis.

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives for students of REL 2930 include the following:

- \* gain a basic knowledge of the origins of Christianity and of its central beliefs and practices
- \* achieve a functional literacy in the New Testament and the gnostic gospels
- \* critically engage both the biblical text and its critics
- \* gain an elementary knowledge of major developments in the history of Christianity
- \* recognize the significance of the modern context for Christianity
- \* address a sampling of contemporary issues facing Christianity today
- \* gain an appreciation for Christianity as an intellectual and artistic tradition

## TEXTBOOKS (OTHER READINGS WILL BE PROVIDED ONLINE ON THE COURSE PAGE)

The Bible (NSRV translation please - save some \$\$\$ - take advantage of [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com) or any of the other free Bible sites out there)

McGrath, Alister E. *Christianity: An Introduction*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.

Borg, Marcus and Wright, N.T. *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. HarperOne, 2007.

Endo, Shusaku. *Silence*. Teplinger, 1980.

O'Connor, Flannery. *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories*. HBJ, 1977. (This might be a text you don't buy right away - many of her most notable essays are available online)

### Grading Scale

A	4.0	93-100	930-1000	C	2.0	73-76	730-769
A-	3.67	90-92	900-929	C-	1.67	70-72	700-729
B+	3.33	87-89	870-899	D+	1.33	67-69	670-699
B	3.0	83-86	830-869	D	1.0	63-66	630-669
B-	2.67	80-82	800-829	D-	0.67	60-62	600-629
C+	2.33	77-79	770-799	E	0.00	0-59	0-599

## ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS (TOTAL POINTS POSSIBLE: 1000)

**Midterm & Final Exam Questions (200 pts total):** After we work through each module of the course, I will ask you to submit potential exam questions based on the material of that particular module (reading, lecture, etc). Specifically, I will ask you to submit four: A True/False, a multiple choice, a short answer (answerable in couple of sentences), and an essay question. You don't need to provide the answers (although you probably should know it! - focus on crafting good questions. I will collect the best ones, (modify them if necessary) and release them back to you, in effect making a study guide for the exams as we go along. The way I see it, this is a way to measure your grasp of the reading and the lectures which goes beyond busy work or quizzes, giving you a tangible purpose for the weekly work I am asking you to do.

**Reflections/Responses (150 pts total)** While the exam questions (see above) will be a test of your ability to grasp the content of each module (including notable people, ideas, themes, etc), the online reflections will be designed to draw out your response to it. In other words, what you think and how you react emotionally to the material, rather than just your cognitive grasp of it. To that end, there will be reflection questions posted for each module. You will be required to post two responses: one in response to the question itself, and a second in response to one of your classmates reflections. All responses need to be at least 100 words, thought through, and RESPECTFUL to one another. If your response fails to meet any of these requirements, it will lose points.

**Midterm and Final Exam (200 points each, for 400 pts total):** Exams will be designed to test your grasp of the material presented, both in the readings and in the course lectures. As mentioned, they will be constituted solely of questions you provide in the weekly assignments (subject to my modification, of course.) A variety of question types will be used: matching, true/false, multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions are all fair game. Exams will not be cumulative. See the course schedule for dates and details concerning each exam.

**Paper: (250 pts total)** You must choose one of the following assignments...

1. **Worship Service Compare and Contrast:** If you choose this assignment, you will be asked to attend two Christian worship services and write an 6-8 page paper (double spaced, 12 pt font, no monkeying with the margins) comparing and contrasting the two worship experiences. In order for this to work, you must attend services from two very different traditions. If you pick a conservative evangelical church for your first, go find a progressive mainline church for your second. If you choose a Catholic mass for your first, go choose a Lutheran or Orthodox for your second, etc. The services you choose will go a long way towards determining the quality of your paper. Think them through. **YOUR CHURCH SELECTIONS MUST BE APPROVED AHEAD OF TIME.** More information will be given as we get into the semester.
2. **Christian Leader Interview:** To succeed at this assignment, you must interview a Christian leader, and write a 6-8 page paper describing what you learned in the process. What is a Christian leader? A pastor or a priest would make obvious choices, but you can also interview a layperson who is known for being a thoughtful Christian and leading in their particular context. Choosing a Christian leader who comes from a context you are not familiar with will result in a better experience, and, most likely, a better paper. (If you're a lifelong Baptist, don't interview the Baptist pastor.) Just be sure to shape the interview accordingly. A Christian business woman is going to be interviewed very differently than a priest. **YOUR INTERVIEW SUBJECT MUST BE APPROVED AHEAD OF TIME.** Again, more information will be given in the semester.

3. **Christian Literature Review:** Finally, this assignment involves picking a piece of literature (most likely a novel) and writing a 6-8 paper tracing the influence of Christianity in the work. (NOTE: If you write 6 pages telling me why you liked or didn't like the book, you will fail this assignment.) You can choose novels written by explicitly Christian authors (C.S. Lewis, Dostoevsky, Buechner, etc) or you can choose books written by authors who were not "Christian authors" so much as they were "Christians who happened to be authors." Examples include Tolkien, Wendell Berry, Marilynne Robinson, and many others. Again, the trick is to trace the type of Christianity which presents itself in the book you read. What themes are sounded most strongly? What gets skipped over? Obviously, Endo is out, because we will be reading and discussing his work in our class. ALL BOOKS MUST BE APPROVED AHEAD OF TIME. No exceptions.

Papers will be graded on quality of the writing, adherence to the assignment's directions, attention to detail, and evidence of reflection. In addition, no matter which assignment you choose, you will be tasked with writing a 200 word (roughly) summary of what you found, and posting it online for the benefit of your classmates. That way, we can share all that good wisdom we just learned! It will be worth 50 of the 250 possible points for this assignment.

## **Schedule of Classes and Assignments (Subject to modification at my discretion)**

**NOTE: Test Questions and Reflections/Responses will be due every week except for exam weeks. (Beginning in week 2) For all other assignments, see the schedule below.**

### **Unit 1: Jesus & the Sources of Christianity**

#### ***Week 1 - August 24-30***

- Course Intro, the academic study of religion
- Texts: Russell McCutcheon, "What is the Academic Study of Religion," Borg & Wright, part 1

#### ***Week 2 - Aug 31-Sept 6***

- Jesus' Life and Teachings
- Texts: McGrath, pp 1-27, Borg & Wright, part 2, Matthew 5-7
- RECOMMENDED TEXTS: The Gospel of Mark. (If you've never a Gospel before and don't know the story, you really ought to read the Gospel of Mark to get caught up,)

#### ***Week 3 - Sept 7-13***

- Death and Resurrection
- Texts: Luke 22-24, 1 Corinthians 15, Borg & Wright, parts 3 & 4

**Week 4 - Sept 14-20**

- **PAPER TOPIC DUE**
- Who is this guy?
- Texts: 2 Corinthians 5, Rev 21-22, Borg & Wright, parts 5 & 7

**Week 5 - Sept 21-27**

- Sources: The Bible & the ancient Creeds
- Texts: McGrath, 28-59, The Gospel of Thomas  
(<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/maps/primary/gthomas.html>)

## Unit 2: The Evolution of Christian Doctrine

**Week 6 - Sept 28-Oct 4**

- The outgrowth of theology
- Texts: McGrath, p 59-120

**Week 7 - Oct 5-11**

- Christian History #1: Early Church to the Middle Ages
- Texts: McGrath, pp 121-148, Excerpts from the Confessions, Aquinas, persecuted church

**Week 8 - Midterm Exam - Oct 12-18**

**Week 9 - Oct 19-25**

- Christian History #2: Reformation to the Modern Age
- Texts: McGrath, pp 148-163, 199-218, tbt from Martin Luther, Calvin, Schleithem Confession, & the Counterreformation

## Unit 3: Interlude - Modernity, Missionaries and the Meeting of Civilizations

**Week 10 - Oct 26-Nov 1**

- Missionaries and Clashing cultures
- Text: Silence, part 1

**Week 11 - Nov 2-8**

- Cultures and the Problem of Evil
- Text: Silence, part 2

**Week 12 - Nov 9-15**

- The Modern Age and Global Christianity
- Texts: McGrath, pp 163-198
- RECOMMENDED: McGrath, p 220-250

**Unit 4: Christianity and the Larger Culture****Week 13 - Nov 16-22**

- **PAPER DUE**
- Art, Poetry, & Literature
- McGrath, pp 251-275, selections from O'Connor, Berry, Guite

**Week 14 - Nov 23-29**

- **PAPER SUMMARY DUE**
- Science, Gender, and the Environment
- Texts: tbd from Matthew Vines, Karen Jo Torjesen, "Household Management and Women's Authority" in *When Women Were Priests*, pp. 53-82, tbd from Wendell Berry

**Week 15 - Nov 30-Dec 6**

- Politics, Pluralism, and Race
- Texts: Miroslav Volf, "Human Flourishing" in *A Public Faith*, pp. 55-74, Stanley Fish and Richard Neuhaus, "Why We Can/Can't All Get Along," in *First Things*, tbd from MLK, Jr.

**Week 16 Final Exam - Dec 7-13****CLASSROOM POLICIES****Attendance**

This course is entirely online. All course activities will be conducted via Canvas (<https://lss.at.ufl.edu/>). So what does attendance mean? Be "present" on the course webpage and do the work!

**Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is a serious violation of the Student Honor Code. The Honor Code prohibits and defines plagiarism as follows:

Plagiarism. A student shall not represent as the student's own work all or any portion of the work of another. Plagiarism includes (but is not limited to):

- a.) Quoting oral or written materials, whether published or unpublished, without proper attribution.
- b.) Submitting a document or assignment which in whole or in part is identical or substantially identical to a document or assignment not authored by the student. (University of Florida, Student Honor Code, 15 Aug. 2007  
<<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/judicial/honorcode.php>>)

University of Florida students are responsible for reading, understanding, and abiding by the entire Student Honor Code.

Important Tip: You should never copy and paste something from the internet without providing the exact location from which it came.

### **Classroom Behavior**

Even though our "classroom" is virtual, the rules of civility and courtesy still apply. Online boorishness will result in reprimand, and could negatively affect your grade. If the infraction is serious enough, or repeated enough, it will be passed on to University discipline. Although the course is online, the University's honor and conduct codes still apply:

<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/> Please keep in mind that students come from diverse cultural, economic, ethnic, and yes, religious backgrounds. Some of the texts we will discuss and write about engage controversial topics and opinions. (I know that comes as a shock in a religion class.) Diversified student backgrounds combined with provocative texts require that you demonstrate respect for ideas that may differ from your own.

### **Turning in Work**

Papers and posts are due and exams are to be taken by the assigned deadline. Late papers and exams will not be accepted. **Failure of technology is not an excuse.** The best way to handle your business? Don't wait until the last minute, and if you're not sure that something went through, follow up to be sure!

### **Paper Maintenance Responsibilities**

Students are responsible for maintaining duplicate copies of all work submitted in this course and retaining all returned, graded work until the semester is over. Should the need arise for a resubmission of papers or a review of graded papers, it is the student's responsibility to have and to make available this material. This is good practice for all classes - cover yourself!

### **Students with Disabilities**

The University of Florida complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Students requesting accommodation should contact the Students with Disabilities Office, Peabody 202. That office

will provide documentation to the student whom must then provide this documentation to the instructor when requesting accommodation.

**Course Evaluations**

“Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations at <http://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester, but students will be given specific times when they are open. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/results>.”