

**Course Syllabus - Tentative Work in Progress**  
**REL 2502 (28375 - 6354)**  
**Introduction to Christianity**  
**Spring 2023**

**Instructor:** Todd Best  
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Office Hours: Wednesdays 3-4pm or by appointment

**Meet time:** Tuesday Period 7 (1:55-2:45) and Thursday Periods 7-8 (1:55-3:50)  
@ Anderson Hall - Room 019

**Required Texts:**

BOOKS TO PURCHASE (other readings will be provided in the course Canvas files)

Johnson, Luke Timothy, *The New Testament: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 2010.  
(Get this one first - initial readings come out of this book)

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

The Bible - Any good translation will do - NASB, NRSV, NIV, ESV are all fine - no paraphrases.  
Recommended: The Harper Collins Study Bible (New Revised Standard Version)

**Course Description:**

Christianity has endured 2000+ years of history and remains a global religion. Although it seems ubiquitous and familiar in the West, most people don't realize its breadth. This class introduces students to the contours of this vast tradition. They will understand what underlies the enduring fabric of Christianity, the tensions straining it today, and its relationship with modernity. Exploring these dimensions will show that, for many, the Christianity they know or have heard about is not all there is to the tradition, nor does it singularly define it.

**Course Objectives:**

1. learn about the origin story and basic sacred text/documents of the tradition
2. understand big ideas, historical movements, and cultural actions of Christianity
3. recognize and explore the plurality of the tradition(s)
4. consider the intellectual and artistic voices Christianity
5. explore and process contemporary issues and curious questions about Christianity's relationship with modernity
6. no matter where any student enters the conversation, to "study" Christianity  
\*critically, that is, to learn about, think deeply about and gain a fuller understanding of this tradition and, as a result, to widen one's own thinking about issues that are relevant to the tradition

\*Critically does not mean negatively, merely. It means that it is expected that you will be able to distance yourself enough to fairly and thoughtfully analyze the content, evaluating in ways that allow you to offer thoughtful response and not merely agree or disagree. This critical stance should be framed by a generous posture on your part. Please read [“Reading Charitably”](#) in Canvas.

[Course Rationale: Conversational nature of reality]

### **Course Expectations, Structure, and Flow:**

The course is built upon the fundamentals of engaged intellectual work: reading (and other media forms), conversation/discussion, and writing. Together we will be taking a journey to try to more fully understand Christianity. *I am expecting you to do at least two hours of course reading and preparation for every hour of class time. While the workload is not terribly intense, the thinking and reflective processing will be, perhaps, the most challenging part.*

Among other requirements, you will be required to keep an electronic journal of your reflection and responses to the readings and to class discussions. You are to write in such a way as to show your understanding, but also to help you in thinking through the various viewpoints you will encounter. I will discuss these journals individually with you at [three intervals] during the course.

Attendance is required for this class not only to hold you accountable for in-class content and learning, but more importantly, in order to maximize the community of learning. I am committed to the idea that learning happens best in community with others who we can process with, learn from, be challenged by, and have our imagination enlarged by. To help with this, and to help us get conversations going, there will be several random pop quizzes at the beginning of the class. Students must be present at the time the quiz is administered. There will be no make-up quizzes.

### **Reading, Conversation, and Imaginative Poking, Prodding, and Puzzlement**

This is mostly not a lecture class. It will be structured more like a seminar. Each week, there will be assigned reading and periodically supplemental articles, videos, podcasts, or poems. Students will be responsible to read, contemplate, and actively discuss the material each week, as well as write a reflection of personal engagement. Students should come to each class having prepared and ready to discuss (talk about, not merely listen). *Depending on class size, students may have rotating responsibility to lead part of the discussion.* In-class discussions will sometimes be led by the instructor, sometimes by class members, sometimes by the collective class. Again, each class member should come to class ready to engage and contribute every session, and not merely to listen. [Consider the range of ways to participate.]

\*Each session, students should come with 1-2 discussion questions that you would want to ask if you were leading a discussion on the assigned content. As much as possible, questions should reference specific passages in the text.

### Film and other media

Recognizing that we can learn through different kinds of input, and that other media forms can elucidate and illustrate reading content, we will explore opportunities through film, podcasts, poetry, even visual arts as ways to more fully explore the concepts of the class. It is hoped that we might even be able to schedule an evening film screening and discussion if enough of us are available.

### *A Word About Academic and Human Discourse: Going Beyond Civility*

*This is a humanities class that raises existential questions related to the human experience. It probes issues that are sometimes thorny, don't always have clear answers and includes ones in which people can have strong differences of opinion. One way to think of the class is to see it as a big conversation about big issues. Optimal participation comes from the ability to be fully engaged: observant, reflective, and imaginative as we enter into content and conversation. In order for us to have a successful class, we need to be able to talk to and with each other well. That involves a conversation in which members are humble, respectful, thoughtfully engaged, and still free to critique (offer friendly push-back). We want to see the articulation and discussion of individual perspectives, while leaving room for disagreement and friendly critique. All of us should respectfully listen to the author's views as well as each other's, without becoming dismissive or defensive, a common default when disagreement is detected; and after listening, we need to be able to converse about what we hear. As these ideals are upheld we hope to create an environment where we all sense that, fundamentally, we are in this together in spite of our differences. (Please see article in Canvas: "Reading Charitably".)*

*All in all, it will be useful to grant ourselves a freedom to think in large terms about life - at the deepest levels of personal conviction. This is not a facts and information class, although we certainly hope to be learning something; this is a class in which we will think about our cultural and media discourse through a lens: pondering and learning about what it means to be human by processing, thinking well about, and interacting over the big ideas that come to us through our reading and discussion.*

### Assignments and Grading (1000 points)

1. **Journal reflections (25% of Grade – 10x25 points)** Weekly journal reflections will include two paragraphs of approx 100 words, in response to something thought-provoking from the week's content. One paragraph will summarize your intake from one of the week's content, and one paragraph will be a personal response to the selection. Reflections will be due each week in Canvas by noon on Thursdays, in preparation for the Thursday discussion.
2. **Fieldwork Project (15% - 150 points).** 1000-1250 words. Due February 19.
3. **Three Take-Home Exams/Essays (45% of Grade – 450 points; 15% each – 150 points).** The purpose of these tests (Due March 5, April 2, and April 30) is to assess your grasp of the materials under discussion at about one-third, two-thirds and at the end of the course.

4. **Attendance and Participation (15% - 150 points):**

*Presence:* 35 points

*Voice:* 50 points

*Quizzes:* 50 points (10x5pts, weekly quizzes, will take top 10)

You will miss points if you are not present to participate and write notes about each classroom conversation. Missing class, for whatever reason, diminishes the community of conversation among us.

*I want you to succeed - but what does success look like beyond a good grade?*

**Class Schedule**

Introduction to the Class

Tu January 10 - discuss Syllabus

Th January 12 - review Syllabus and cover Ground Rules: "how to study and talk about religion"

- ["Reading Charitably"](#)

- Peter Berger, "The Many Gods of Modernity" (will be available in Canvas)

I The New Testament

Tu January 17: Approaching the New Testament

Read: -Johnson, New Testament 1-35

**Journal reflections due weekly on Thursdays by noon.**

Th January 19: The Gospel of Mark

Read: -Johnson, 36-42

-The Gospel of Mark

Tu January 24: The Gospel of Matthew

Read: -Johnson, 42-48

-The Gospel of Matthew

Th January 26: The Gospel According to Luke

Read: -Johnson, 48-50

-The Gospel of Luke

*Differences and Distinctiveness in the Synoptic Gospels*  
(review Mark 1-8; Matthew 5-10; and Luke 5-9)

Tu January 31: Paul and his Letters

Read: -Johnson, 60-83

-Corinthians

-Romans  
-Galatians 1-6

Th February 2: The Gospel According to John  
Read: -Johnson, 95-113  
-The Gospel of John

*Fieldwork Project/Creative Review Assigned*

Tu February 7: The Gospel According to the Gnostics  
Read: -\*"The Gospel of Thomas,"  
at <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gosthom.html>  
-\*\*Elaine Pagels, "Gospels in Conflict: John and Thomas"  
in Beyond Belief, pp. 30-75

II The Historical Jesus

Th February 9: Borg/Wright "How do we know about Jesus?"  
Read: -Borg/Wright, "Introduction"  
-Borg, "Seeing Jesus: Sources, Lenses, and Method"  
-Wright, "Knowing Jesus: Faith and History"  
-And Matthew 1-2; Luke 1-2

Tu February 14: Borg/Wright "What Did Jesus Do and Teach?"  
Read: -Wright, "The Mission and Message of Jesus"  
-And: Mark 1-10; Matthew 5-7, 13; Luke 6, 10.25 - 16; John 6, 10, 15

Th February 16: Borg/Wright "What Did Jesus Do and Teach?" continued  
Read: -Borg, "Jesus Before and After Easter: Jewish Mystic and  
Christian Messiah"

**Fieldwork Project/Creative Review Due @ 11:59pm Sunday February 19**

Tu February 21: Borg/Wright, "The Death of Jesus"  
Read: -Borg, "Why was Jesus Killed?"  
-Wright, "The Crux of Faith"  
-And: Mark 11-16; Matthew 21-28; Luke 22-24; John 13, 18-21;  
1 Corinthians 15

Th February 23 Borg/Wright, "Was Jesus God?"  
Read: -Borg, "Jesus and God"  
-Wright, "The Divinity of Jesus"  
-And: 2 Corinthians 5, Rev 21-22

*First Take-Home Exam Assigned*

Tu February 28:

TBA

Th March 2: NO CLASS. Work on Take-Home Exam.

*First Take-Home Test Due at 11:59 pm on Sunday, March 5th*

### III The History of Christianity/Voices of Christian Traditions

Tu March 7:

The Early Church, 100-500

Read: -\*\*McGrath, Christianity, pp. 122-134

-\*The Apostles Creed, at <http://sacred-texts.com/chr/apocreed.htm>

-\*The Nicene Creed at <http://sacred-texts.com/chr/nicene.htm>

Th March 9:

The Middle Ages and the Renaissance,, 500-1500

Read: -\*\*McGrath, Christianity, pp. 135-148

Roman Catholicism/Eastern Orthodoxy

March 11-18: NO CLASS - SPRING BREAK

Tu March 21:

The Reformation, 1500-1650

Read: -\*\*McGrath, Christianity, 148-163

Protestantism/Anabaptist

Recommended:

\*Martin Luther, "Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation"

<https://web.stanford.edu/~jsabol/certainty/readings/Luther-ChristianNobility.pdf>

\*John Wesley's conversion,

<http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/john-wesleys-heart-strangely-warmed-11630227.html>

Th March 23:

The Modern Period, 1650-1914

Read: -\*\*McGrath, Christianity, pp. 163-180

Evangelicalism (liberal/fundamentalist split)

Tu March 28:

The Twentieth Century to the Present

Read: -\*\*McGrath, Christianity, pp. 181-198

Emergent/Deconstructing/Re-imagining

*Second Take-Home Test Assigned*

Th March 30:

TBA

***Second Take-Home Test Due at 11:59 pm on Sunday, April 2nd***

IV Contemporary Issues (tentative: may change based on class input)

Tu April 4:

1. World Christianities

Read: \*\*Philip Jenkins, "The Christian Revolution" in The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity, pp. 1-14.

Th April 6:

The Rise of the New Christianity

Read: \*\*Philip Jenkins, "The Rise of the New Christianity" in The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity, pp. 101-133.

Tu April 11:

2. Evangelical Christianity Today

a. Evangelicalism and Trump

Read: \*\*Gerardo Marti, "The Unexpected President: The 2016 Trump Election and White Evangelical Support" Chapter One pp. 1-23 in American Blindspot: Race, Class, Religion and the Trump Presidency (2020)

Th April 13:

b. Liberal vs. Conservative Divisions over Gender/Sexuality

Read: \*\*R. Marie Griffith, "Introduction" pp. vii-xx to Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics (2017)

Tu April 18:

3. Spiritual but not Religious

Read: \*New York Times,  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/us/examining-the-growth-of-the-spiritual-but-not-religious.html>

Third Take Home Test Assigned

Th April 20: TBA

Tu April 25: TBA

***Third Take-Home Exam Due at 11:59 pm on Sunday, April 30***