

Early Christianity: Diversity, Conflict, Self-Definition and Dominance

[Robert W. Allison](#)

Go directly to:

- [How to Use This Electronic Syllabus](#)
 - [The Calendar of Topics and Readings](#)
 - [Books on Reserve](#) in Ladd Library
 - [Summary of Course Requirements](#)
 - [The Early Christian Epistlographer](#)
 - [The Ladd Library Home Page](#)
 - [The Ladd Library On-Line catalog](#)
 - [How to cite sources found on the Internet](#)
-

Introduction to the Course

This course is a study of how the "Great Church" or the "Catholic Church" as it was known in the Middle Ages, emerged from the Jewish revitalization movement started by Jesus of Nazareth his family, and his following of disciples, apostles and believers. Many of the primary sources for this study belong to what is known in Christian tradition as "apostolic and patristic literature," the writings of the apostles and "fathers" of the church. In fact, we will read literature by and about women as well as men, including a variety of writings by or about women ascetics, poets, and heretics, and the prison diary of a woman martyr in the days before her execution, as she struggled to adjust to separation from her family and to internalize her new identity as a martyr. She had been sentenced to be eaten by wild beasts in a Roman arena.

In this study we are confronted by the paradox of a church which came into being through a series of crises and radical changes from its Jewish origins to claim that it preserved unchanged, as the state religion of the Roman empire, the teachings and beliefs of those Jewish apostles. That paradox accounts in part for the theme of the course, "diversity, conflict, self-definition, and dominance." The course attempts to answer questions about the variety of ways that early Christians understood themselves, how they interpreted their religious tradition and related it to their personal religious experience, how they defined their own purposes and standards of living and the purpose of the church, as they gradually brought into being and defined the teachings of the Catholic (universal) Church.

The themes of this course, "diversity, conflict, definition, and dominance," also reflect a modern reading of the history of Christian thought from its beginning through the early middle ages, like that presented by Chadwick, the author of one of the textbooks on [Library Reserve](#) for this course. The ancient writers, Luke (author of the Biblical *Gospel According to Luke* written in the late 1st century) and Eusebius (4th century), also wrote as historians, and offered early theories of the church's history which are quite different, but theories nevertheless. For example, for these writers the beginning of Christianity -- the era when Jesus

walked the earth as the Son of God incarnate -- was a time of perfect and ideal unity within the circle of the disciples and apostles and the first believers, not a time of diversity and confusion. For Luke, the subsequent era was characterized by the glorious spread of the church to encompass the world symbolized by Rome. Eusebius picked up this theme and carried it through to what he saw as the realization of this destiny -- the conversion of his patron, the Roman emperor, Constantine "the Great", to Christianity. Likewise, where modern scholars see the problem of heresy as a sociological phenomenon typical of strongly ideological or doctrinal movements, for those writers conflict and heresy were the results of the Devil's machinations against this glorious destiny.

During this semester we will follow Eusebius' history as we read the literature of both orthodox and heretical Christianity. We will juxtapose the traditional history derived from the writing of Luke and Eusebius with the stories and theories of the early Christians themselves. We will attempt to identify major developments in early Christian theology and tradition. At the same time, we will try to understand the numerous ways of being Christian which contended for dominance as the church strove to define itself, to establish its place in the world, and even to change how people understood the world.

This study of the writings of the early church is intended to introduce you to early church history and the Christian foundations of the middle ages. More than that, it is also intended to introduce you to ways of reading and thinking about the evidence that do justice to its diversity and its historical, psychological and sociological "otherness" from our own world.

The course presumes no prior knowledge of this literature nor any personal allegiance to the religious ideas expressed in this literature.

Summary of Objectives of the Course

1. To provide an opportunity to gain an understanding of the major religious ideas and theological developments of the early church.
2. To introduce some of the major and most influential writings of the first four centuries of Christian literature, which have played a formative role in the history of Western civilization.
3. To introduce as well with some of the "heretical" literature which has been discovered only recently, and to assess how that literature has enhanced our understanding of history and our interpretation of the "canonical" literature.
4. To explore several specific early regional and theological traditions (especially Jewish Christianity, Christian prophetism, Gnosticism, ascetic and monastic Christianity, and the evolution and understanding of the episcopacy (leadership by unmarried male bishops and popes)
5. To recover something of the history of female experience & understanding of early Christianity overwritten by the tradition of "patristic" and apostolic leadership
6. To investigate several early controversies, their impact on the development of the church, and how they were resolved (especially, conflicts with Judaism about the meaning of monotheism and the messiah, and internal controversies about the nature of Christ, creation, good and evil, the Christian understanding of human nature, and the powers and activities of demons and angels.
7. To provide experience in applying the above kinds of knowledge so that you will be able to relate your

knowledge to contemporary issues, such as questions about

- the relations between Judaism and Christianity
- the role of women in the leadership of the church
- relations between church and state
- relations between the church and other religions
- beginnings of the East-West split (between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism)

or think for yourself about classic theological theories about such matters as

- the nature of God and Satan
- the nature and role of divine Sophia (wisdom),
- human nature and the nature of the Christ
- the problem of evil

Communications may be addressed by e-mail to

[Robert W. Allison](mailto:Robert.W.Allison@bates.edu)

*Associate Prof. of Religion and
Chair of Classical & Medieval Studies*

URL: http://www.bates.edu/241_intro.html