

Religion 49: Christianity, Philosophy and History in the 19th Century.

Fall 2010

TTH 10:00-11:20 AM
Chapin 101

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Course description

This course is a selective examination of trends within the Christian intellectual tradition during the ‘long nineteenth century’. During this period, developments within philosophy, the study of history, and the ‘higher criticism’ of the Bible posed sharp challenges to many claims commonly regarded as essential to Christianity. Some thinkers within the Christian tradition refused to engage these critical voices or concerned themselves with building defenses around traditional faith; others conceded the integrity of the new scholarship and set about working towards a reformed Christianity in response to emerging scholarship.

At stake in these discussions was nothing less than the nature and the legitimacy of the Christian religion. What happens when historical and philosophical scholarship suggests that some of the most important claims upon which Christianity rests are untenable? Could Christianity stomach an understanding of its own history significantly at odds with traditional views, or was it necessary to resist secular inquiries into the past in order to preserve the faith? Might it be necessary to re-imagine what Christian self-understanding requires? What degree of ‘revision’ could Christianity withstand before lapsing into heresy?

The dominant narrative thread we will be following in this course will be the development of liberal Protestant thought in Germany, beginning with Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s controversial ethical reconstruction of religion and culminating with Adolf von Harnack’s retrieval of a Jesus-centered religion of ‘universal brotherhood’. But along the way we will also encounter a variety of disruptions and reflections of this narrative within Germany and elsewhere—Feuerbach’s strong challenge to the legitimacy of Christianity, Kierkegaard’s acerbic skepticism regarding the very project of ‘re-thinking’ the tradition, Hodge & Warfield’s development of the ‘Princeton doctrine’ of biblical inerrancy, and the varied fortunes of historical consciousness within Roman Catholic religious thought during what is now referred to as the ‘crisis of modernism’.

Textbooks

Textbooks for the course will be available from Amherst Books.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, tr. Crouter
Adolf Von Harnack, *What is Christianity?*

In addition to the textbooks, there will be a packet of readings available from the Religion Department.

Expectations

Students are expected to do all of the assigned readings before class, to attend all class sessions, and to actively participate in classroom discussion. There will be a midterm, a final examination, one 4-5 page paper due early in the semester, and one 8-10 page paper due towards the end of classes.

Exams will be a combination of identifications, short answers, and essay questions. The first paper will be primarily expository in nature. I will provide a list of suggested topics for the final paper; you are also invited to propose your own topic. Final papers are expected to combine exposition of an author’s thought (one or more) with evaluation.

Course policies

Absence policy: I will allow one unexcused absence per semester without penalty. Each unexcused absence thereafter will result in a significant grade penalty. Among valid reasons for requesting an excuse to miss class are illness; job interviews; missed or canceled airline flights (after vacations); and family or personal emergencies. Among non-valid reasons for requesting an excuse are alarm clock failures; conflicting college activities (curricular, co-curricular or extracurricular); leaving early for vacations; and roommates who do not wake you up in time for class.

Lateness policy: If you have a compelling reason for appearing late in class on a regular basis (such as needing to cross campus after another class) please make me aware of this. Important announcements regarding administrative matters are typically made at the beginning of class. If you are late to class, you are responsible for finding out what you may have missed.

Draft policy: I encourage the writing of multiple drafts, and am willing to read and comment on one rough draft per paper assignment. You will need to alert me ahead of time that you will be submitting a rough draft, and will need to allow sufficient time for me to read and comment on drafts in advance of paper deadlines. Use of the Writing Center's resources is encouraged.

Extension policy: I am likely to grant paper extensions if they are asked for well ahead of time. I consider two kinds of reasons acceptable for asking for an extension: first, to better manage your workload in cases where deadlines for assignments from various classes fall closely together; and second, in cases where an emergency arises which requires your immediate attention and prevents you from meeting the deadline. No extensions will be granted less than twenty-four hours in advance of a paper deadline except in cases of emergency. Papers that are received late (i.e. not received by either a standard or an extended deadline) will be penalized by a minimum of 1/3 of a letter grade and will receive minimal commentary.

Revision policy: I do not allow revisions of papers once they have been submitted in final form.

Grading policy

Final grades for the course will be calculated approximately as follows:

First paper: 20%
Midterm exam: 20%
Final paper: 30%
Final exam: 30%

Contribution to classroom discussion, unexcused absences, and repeated, unexplained lateness to class will also be taken into account in the calculation of final grades.

Students are expected to abide by the Amherst College Statement of Intellectual Responsibility:

Every person's education is the product of his or her own intellectual effort and participation in a process of critical exchange. Amherst cannot educate those who are unwilling to submit their own work and ideas to critical assessment. Nor can it tolerate those who interfere with the participation of others in the critical process. Therefore, the College considers it a violation of the requirements of intellectual responsibility to submit work that is not one's own or otherwise to subvert the conditions under which academic work is performed by oneself or by others.

COURSE SCHEDULE

September 7: Course introduction

I: Philosophical reflections on the nature of religion

Sep 9: J. G. Fichte, "On the Ground of our Belief in a Divine World-Governance" (1798)

Sep 14, 16, 21, 23: Schleiermacher, *Speeches on Religion* (1799)

Sep 27: First paper due

Sep 28, 30: Hegel, *Lectures in the Philosophy of Religion* (1827)

Oct 5, 7: Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (1843)

Oct 12, 14: Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (1844)

Oct 19: in-class midterm

II: Higher criticism and historicism

Oct 21, 26: David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus* (1839-40)

Oct 28: Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (1878)

Nov 2: A. A. Hodge & B. B. Warfield, "Inspiration" (1881) (packet)

Nov 4, 9: John H. Newman, *Essay on the Development of Doctrine* (1881)

Nov 11, 16: Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (1900)

III: Modernism and reaction

Nov 18, 30: Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church* (1902)

Nov 23, 25: Thanksgiving break

Dec 2: Pius X, encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907)

Dec 6: Second paper due

Dec 7, 9: George Tyrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (1908)

IV: Coda: Beyond the 'Historical Jesus'

Dec 14: Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (1896)

Final exam: self-scheduled during the exam period (Dec 18-22)