

Nicaea and its Legacy CH 6R1080

McMaster Divinity College

Fall term 2025

Monday

11:00am–12:50pm

Room: Cochran

Instructor: James R. Payton, Jr.

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Office hours: Monday, 1pm–3pm; Tuesday, 1pm–2pm, 3pm–4pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course focuses on the Trinitarian and Christological controversies from the first ecumenical council (Nicaea, 325 AD) through the fourth (Chalcedon, 451 AD). We consider what the concerns were as these controversies unfolded and how the issues were dealt with, studying the settings in which the controversies were conducted and the written contributions of the Church fathers involved. Extensive reading of primary sources and careful consideration of secondary ones in a seminar format invite a high level of student participation.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

Knowing...

- Learn the significance of this period for the history of Christian doctrine.
- Learn key figures who contributed to the articulation and defense of the Christian faith during this period.
- Learn and discern the distinct emphases of the Church fathers who engaged in these controversies.

Being...

- Develop a sense of how deeply the Christian faith is rooted in the outcomes of these controversies.
- Develop the ability to enter the intellectual world of the Church fathers of this period and “think their thoughts after them.”

Doing...

- Read and intelligently discuss assigned readings.
- Engage in scholarly and professional interaction with colleagues in collegial fashion.
- Prepare and present a scholarly research paper on a topic rooted in primary sources from this period.

REQUIRED READINGS:

Textbooks:

- John Behr, *The Nicene Faith, Part One: True God of True God*. The Formation of Christian Theology, volume 2, part 1. (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004). {→ B in the class schedule below.}
- _____. *The Nicene Faith, Part Two: One of the Holy Trinity*. The Formation of Christian Theology, volume 2, part 2. (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004). {→ B in the class schedule below.}
- Frances M. Young with Andrew Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background*, 2d ed. (Baker Academic, 2010). {→ Y in the class schedule below.}

Primary sources:

- Mark DelCogliano, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, and Lewis Ayres, *Works on the Spirit: Athanasius the Great and Didymus the Blind*. (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011).
- Edward R. Hardy, ed., *Christology of the Later Fathers*. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1954/2010). {→ H in class schedule below.}
- Hildebrand, Stephen M., trans. *St. Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit*. (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011).
- McGuckin, John Anthony, trans. *St. Cyril of Alexandria: On the Unity of Christ*. (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000).

Recommended Resource:

- Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. (Oxford University Press, 2004).

METHOD:

Instructor's Presentations:

In the initial class session, the professor will make a presentation for orientation purposes, to describe the significance of this period for the history of Christian doctrine and to explain how the class will proceed. In subsequent class sessions, presentations by the professor will be to get discussion of the assigned readings underway, respond to questions raised by students, or for focusing on another issue or question in the readings which has not yet been addressed in the class session.

Readings:

All readings assigned for a class session are to be completed before the class session begins. Students should bring their copies of the assigned readings for the session with them for ready reference as the class interacts with the readings.

Discussions:

Students are expected to engage consistently and insightfully in the discussions. They should come with observations about or questions regarding what they have read and be ready to engage with each other and the professor in a close interrogation of and careful listening to the readings.

REQUIREMENTS:

- Literature Review:** Students will develop an annotated bibliography of **20 articles in scholarly journals and/or chapters (in edited volumes) dealing with the 325 Council of Nicaea and its legacy** (on the importance of Nicaea for the articulation of Christological and Trinitarian doctrine, subsequent church history, and/or the development of historical theology). Each annotation should be approximately 100 words. The literature review will be approximately **2000 words**. This assignment is **due October 20** and will account for **25%** of the final grade.
- Research Essay:** Each student will prepare an academic thesis paper of approximately **5000 words**, on one (or more) of the Church fathers active in this period (or on a patristic topic from this period related to the student's area of study); the focus for this paper will be chosen in consultation with the professor. The paper is to be written at the level of a peer-reviewed journal article. This assignment is **due November 17** and will account for **40%** of the final grade.
- History of Doctrine Paper:** Students will prepare a paper engaging the question what is happening to the apostolic message transmitted through the Ante-Nicene Church during the period covered in this course. By its end (the Council of Chalcedon, 451AD), that message has come to be articulated with specific terminology and in creedal formulations embraced throughout the Church (and its subsequent history) as embodying the doctrine taught by the apostles. Undeniably, this all played a significant role in the *history of doctrine*. In this paper, students should reflect on and set forth what they perceive to be the intentions of those involved in these controversies. What was the significance they intended with such specific terminology and those creedal formulations *vis-à-vis* that apostolic message? Did they understand their endeavors as serving the *development* of doctrine, or was something else their purpose? How did they envision the specific terminology and creedal formulations would serve the task of passing on the apostolic message they had received? So, this boils down to the question, "What was the legacy of Nicaea for the history of doctrine?" Careful use of and reliance on the primary sources assigned and read in this course are expected. The paper should be **8–10 pages (approximately 2000–2500 words)**. It is **due December 8** and will account for **25%** of the final grade.
- Class participation:** Students will be expected to participate extensively and insightfully in class discussions. This will account for **10%** of the final grade.

GENERAL COMMENTS:

Academic Honesty

Academic dishonesty is not qualitatively different from other types of dishonesty. It consists of misrepresenting the ownership of written work by deception or by other fraudulent means. In an academic setting this may include any number of forms such as: copying or using unauthorized aids in tests, examinations; plagiarism, i.e., submitting work that is not one's own (regardless of the means of its production, including AI) but passing it off as if it is; submitting work for credit in a course for which credit is being or has already been given, unless the previously submitted work was presented as such to the instructor of the second course and has been deemed acceptable for credit by the instructor of that course; aiding and abetting another student's dishonesty; giving false information for the purposes of gaining admission or credit; giving false information for the purposes of obtaining deferred examinations or extension of deadlines; forging or falsifying McMaster University or McMaster Divinity College documents.

A special note about AI: You are expected to do your own thinking and to write your own papers, etc., and not to have AI do this work for you. There may be value in using an AI tool to help you locate and collate resources or to help you "tidy up" your English grammar, usage, and mechanics, especially if English is not your native language. However, using AI to create content for you and then submitting that content as if you created it is considered plagiarism (i.e., submitting work that is not one's own as if it is one's own) and is a violation of the academic honesty policy.

AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), the content of this course is intended to be accessible to all students who are enrolled in the course, including those with disabilities. If a student requires accommodation to participate fully in this course, that student is to contact SAS at McMaster University, who will then work directly with the McMaster Divinity College Registrar to negotiate reasonably appropriate accommodation for the student. The MDC Registrar will communicate with faculty regarding necessary accommodations. Please note that an accommodation is not retroactive and must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation.

Gender Inclusive Language

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as, for example, the following: NRSVue (2022), TEV/GNB/GNT (1976), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), NIV (2011), and the CEB (2011).

Bookstore

All required and recommended books for this class are available from the Hurlburt Family Bookstore located beside the entrance to the Nathaniel H. Parker Memorial Chapel of McMaster Divinity College. To purchase in advance, you may contact the bookstore manager, Bernice Quek, by phone at 416-620-2934 or 416-668-3434 (mobile); or by email at books@readon.ca. The Hurlburt Family Bookstore also carries other books and merchandise and is open throughout the academic year during posted hours.

Submitting Papers

Papers must be submitted at least 30 minutes before the beginning of the class on the day they are due. Students may be exempted from the late penalty of 5% per day (not including Sunday) if they attach to their paper a letter explaining the genuine emergency that delayed them. Late assignments (even ones with an extension) will not receive comments and constructive criticism from the professor.

All written work must conform to the *McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses*. Failure to use appropriate form will result in grade reductions. Further, failure to abide by the “Usage Guidelines” posted on Avenue to Learn by the instructor will result in grade reductions.

- Please turn off your cell phone and/or pager before class begins.
- Please do not attend class if you are ill and contagious (e.g., the flu or symptoms of Covid 19). Get in touch with other students in the course to catch up on the discussion that took place.
- If the instructor becomes ill and unable to lead the class in person, he will advise MDC accordingly and contact you all by email. In that eventuality, we will either conduct the class by electronic means or figure out how to make up the missed class.
- In the unlikely event that MDC needs to close for inclement weather on a Monday when we have class in this fall term, we will communicate by email how to make up the missed class.

CLASS SCHEDULE (dates when assignments are due are bolded, italicized, and marked with an asterisk [*]):

Sept. 8	Introduction to the course ... and presentation on complexity of “Nicaea”
Sept. 15	Basic orientations on Nicaea and its legacy H: 15–38 B: xv–xvii, 1–36 Patristic historians on Nicaea Y: vii–viii, 1–39

To the Council of Nicaea, 325

Sept. 22	Historical overview of the period B: 37–122 Participants in Nicaea B: 123–161 H: 329–342
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Sept. 29 Athanasius: earlier writings B: 163–207 H: 43–110

To the Council of Constantinople, 381

Oct. 6 Athanasius: anti-Arian writings B: 207–259 Y: 40–78
Cappadocian Fathers Y: 135–172

{Oct. 13 –17, MDC Reading Week: no class}

****October 20 *Literature Review due****

Basil of Caesarea B: 263–324 *On the Holy Spirit* (11–122)

Oct. 27 Gregory of Nazianzus B: 325–379 H: 113–193

Nov. 3 Gregory of Nyssa B: 409–451 H: 235–325

Nov. 10 Issues at the Council:
The Holy Spirit *Works on the Spirit* (11–227)

****Nov. 17 *Research Essay due****

Apollinarianism Y: 241–251 H: 194–232 B: 379–408 B: 451–458
Synodical Letter of the Council of Constantinople H: 343–345

To the Council of Ephesus, 431

Nov. 24 Cyril/Nestorius Y: 251–261 Y: 275–322 H: 346–354
On the Unity of Christ (9–133)

To the Council of Chalcedon, 451

Dec. 1 Formula of Union (433) H: 355–358
Theodoret of Cyrus Y: 322–343
Leo/Eutyches H: 359–374
Other significant figures of the period Y: 173–222

****Dec. 8 *History of Doctrine Paper Due****

Contending for the Faith B: 458–481

Please note: This syllabus is the property of the instructor and is prepared with currently available information. The instructor reserves the right to make changes and revisions up to and including the first day of class.

Bibliography for From Nicaea to Chalcedon: Contending for the Faith

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- Bantu, Vince L. *A Multitude of All Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity's Global Identity*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020.
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