

The Holy Spirit in the Early Church
TH 3P1230/Th 5P1190
McMaster Divinity College

Fall 2026

Tuesday, 4:00–5:50 pm

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Course Description:

It was not until the fourth century that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit's ontological status was settled through the promulgation of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381). The key Church Fathers who wrote about the Holy Spirit in this era were Athanasius of Alexandria, Didymus the Blind, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. This course will provide a historical survey of these Church Fathers' writings on the Holy Spirit. Earlier treatments of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit from Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, and Origen will also be examined.

Course Objectives:

Knowing

- to have thorough knowledge of the development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the early church and the concept of the Trinity in these texts.
- to recognize the early church fathers' contributions to the church's doctrine of the Holy Spirit as a distinct person in the Trinity.
- to become familiar with the church fathers' writings on this subject.

Being

- to gain a sense of the foundational works of the important church fathers who wrote on the divinity of the Holy Spirit.
- to acquire the ability to enter the intellectual world of the church fathers.

Doing

- to be able to engage with primary and historical theological sources.
- to develop the ability to evaluate how the church fathers intended to teach and defend the church's faith against heretics.
- write and present an effective scholarly research paper on any primary text.

Required Books

- Yves Congar, *I believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Seabury, 1983).
- R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988).
- Haitham A. Issak. *The Spirit of Truth: Johannine Pneumatology in the Letters of Athanasius to Serapion* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2023).

Assignments:

- Presentation: Students will present in class on the material covered. The presentation will include an analysis of the material. Students must also prepare two questions for discussion with the rest of the class.
- Class participation: Class participation is essential. Students should read the material before class and actively participate in the discussion.
- Two research papers:

The first paper should be approximately 5–7 pages in length and cover a subject listed in the syllabus. This paper is due on October 20.

The second paper should be approximately 10–15 pages on the Trinitarian theology of one of the church fathers listed in the syllabus. This paper is due on December 15.

- Grading:
 - Presentation: 20%
 - Participation: 15%
 - First paper: 30%
 - Second paper: 35%

Course Schedule:

September 15

- Syllabus
- Introduction to the course

September 22

The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament

- The meaning of *rûah* & God's *Ruach* in Action
- Alasdair Heron, *The Holy Spirit in the Bible*, 2–22
- Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. I, 3–14
- Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 25–28

The Holy Spirit in the New Testament

- Yves Congar, vol. I, 15–62
- Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 28–36

September 29

The Holy Spirit and the Trinitarian Mystery

- Congar, vol. III, 3–43
- Haykin, *The Spirit of God*, 93–97
- Issak, *The Holy Spirit*, 200–221

October 6

The Holy Spirit in History & The Holy Spirit and the Church Fathers (Precursors to the fourth century)

- Ignatius of Antioch, *Romans* 5.1; *Philadelphians* 7.1; *Ephesians* 9.1; *Magnesians* 13.1
- Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 2; 3; 4; 8; 9; 12; 13; 30
- Origen, *On First Principles* 1.3.2; 1.1.3; 1.3.5; 1.3.7; 1.5.2–4; 1.8.5; 2.7.2; 4.3.15
- Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; 3.4.1; 3.17.1; 3.18.3; 3.24.1; 4.20.1; 5.8; 5.9.1–3
- Yves Congar, vol. I, 65–114

October 12–16 Reading Week

October 20

The Syriac Fathers on the Holy Spirit

Symbols

- Aphrahat, *Demonstrations*
- Demonstration VI, *On Covenanters*
- Odes of Solomon, 11.1–3; 28.1–8; 13.1–4
- Ephrem the Syrian, *On Faith* 10. 17; 38.12; 77.20–22; 46.12; 51.7–8; *On Virginity* 7.5
- Philoxenus of Mabbug, *On the Dwelling of the Holy Spirit*
- Stanley Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Eastern Christian Tradition*, 169–207
- Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 23–25
- Issak, *The Holy Spirit*, 7–18
- Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, 101–133

October 27

Didymus the Blind: *On the Holy Spirit*

- Didymus the Blind, *On the Holy Spirit*
- Hanson, 653–658
- DelCogliano. *Works on the Spirit: Athanasius and Didymus*, 31–50; 143–227

November 3

The Holy Spirit in the Arian Controversy

- A definition of heresy, the positive side of heresy, and why heresies?
- Hanson, 129–172
- Issak, *The Spirit of Truth*, 19–29
- Harold Brown, *Heresies*, 2–6

The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Athanasius to Serapion

- Shapland, *The Letters of St. Athanasius to Serapion*: Text
- Issak, *The Spirit of Truth*, 54–65
- Haykin, *The Spirit of God*, 59–63

November 10

Tomus Antiochenos: Synod 362

- *Tomus Antiochenos*: Text
- Hanson, 639–653
- Issak, *The Spirit of Truth*, 29–35

November 17

The Characteristics of the Holy Spirit, Council of Constantinople 381

- Hanson, 791–823
- Issak, *The Spirit of Truth*, 35–44
- Franz Dünzel, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, 123–131

November 24

The Cappadocian Fathers on the Holy Spirit: Basil of Caesarea

- Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*
- John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, vol. 2, part 2, 305–318
- Hanson, 676–699
- Haykin, *The Spirit of God*, 104–113

December 1

The Cappadocians on the Holy Spirit: Gregory of Nazianzus

- Gregory of Nazianzus, *Fifth Theological Oration (Oration 31)*
- Hanson, 699–715
- John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, vol. 2, part 2, 360–370
- Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the knowledge of God*, 153–186

December 8

The Cappadocian Fathers on the Holy Spirit: Gregory of Nyssa

- Gregory of Nyssa, *Against the Macedonians: On the Holy Spirit*
- Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Trinity*
- Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Early Church Fathers*, 19–26, 35–46
- Hanson, 715–730
- John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, vol. 2, part, 2, 414–415

- Lucian Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of the Divine Persons*, p. 109–117

December 15

The Term Τριάς (Trinity)

- The Term ἴδιον τοῦ Λόγου (Proper to the Word)
- The Term Μία Ενέργεια (One Activity)
- The Term Παραδείγματα (Images or Symbols)
- Issak, *The Spirit of Truth*, 200–210
- Fountain-River
- The Uncreated Spirit
- The Nature of the Spirit
- The Uniqueness
- The Indwelling
- Haykin, *The Spirit of God*, 71–92

For Further Reading:

Anatolios, Khaled. *Athanasius: The Early Church Fathers*. New York: Routledge, 2004

Burgess M. Stanley. *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions*. Massachusetts: Peabody, Hendrickson, 1984.

_____. *The Holy Spirit: Eastern Christian Traditions*. Massachusetts: Peabody, Hendrickson, 1989.

_____. *The Holy Spirit: Medieval Roman Catholic and Reformation Traditions (Six–Sixteen Centuries)*. Massachusetts: Peabody, Hendrickson, 1997.

Behr John. *The Nicene Faith: Formation of Christian Theology*. Part 2. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004.

Beeley, Christopher A. *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the knowledge of God*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

_____. “The Holy Spirit in the Cappadocians: Past and Present.” *Modern Theology*, 26, 1 (2010), 90–119.

Brock, Sebastian. *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*. Kalamazoo, Mich: Cistercian, 1987.

Brown, Harold. *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy From the Apostles to the Present*. Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1988.

Campbell, C. Theodor. "The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Theology of Athanasius." *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 27, 4 (1974), 408-440.

Congar, Yves. *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*. Translated by Smith David. New York: Crossroad, 1983.

DelCogliano, Mark, et al., trans. *Works on the Spirit: Athanasius and Didymus*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011.

Dünzl, Franz. *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church*. London: T & T Clark, 2007.

Heron, Alasdair I.C. *The Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit in the Bible, the History of Christian Thought, and Recent Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983.

Hanson, R. B. C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381*. Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2005.

Haykin, Michael A G. "And who is the Spirit" Basil of Caesarea's Letters to the Church at Tarsus," *Vigiliae Christianae*, 41, 4 (1987), 377-385.

_____. "The Spirit of God.' The Exegesis of 1 Cor 2:10-12 by Origen and Athanasius" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35, 6 (1982): 513-528.

_____. *The Spirit of God: the exegesis of 1 and 2 Corinthians in the Pneumatomachian Controversy of the Fourth Century*. New York: Brill, 1994.

Issak A. Haitham. *The Spirit of Truth: Johannine Pneumatology in the Letters of Athanasius to Serapion*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2023.

Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religious*. Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004.

Lucian Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of the Divine Persons*, Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Meredith Anthony. *Gregory of Nyssa: The Early Church Fathers*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Shapland C. R. B. *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit: Translate with Introduction and Notes*. New York: Epworth, 1951.

Swete, Henry Barclay. *The Holy Spirit in the Ancient Church; A Study of Christian Teaching in the Age of the Fathers*. Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1966.

Satyavrata, Ivan. *The Holy Spirit: Lord and Life Giver*. Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009.

Thomas Forsyth, Torrance. *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement*.
Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994.

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).

Illness Policy

If a student cannot attend class due to illness, please do not hesitate to contact the instructor, and if you are contagious, please refrain from attending class. The absent student will receive a summary of the material covered in that class to ensure they do not miss any important information. If the instructor feels unwell, the class may be conducted via livestreaming (Zoom) instead of in-person attendance.

The Inclement Weather

On a snow day when the university is closed, classes and exams will be cancelled and rescheduled. Assignments due on that day will be postponed. If it is possible to conduct class on Zoom during a snow day, we will proceed with that.

Highly Recommended for Online (Asynchronous) Courses

Presence and Meaningful Participation

Presence and participation in this course are expected. Faculty know from many years of experience that a student's level of presence and participation in the course will impact how well she or he will score in the course. Although there are exceptions to this rule of thumb, low levels of presence and participation tend to translate to low grades; mediocre presence and participation tend to translate to mediocre grades; and high levels of presence and participation tend to translate to higher grades.

A word needs to be said about what constitutes "presence" (attendance) and "participation" in an asynchronous course. Students must establish a record of participation in academically related activities to meet the expected level of attendance and meaningful participation. Be aware that merely logging into the online class is not, by itself, sufficient as a demonstration of attendance and participation by the student. "Academically related activities" certainly includes participation in and completion of the course requirements that are described below. Additionally, just as students are expected to engage with the course content/materials throughout the week outside of the learning management system (A2L), so also students are expected to engage one another in formative dialogue "outside of class." This is an important part of belonging to and maintaining a community of learning and is a staple ingredient in what constitutes "presence."

Online Etiquette

It is critical in any MDC class that students show respect for classmates and the instructor. This is even truer in the online environment because many of the non-verbal cues that we

use to interpret what a person is communicating to us are not present online (except, perhaps in video posts). Therefore, it is especially critical that we be mindful of how our words will be interpreted by those who are reading them. As the instructor of the course, it is my responsibility to monitor communications to ensure that all students feel comfortable expressing their views in a respectful manner. Most if not all courses at MDC are devoted to the interpretation of Scripture. Invariably there will be disagreements; these disagreements must be discussed and negotiated in a respectful manner. This applies to individual and group communications involving the instructor and the others enrolled in the course. The instructor will expect that you will give some thought to your postings. Excessive postings are also frowned upon because these amount to dominating the discussion. Please limit your postings to less than 200 words. Instructors reserve the right to ask students to take a step back to allow others discussion time if she or he feels that an individual is dominating the discussion. In your responses, please try to be clear which point your response refers to. Students who violate these guidelines may be dismissed from class.

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.

Note: This syllabus is the property of the instructor and has been developed using the most up-to-date information available. The instructor retains the right to make changes and revisions up to and including the first day of class.