



McMaster Divinity
College

MAJOR ISSUES IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY CH 6R1100

McMaster Divinity College

Fall Semester 2026
Wednesday, 11:00am–12:50pm

Instructor: Gordon L. Heath

gheath@mcmaster.ca

Office Hours (#221): Monday 11:00am-1:00pm; Wednesday 9:00-11:00am (Zoom or inperson)

The mission of McMaster Divinity College is to develop effective evangelical Christian leaders for the Church, academy, and society through graduate-level education, spiritual development, and vocational formation.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course examines a wide variety of critical events that have shaped the course of Christian history over the past two thousand years. Specific events and individuals will be examined, as will be broader movements that impacted the church. The goal is for doctoral students to deepen their awareness of the ways in which historians have understood the events over the centuries, as well as sharpen their own approach to historical and theological research.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

Knowing

- to provide students with a broad understanding of how the church has grown and developed over the centuries
- to examine specifically the critical events in the church's history that shaped significantly subsequent generations

Being

- to explore (and ultimately appreciate) the different expressions of spirituality as practiced by the church throughout history
- to create an awareness of the breadth and diversity of the church, and provide a sense of "place" within the many church traditions

Doing

- to develop an ability to assess documents and situations from an historical perspective
- to acquire an ability to assess textbooks and monographs for the author's assumptions and methodology
- to develop critical research and writing skills

REQUIRED TEXTS:

- Noll, Mark. *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. Baker Books (Third Edition, 2012).
- Eusebius. *Church History: A New Translation with Commentary*. Paul L. Maier, ed. (paperback is fine)
- Jenkins, Philip. *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How It Died*. New York: HarperOne: 2009)
- Gordon L. Heath. *Doing Church History: A User-friendly Introduction to Researching the History of Christianity*. Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2008.

All required textbooks 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. Of course, you can purchase your books anywhere, but I encourage you to support our local bookstores.

BIBLIOGRAPHY (*not* required for purchasing):

The following is a list of a few books the professor has found helpful on the course's subject matter. This list contains suggestions for supplementary reading only, and the books are not required for the course.

- Christopher Baumer. *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*. London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2016.
- Peter Brown. *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*. Blackwell, 1996.
- Henry Chadwick. *The Early Church (Revised Edition)*. London: Penguin, 1993.
- Richard Fletcher. *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Michael Green. *Evangelism and the Early Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.
- Hans-Joachim Klimkeit. *Christians in Asia before 1500*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.
- Carter Lindberg. *The European Reformations*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996.

- Diarmaid MacCulloch. *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. London: Allen Lane, 2009.
- Thomas F. Madden. *The New Concise History of the Crusades*. Lanham/New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.
- Samuel Hugh Moffett. *A History of Christianity in Asia: Volume 1, Beginnings to 1500*. San Francisco: Harper, 1992.
- Thomas C. Oden. *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2007.
- Jenkins, Philip. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (Third Edition, 2011).
- Rodney Stark. *The Rise of Early Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

An older but helpful and accessible set of books on this subject are from the six-volume set on the expansion of Christianity by Kenneth Scott Latourette:

- *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: The First Five Centuries*
- *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: The Thousand Years of Uncertainty, 500-1000*
- *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: Three Centuries of Advance, 1500-1800*

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 Generative 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 Generative AI: Students are expected to do their own thinking and to write their own papers, etc. Generative AI is not to be used to do this work for students. Using AI to produce content then submitting that content as if the student produced 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.

Additionally, although there may be value in using an AI tool to correct mistakes in English grammar, usage, and mechanics, Generative AI is not to be used for translating from native language to English. All degree programs at MDC are taught in English language. Students are expected to be sufficiently proficient in English to engage fully in academic discourse in these programs.

GuardMe Statement

Students at McMaster Divinity College have access to the GuardMe Student Support Program (GMSSP), which offers free, confidential mental health and wellness support 24/7. Through the program, students can connect with counsellors, access helpful tools and resources, and receive support anytime, from anywhere. Support is available by phone (1-844-451-9700) or visit gmssp.org to download the Student Support App.

AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), McMaster Divinity College (MDC) is committed to supporting a learning environment that is inclusive and accessible to all students, including those with disabilities. Students who require academic accommodations to participate fully in this course must register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS) (<https://sas.mcmaster.ca/>) of McMaster University. SAS will work directly with the MDC Registrar to ensure reasonably appropriate accommodations are in place. Students with accommodations must use the SAS portal to activate the accommodations relevant to each course at the start of each term they are enrolled in. This will generate a notification to course instructors outlining the activated accommodations for the student in their course. Please note that accommodations must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation. Accommodations will be implemented once the faculty member has been notified. Accommodations are not retroactive and will not be applied to coursework or activities that have already concluded.

Contact Information:

- Student Accessibility Services General Inquiries: sas@mcmaster.ca
- Roksana Sobota (SAS Representative for MDC): sobotar@mcmaster.ca
- MDC Registrar: mdcreg@mcmaster.ca

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

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Absence Due to Illness

If you must miss class due to an illness, you must contact the professor as soon as possible. Likewise, if the professor should become ill, he will communicate via A2L about how we will make up class sessions.

Inclement Weather

If on a class meeting day MDC closes due to inclement weather, the professor reserves the right to move the lessons and, where possible, class activities for the week to A2L (asynchronous format). This will help to ensure that we stay on target in the course.

Other

Please turn off cell phone and/or pager before the class begins. Please do not attend class if ill and contagious (e.g. the flu).

GRADING:

- Causation in History Position Paper (10%)
- Seminar #1 (20%)
- Seminar #2 (20%)
- Research Paper (40%)
- Participation and Reading (10%)

COMMENTS ON ASSIGNMENTS:

Due dates are in the class schedule below. Here is a brief summary of assignments - further instruction will be given in the opening class.

- Causation in History Position Paper (10%)

Students will write a five-page position paper on their personal position regarding the ability to discern God's actions in history.

- Seminar #1 and Seminar #2 (20% + 20%)

Students will lead two seminar sections of the course. Seminars are chosen in discussion with the professor, and each seminar is to be organized around one of the following categories:

Authority/Identity

- eg. scripture, tradition, structure/governance, unions and divisions

Evangelism/Missions/Culture

- eg. methods, periods, movements, gospel versus culture, ethics

Church/State

- eg. partnership/odds, violence/coercion/war, Christendom? (what kind)?

Christian Life

- eg. spirituality, renewal/reform, liturgy, rites

Justice

- eg. war/genocide, race, gender, social ills, family

Global Church

- eg. West-East-North-South, rise and declines

Theology

- eg. retrieval/ressourcement, discovery, explanation, comparison

Length of the seminar will be determined by the number of students enrolled in the course. Students can select seminar subjects that relate to their areas of research interest. Presentations require a single-sheet handout for the class with an outline on one side and a bibliography on the other. (Student's presentation notes will be submitted to professor but will not be graded for styleguide – this submission is solely so that the professor can get a glimpse of the ways in which students have prepared for the presentation.)

- Research Paper (40%)

Students will write a 25-page research paper on a subject selected in discussion with the professor. Students will present the results of their research in class.

- Participation and Reading Complete (10%)

CLASS SCHEDULE:

Sept 16: Introduction to Course; Providence and Causation in History

Sept 23: Problems (sources and historian), Methodological Issues

**Position Paper Due*

Sept 30: Church/State: Conversion of Constantine and Its Impact

Oct 7: Authority/Identity: Canon, Councils, Creeds, and Patriarchs

Oct 14: *Reading Week – No Class*

Oct 21: Student Seminars

Oct 28: Student Seminars

Nov 4: Justice: Catastrophes and Genocide

Nov 11: Student Seminars

Nov 18: Student Seminars

Nov 25: TBD

Dec 2: Future Trends and Possibilities

Dec. 9: Research Paper Presentations

**Research Papers Due*

Dec 16: Research Paper Presentations

**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.**