

Athanasius of Alexandria: Defender of Faith

TH 6R1100

McMaster Divinity College

Winter 2027

Wednesday, 11:00–12:50 pm

Instructor: John Haitham Issak, PhD

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Course description

Athanasius of Alexandria was a leading figure in the early church in the fourth century. His name always comes to mind when recalling the Arian controversy, since he played a significant role in that conflict and in his fight against the heresy of the Pneumatomachi at the close of the Arian controversy. His thought represented the church's fundamental teaching against the Arians and the Pneumatomachi, both of whom caused instability in the early church. In general, most of his works were written in response to theological controversies, including Arianism, which denied the Son's divinity, and the Tropici or Pneumatomachi, who opposed the Holy Spirit's divinity. This course will examine his main writings in detail and discuss their importance for the fundamental theological issues of the fourth century.

Course Objectives:

Knowing

- to become familiar with one of the key church leaders' writings in the fourth century.
- to gain a thorough knowledge of the important works of Athanasius of Alexandria and a sense of his contribution to theology and how he engaged in these controversies.
- learn and appreciate the importance of this period of church history for church doctrine.

Being

- to have a sense of how the Christian faith is rooted and established as an outcome of all these controversies in the early church.
- Students gain an appreciation for the church fathers' writings, which were intended to defend the church's faith and to establish the church's doctrines and creeds.

Doing

- to be able to explain the gradual development of Trinitarian theology during that important period in the early church, especially as he positioned the Holy Spirit fully within the Godhead.
- write and present an academic research paper on any topic mentioned in the primary sources.

Required Books

- Schaff Philip and Wace Henry (ed). *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*. Second Series. Vol. IV. Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2004.
- Anatolios, Khaled. *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*. New York: Routledge, 1998
- ———. *Athanasius: The Early Church Fathers*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Shapland, C. R. B, trans., *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*. London: Epworth, 1951.

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 7–10 pages in length and cover a subject listed in the syllabus. This paper is due on February 24.

The second paper should be approximately 15–20 pages on a subject selected in consultation with the instructor. This paper is due on April 14.

Grading:

- Presentation: 15%
- Participation: 10%
- First paper: 35%
- Second paper: 40%

Course Schedule

January 13

- Syllabus
- Introduction

January 20

Life, Works, theology of Athanasius

- Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 1–86
- Issak, *The Spirit of Truth*, 45–53

January 27

Against the Heathen (Contra Gentes)

De Incarnatione (On the Incarnation)

- Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1–30
- Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 31–67

February 3

The Arian Controversy & the Council of Nicaea 325

A definition of heresy

The positive side of heresy

Why heresies?

What is a council?

- Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 74–85
- Christopher Belitto, *The General Councils*, 4–15
- Harold Brown, *The Image of Christ*, 2–6
- J. W. C. Wand, *The Four Councils*, 1–20

February 10

Apology (Apologia Contra Arianos)

Defence of the Nicene Council (de Decretis)

- Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 97–147
- Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 149–172

February 15–19 Reading Week

February 24

Against the Arians (Orations Contra Arianos)

- Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 303–447

March 3

Tomus Antiochenos: Synod 362

- *Tomus Antiochenos*: Text
- Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 481–486
- Hanson, 639–653
- Issak, *The Spirit of Truth*, 29–35
- Harold Brown, *The Image of Christ*, p. 62

March 10

Vita Antonii – Life of Anthony

- Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 188–221
- Brian Brennan, Athanasius “Vita Antonii,” 209–227

March 17

The Letters of Athanasius to Serapion

- Shapland, *The Letters of St. Athanasius to Serapion*
- Issak, *The Spirit of Truth*, 54–65
- Haykin, *The Spirit of God*, 59–63
- Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 212–233

March 24

Athanasius' Understanding of Scripture and Tradition

- Hermeneutical Principles
- Amos 4:13; 1 Timothy 5:21
- The Philosophical term ὁμοούσιος (of one substance)
- Trinity
- Issak, *The Spirit of Truth*, 164–210

March 31

The Festal Letters

- Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 506–553

April 7

The Personal Letters

- Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 555–580

April 14

Athanasius Christology and Trinitarian Theology

- Torrance, “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity according to St Athanasius,” 395–405
- Edwards, “Athanasius' Letters to Serapion,” 41–64

For Further Reading

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

_____. *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

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

Brian Brennan. “Athanasius' Vita Antonii. A sociological Interpretation.” *Vigiliae Christianae*, 39, No. 3 (1985) 209–227.

Butler, Alban. *Lives of the Saints*. New York: Kennedy, 1963.

- Barnes, Timothy D. *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Belitto, Christopher M. *The General Councils: A History of the Twenty-One Church Councils from Nicaea to Vatican II*. New York: Paulist Press, 2002.
- Bush, R. Wheler. *St. Athanasius: His Life and Times*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1912.
- Chadwick, Henry. *The Early Church*. Grand Rapids, MI, 1967.
- Edwards, Denis. "Athanasius' Letters to Serapion: resource for a twenty-first century theology of God the Trinity." *Phronema* 29 (2014) 41–64.
- Döpp, Stegmar and Gerllings, Wilhelm. *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature*. New York, NY: Crossroad, 2000.
- Heron I. C. Alasdair. *The Holy Spirit*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1985.
- Ferguson, Everett. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*. Second Edition: New York; London, Routledge, 1999.
- Gwynn, M. David. *The Eusebians: The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of the 'Arian Controversy'*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- González, L. Justo. *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 1. The Early Church to the Dawn of Reformation*. New York: HarperCollins, 1984.
- Hanson, R. B. C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy* 318-381. Grand Rapids, MI, 2005.
- Issak A. Haitham. *The Spirit of Truth: Johannine Pneumatology in the Letters of Athanasius to Serapion*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023.
- Lewis C. S. *On the Incarnation*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. 2011.
- Schaff Philip and Wace Henry (ed). *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*. Vol. 4. MA: Peabody, 2004.
- Socrates, *History of the Church*. No pages. Online: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>
- Torrance, Thomas F. "The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity according to St Athanasius." *Anglican Theological Review* 71 (1989) 395–405.
- Young M. Frances, and Teal Andrew, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon, A Guide to the Literature and its background*. 2nd ed. Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1983.

Wand J. W. C. *The Four Councils*. London: Faith Press, 1951.

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.