Early Christian Spirituality

TH 3P1240/Th 5P1200

McMaster Divinity College

Winter 2027

Monday, 9:00–10:50 pm

Instructor: John Haitham Issak, PhD
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Course Description:

The spirituality of the early Church was marked by a communal life, by prayer, by love for others, by courage in bearing witness to Christ, by asceticism and detachment from the world, and by a dependence upon the Holy Spirit and His work within each person in service, worship, and daily life. No spiritual work can be done without the presence of the Holy Spirit. The course will discuss the spiritual practices and theology of the early Church, focusing on themes of spiritual life and exploring the key figures who enriched this field through their writings and spiritual practice. It will examine the origins of the various spiritualities in the early Church, the Church Fathers who wrote about spirituality, and the practical foundations of spiritual life and holiness through a relationship with God, offering an overview of spiritual development in early Church life.

Course Objectives:

Knowing

- to gain broad knowledge of spirituality in the Early Church and to understand the spiritual approaches in the texts of various Church Fathers.
- to discover the profound relationship between theology and spirituality.
- to learn the importance of the roots of Christian spirituality as described by the church fathers who wrote on this subject.
- to gain familiarity with the various texts that explain the early church's spirituality.

Being

- to develop a sense of early Christian spirituality and of the importance of a spiritual-growth approach to the relationship with God by reading these texts.
- to explore the various spiritual texts written by many church fathers during the Patristic period.

Doing

- to be able to interpret these texts, which is needed today to serve others, and to develop a pattern for one’s own spirituality.

Required Books

- Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1987.
- ———. *Spirituality in Syriac Tradition*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012.
- Clément Olivier. *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*: *Text and Commentary*. New York, NY: New City Press, 1995.

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 February 24.

  The second paper should be approximately 10–15 pages on a subject selected in consultation with the instructor. This paper is due on April 12.

  Grading:

  - Presentation: 15%
  - Participation: 15%
  - First paper: 30%
  - Second paper: 40%

Course Schedule

January 11
- Syllabus
- An introduction to Early Christian Spirituality
- A survey of Patristic Spirituality
- Clément. *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 13–57

January 18
<u>What is spirituality? The importance of spirituality, *Shaphutho*: limpidity (of heart), Life in God</u>
- Ephrem the Syriac Hymns: *Against Heresies* 29,4,9; *On the Church* 2,9,1; 43,1; 51, 3; *On Nativity* 1,82; 3,8; 4,65; *On Virginity* 15,3
- Clément. *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 58–94

January 25
The Early Church Fathers

- Ignatius of Antioch: Letters
- The spirituality of Martyrdom, the imitation of Christ
- Schoedel, William R. *Ignatius of Antioch*

February 1
Aphrahat: Demonstrations
Inner chamber, spirituality of the heart, *bnay qyomo*, Christ' teaching on prayer, the interior combat

- Demonstration II, *On Love* 2, 11–12, 17–19
- Demonstration III (3), *On Fasting*, 1, 2
- Demonstration IV (4), *On Prayer*, 1–2, 4, 7, 10–11, 13, (types of prayers) 16–17, (pure prayer) 18
- Demonstration IX, *On Humility*
- Demonstration VI, *On Covenanters*, 1, 4, 6–8, 20
- Demonstration VII.2, 3, *On the Penitent*
- Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, p. 2–32
- Lehto Adam, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat*
- Clément. *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 130–148

February 8
Odes of Solomon

- Odes 8. Fruits of the Lord.
- Odes 9. The Wreathed-Crown of the True Covenant.
- Odes 12. The Ineffable Word
- Odes 13. The Lord is our Mirror.
- Odes 29. The Lord is my hope.
- Odes 30. The Lord's Living Spring.
- Odes 37. The lips of my Heart.
- Odes 40. The Lord's Odes of Immortality.
- James Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*.

February 15–19 Reading Week

February 22
Ephrem the Syriac
Spiritual mirror, the inner eye

- Homily on our Lord 1–2
- Homily on Faith 10. 1–22; 20
- Letter to Publius 1–2
- Commentary on the Diatessaron XXI. 15, 17
- Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, p. 30–38

- Brock Sebastian, “The Imagery of the Spiritual Mirror in Syriac Literature,” p. 1–17

March 1
Book of Steps
The way of the greater commandments
- Chapter VI. *On those who are made perfect and continue to grow*.
- Chapter VIII. *On one who gives all he has to feed the poor*.
- Chapter XI. *On the hearing of the Scriptures*.
- Chapter XVIII. *On the Upright and the Perfect.*
- Chapter XIX. *On the Discernment of the Way of Perfection*.
- Chapter XIX. 2–3
- Chapter XVIII. *On the Tears of Prayer*
- Chapter XX. *On the Difficult Steps that are on the Road of the City of our Lord*.
- *Shaphutho*, 22,4; 10,4
- Robert Kitchen, *The Book of Steps*: *The Syriac Liber Graduum*.

March 8
Athanasius of Alexandria
- *Life of Anthony* (*Vita Antonii*): Text
- *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, p. 188–221
- Brennan, “Dating Athanasius’ Vita Antonii,” p. 52–54

March 15
Gregory of Nyssa
- *The Life of St. Macrina*: Text
- *The Life of Moses*: Text
- Ferguson & Malherbe, *Gregory of Nyssa*: *The Life of Moses*
- Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, p. 78–85
- Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa ancient and* [*post*] *modern*, p. 125–134; 200–219
- Anthony Meredeth, *Gregory of Nyssa*: *The Early Church Fathers*, p. 87–128

March 22
Basil of Caesarea
Humility, what is humility?
- *Homily* 20.1, 3, 4, 6–7
- *On the Holy Spirit*: Text

March 29
Philoxenus of Mabbug

- *On the indwelling of the Holy Spirit*, p. 102–127
- Excerpt on Prayer 2–4, 128–131
- A letter sent to a monastery: to a person newly left the world and became a monk
- Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, p. 101–131

Apri 5
Gregory of Nazianzus
Preaching purification, preaching pastoring
- *Oration* 2, 5
- Brian Matz, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, p. 37–52; 53–71

April 12
Isaac of Nineveh
Humility, prayer, perfection
The Way of Solitary, tears, prayer
- From discourses: III, VIII, XVIII, LXIII, LXXIV, XXII
- Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, p. 241–301
- Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*. Ch. II, IV, V, VI.
- Clément. *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 181–229

For Further Reading

Athanasius, *The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Robert C. Gregg. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1980.

Adam, Lehto. *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat*, *the Persian Sage*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias press, 2010.

Alfeyev, Hilarion. *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, Cistercian Studies 175. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2001.

Basil the Great. *On the Holy Spirit*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980.

Brennan, B. R. "Dating Athanasius' Vita Antonii." *Vigiliae Christianae*, 30, 1 (1976), 52–54.

Brock, Sebastian. "The Imagery of the Spiritual Mirror in Syriac Literature," *The Canadian Society for Syriac Studies*, 21 (2005), 3–17.

———. *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*. Kalamazoo: MI: Cistercian, 1992.

———. *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*. Kalamazoo. MI: Cistercian, 1987.

Clément, Olivier. *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Text and Commentary*. New York: New City Press, 1995.

Gregory of Nazianzus. *On God and Christ. The Five Theological Orations and Two Letter to Cledonius*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002.

Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul & the Resurrection*, trans. Catherine P. Roth. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993.

———. *The Life of Moses*. New York; Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978.

Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*. Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008.

Isaac of Nineveh. *Mystic Treatises*. Ed. A. J. Wensinck. Amsterdam, 1923 (Wiesbaden 1969).

James Charlesworth. *The Earliest Christian Hymnbook*: *The Odes of Solomon*. Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co, 2009.

John Climacus. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. New York; Toronto: Paulist Press, 1982.

Kitchen Robert and Martien Parmentier. *The Book of Steps*: *The Syriac Liber Graduum*. Kalamazoo. MI: Cistercian, 2004.

Ludlow Morwenna, *Gregory of Nyssa ancient and* [*post*] *modern*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Malherbe Abraham and Ferguson Everett. *Gregory of Nyssa*: *The Life of Moses*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.

Matz, Brian. *Gregory of Nazianzus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016.

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

Pseudo-Macarius, *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*, trans. George A. Maloney. New York: Paulist Press, 1992.

Schoedel, William R. *Ignatius of Antioch*: *A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985.

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.

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.