

Early Christian Spirituality

TH 3XE3/5XE5

CS/CW/PS

McMaster Divinity College
Spring 2024 (May 13 – August 2)

Don W. Springer, Ph.D.
Email: springdw@mcmaster.ca

I. Description

What is spirituality? How did the early Church understand those ideas and practices that we now refer to as “spiritual?” This course provides an opportunity to explore and develop scholarly expertise in both the practical expressions of early Christian worship, fellowship, and devotional traditions, and in the theological assumptions behind those practices.

Specializations: Christian History and Worldview, Pastoral Studies, Counselling and Spiritual Care

II. Course Objectives

Knowing:

- Know the various expressions of spirituality present in the early church.
- Know the key contributors – the major voices that influenced faith practices & worship.

Being:

- Our objective is to become critically aware and receptive to varied traditions and expressions of Christian faith.
- Our goal is to analyze our own ways of thinking in view of early traditions and ideas.

Doing:

- This course aims to deepen our understanding of spirituality such that it would cause us to critically examine and further nurture our faith.

III. Course Readings & Texts

Required Readings:

McGinn, Bernard. *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*. Reprint. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2004.

Primary Readings will be uploaded to Avenue to Learn.

Recommended Texts:

Bright, Pamela, and Charles Kannengiesser. *Early Christian Spirituality*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986.

Lossky, Vladimir. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. London: J. Clarke, 1957.

Springer, Don W., and Kevin M. Clarke, eds. *Patristic Spirituality: Classical Perspectives on Ascent in the Journey to God*. Studies in Theology and Religion 30. Leiden: Brill, 2022.

IV. Course Assignments

➤ MDiv/MTS/Diploma/Certificate Assignments

1. Book Review (3–5 pages) 20%

Purpose: Develop the ability to analyze and constructively critique *secondary* source scholarship.

Description:

- Write a review of a book (minimum length of 150 pages) on a topic related to the course.
- The book may *not* be the course text (McGinn), but may be one of the recommended volumes.
- You are encouraged to review a book that you will use for your major paper.
- The volume chosen for this assignment does not need to be included in the reading log.

Format: A review should include the following elements:

- Statement of the project's purpose and thesis.
- Description of the content and its relationship to the thesis; does it support the thesis?
- Critical analysis: fairly point out the strengths and weaknesses.
- Statement of the book's value and suitable audience(s).

Specialization Requirement: Students must choose a volume that corresponds to their specialization.

➤ Due Date: May 27

2. Annotated Reading Log 25%

The annotated reading log demonstrates your level of interaction with and understanding of the course materials. Each student will include an entry for every assigned reading, *excluding* the volume chosen for the book review assignment. Your task is to provide a summary analysis and reflection (include: a summary of key ideas, potential insights for ministry, and personal evaluation of the book's thesis and relevance). There are two parts to this assignment: the review of the McGinn textbook, and the weekly primary-text readings uploaded to Avenue to Learn. The word count for each is:

- A 500-word entry for McGinn's *Foundations of Mysticism*.
- A minimum of 100-word entries for *each* primary source reading.

➤ Due Date: June 30

3. Research Paper (10-12 pages) 40%

Students will write a research paper on a topic related to their personal research interests, but also related to the class focus. The essay requires a clear thesis question and statement and could focus on a key era, individual, or practice of early Christian spirituality. The topic of this paper will be determined by the student's specialization and developed in consultation with the professor.

➤ Due Date: June 20

4. Participation & Personal Reflection 15%

Each student must: 1) Actively engage in *all* forum discussion posts; 2) choose one (new to you) early Christian spiritual practice to incorporate for a four-week period. After the four weeks, write a half-page summary of your experience.

➤ Due Date: August 2

➤ DPT Assignments

1. Book Review (4–6 pages) 20%

Purpose: Develop the ability to analyze and constructively critique *secondary* source scholarship.

Description:

- Write a review of a book (minimum length of 200 pages) on a topic related to the course.
- The book may *not* be the course text (McGinn), but may be one of the recommended volumes.
- You are encouraged to review a book that you will use for your major paper.
- The volume chosen for this assignment does not need to be included in the reading log.

Format: A review should include the following elements:

- Statement of the project's purpose and thesis.
- Description of the content and its relationship to the thesis; does it support the thesis?
- Critical analysis: fairly point out the strengths and weaknesses.
- Statement of the book's value and suitable audience(s).

➤ Due Date: May 27

2. Annotated Reading Log 25%

The annotated reading log demonstrates your level of interaction with and understanding of the course materials. Each student will include an entry for every assigned reading, *excluding* the volume chosen for the book review assignment. Your task is to provide a summary analysis and reflection (include: a summary of key ideas, potential insights for ministry, and personal evaluation of the book's thesis and relevance). There are two parts to this assignment: the review of the McGinn textbook, and the weekly primary-text readings uploaded to Avenue to Learn. The word count for each is:

- A 500-word entry for McGinn's *Foundations of Mysticism*.
- A minimum of 100-word entries for *each* primary source reading.

➤ Due Date: June 30

3. Major Research Paper 40%

The paper should include four key sections. (1) a brief, but clear explanation of how the paper is rooted in a Practice Led-research approach; (2) an exploration of the challenges and problems that provoke this study (i.e. why does this ministry practice need to be addressed? What are the problems that you want to identify?) (3) a consideration of a foundational theology of the practice of ministry under consideration in this course and a deep consideration of how new approaches to this practice can be employed in helping to address and improve ministry practice in this area. (4) some reflection on the application of these ideas to the student's own ministry context (both in terms of the local church and also their ministry beyond the local church). The paper should be approximately 7,000 words.

➤ Due Date: June 20

4. Participation & Personal Reflection 15%

Each student must: 1) Actively engage in *all* forum discussion posts; 2) choose one (new to you) early Christian spiritual practice to incorporate for a four-week period. After the four weeks, write a half-page summary of your experience.

➤ Due Date: August 2

V. Tentative Course Schedule:

1. May 13 Course introduction; spirituality defined
2. May 20 The intersection of theology and the spiritual life
3. May 27 Community, fellowship, and hospitality
4. June 3 Worship, prayer, and the sacraments
5. June 10 Martyrdom and monasticism
6. June 17 Mysticism, marriage and the family
7. June 24 The conception of holiness and ascent to the Divine

VI. Online Participation & Etiquette

Presence and Meaningful Participation

Presence and meaningful 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, regardless of course modality. 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.

What constitutes "presence" (attendance) and "meaningful participation" in an asynchronous course needs definition. 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 in the syllabus. In addition to this, however, 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.

VII. Policies

A. Textbook Purchase:

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.

B. 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) 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.

C. 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.

D. 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).

E. Style:

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses. Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.
<http://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/sites/default/files/documents/MDCStyleGuide.pdf>

F. Late-Assignment Policy:

- Assignments are due at midnight on the date specified in the syllabus.
- Late assignments are reduced five percentage points for each day late.
- Assignments will be accepted without penalty only in the case of an excused absence. If a
- Assignments will not be accepted late on the basis of the student's involvement with school-approved activities. If you unable to attend class, you must pre-arrange with the instructor to submit the assignment before the scheduled date in the syllabus.

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.