



## Unorthodox Christianity HUM 4953

*Jesus said, "I am the light that is over all things. I am all: from me all came forth, and to me all attained. Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there." — Gospel of Thomas 77*

*Jesus said to them, "My wife ..." — Gospel of Jesus' Wife*

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James R. Adair • james.adair@utsa.edu

Class website: <http://rosetta.reltech.org/UTSA/HUM4953/>

Office hours by appointment in FLN 1.05.10A

210-458-6216 or 210-458-4302

### I. Course Description

Christianity today exists in many different forms, with different beliefs and practices, but the range of beliefs and practices is small compared with Christianity in the first few centuries of its existence. In fact, it might be better to speak of various "Christianities" during the pre-Constantinian era than of a single Christianity. In this course, we will examine the notions of orthodoxy and heresy, and we'll look at the beliefs and practices of groups outside the stream that developed into orthodoxy by examining the texts they used when possible and the complaints of their opponents when such texts have not been preserved. We will focus especially on many of the noncanonical gospels, including the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Judas, and the newly discovered fragment called the Gospel of Jesus' Wife. We will examine the life and work of Marcion, "the first great heretic of the church," explore different forms of Gnostic Christianity, and look at the incredible variety of Christianity found in Syria, India, and elsewhere beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire. We will examine the role that women played in these unorthodox communities, and we'll ask what evidence there is for Jesus being married. Finally, we'll look at the medieval community called the Albigenses or Cathari, which threatened the authority of the orthodox church so much that the pope declared a crusade against them.

### II. Course Aims and Objectives

#### Aims

Students will consider the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy as applied to early Christianity, and they will examine, analyze, and evaluate several noncanonical Christian writings that stem from communities in the early centuries of Christianity that were outside the stream that became orthodoxy.

### Specific Learning Objectives

- Students will have a general understanding of many of the important events in the first few centuries of Christian history that relate to the development of variant forms of Christianity.
- Students will understand the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy, identify periods during which these terms are and are not applicable, and identify criteria that ultimately helped define orthodoxy.
- Students will be able to identify variant forms of early Christianity, including Marcionism, Gnosticism, and forms of Jewish Christianity.
- Students will learn to read and listen critically and respond in a scholarly yet respectful manner to the ideas of others.
- Students will critically analyze books and articles related to the subject matter.

### **III. Format and Procedures**

The instructor will meet with students once a week for sixteen weeks on Tuesdays with class sessions of one hundred sixty-five minutes apiece. The instructor will use a modified seminar approach for most class sessions, and students are expected to have read assigned materials beforehand and to participate in class discussion. Students, either individually or in groups, will often be responsible for leading class discussions. Some class sessions will be devoted in part to student presentations. Class announcements, assignments, and supplementary material will be available on Blackboard and/or the class website.

Assignments are due either in class on the due date, or they may be submitted to Blackboard no later than 9:00 p.m. on the due date. Assignments are due on the assigned date regardless of whether the student attends class on that date. Late work will be penalized one letter grade per week (or portion of week), with a minimum penalty of half a letter grade (e.g., for work submitted after the assigned time on the due date).

### **IV. Course Requirements**

#### 1. Class Attendance, Participation, and Assignments

Students will endeavor to attend every class, turn in every assignment on time, and participate in all class discussions. Students with more than two unexcused absences will be penalized three points on their final grade per additional class missed (as part of their Class Participation grade). Excused absences are illness, death in the family, and officially sponsored UTSA activities. The student will be expected to provide documentation for all excused absences. Students who are absent, whether the absence is excused or unexcused, are expected to complete assignments on time (see previous section). Students who know in advance they will be absent may make arrangements to turn in assignments or take tests early.

Unless otherwise specified, all written assignments should be printed in Times or Times New Roman font, 12 point type, double-spaced, with one-inch margins on all four sides, and follow MLA specifications. Papers with a minimum page count specified will be considered short of the required minimum if they employ excessive margins. For example, a two-page paper must

extend to the bottom of the second page, or it will be considered a one-page paper. Charts, illustrations, and other non-textual material may be included in a paper when appropriate—in fact, they may well improve a paper in some instances—but the non-textual material will not be counted toward the total page count, so students should adjust the length of their papers accordingly.

## 2. Course Readings

Class texts will include:

Barnstone, Willis. *The Gnostic Bible*. Revised ed. Boston: Shambhala, 2009.

Bauer, Walter. *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. Trans. Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins. Ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971.  
[<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rak/publics/new/BAUER00.htm>]

Ehrman, Bart. *Lost Christianities*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.

Ehrman, Bart. *Lost Scriptures*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.

Harnack, Adolf. *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*. Trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1990.

Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Other readings will be assigned.

## 3. Topic Presentations

Over the course of the semester, students will submit three papers (6-8 pages, double-spaced) on assigned topics. They will share the content of these papers with the class as part of the class discussion of these topics.

## 4. Book Report and Analysis

Students will read *The Gnostics Gospels* by Elaine Pagels and write a book report of between 4 and 6 pages, double-spaced. Students should summarize the contents of the book and offer a critique of the author's argument.

## 5. Article Review

Students will read an assigned scholarly article and write a summary and analysis of it that is between 4 and 6 pages, double-spaced.

## 6. Group Report and Presentation

Students will form groups of two or three people and produce a written report of 12-15 pages, double-spaced, on a topic related to unorthodox Christianity in the early or medieval Christian period, prior to 1500 (one paper per group). **This paper should focus on a fairly narrow topic**

(e.g., specific works, movements, or topics not covered in depth in class). The group will present its findings to the class during the final exam period. A minimum of eight **academically acceptable** bibliography entries must be included (no more than three encyclopedia articles may count toward the total of eight bibliography entries).

## **V. Grading**

The student's grade will be determined as follows:

- a. Topic Presentations: 45% (15% apiece)
- b. Book Report and Analysis: 15%
- c. Article Review: 15%
- d. Group Report and Presentation: 15%
- e. Class Participation: 10%

Letter grades will be assigned according to the following table:

A+: 97-100	B+: 87-89	C+: 77-79	D+: 67-69	F: below 60
A: 93-96	B: 83-86	C: 73-76	D: 63-66	
A-: 90-92	B-: 80-82	C-: 70-72	D-: 60-62	

## **VI. Subject to Change**

Assignments, grades, schedules, and other items detailed in this syllabus or on the class website are subject to change at the instructor's discretion. The instructor will give students reasonable notice of any changes that are made.

## **VII. Supplemental Information**

UTSA offers many services to help students succeed in their classes. Some of the offices that provide these services are Counseling Services, Student Disability Services, and the Tomás Rivera Center, which offers Supplemental Instruction and Tutoring. Information on these services, as well as the Student Code of Conduct and Scholastic Dishonesty policies, can be found on the following web page: <http://provost.utsa.edu/syllabus.asp>. Please read the information on this page, which may be considered an appendix to this syllabus.