It is not so very important for a person to learn facts. For that he does not really need a college. He can learn them from books. The value of an education in a liberal arts college is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks. (Albert Einstein, 1921, in response to Thomas Edison’s opinion that a college education is useless)

The growing precision of our understanding should enhance, and not diminish our sense of wonder. (Alfred Brendel)

In much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase in sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1.18)

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire. (William Butler Yeats)

You must unlearn what you have learned. (Yoda, Star Wars V: Empire Strikes Back)

The unexamined life is not worth living. (Socrates [Plato, Apology, 38a])

EN ΟΙΔΑ ΟΤΙ ΟΥΔΕΝ ΟΙΔΑ. (= Ἐν οἴδα ὅτι οὐδὲν οἶδα. — Socrates)

ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ. (= Γνῶθι σεαυτόν. — Temple of Apollo at Delphi)

Welcome to Religion 160: Understanding Christianity. This course is a general introduction to and an exploration of Christianity (basic beliefs and practices of Christianity in various times and places). If you do the required work, by the end of the semester you will be able to:

- identify and explain (1) the sacred texts, doctrines, and practices of Christianity, and (2) their significance for Western culture, for the world, and for us
- identify and explain significant developments and debates that have shaped Christian beliefs and practices, and thereby also Western culture, the world, and us
- identify and explain significant figures that have shaped Christian beliefs and practices, and thereby also Western culture, the world, and us
- demonstrate an appreciation of Christianity that is both critical and creative

Achieving these goals will require hard work on your part, which will bring many challenging, enlightening, exciting, frustrating, and rewarding experiences.

Caveat

This course is designed so that anyone, religious or not, who does the required work can attain the goals mentioned above. This course is not designed to persuade you to a particular faith or religious point of view. Nor is it intended to build up or disparage existing faith, although an informed understanding of Christianity can lead to a deeper appreciation of it. Students who consider themselves to be followers of any religion, or of no religion at all, are welcome on this semester journey to become better acquainted with Christianity, to learn to appreciate it better, and to become informed and responsible interpreters of it.

Requirements and evaluation for the course

• evaluation

For my criteria for evaluation go to my Evaluation page and read the information carefully.

- If you have any questions about any assignment, ask in class or make an appointment to see me.
- If you have any questions about any evaluation or how you are doing in the course, make an appointment to see me.
• If you miss an assignment or exam, call or make an appointment to discuss any makeup work.

Due dates for submitting assignments are on D2L (click on the “Dropbox”).

**assigned readings**

Assigned readings should be completed before the class for which they are assigned—use your best judgment to divide the readings evenly for each week. You must come to class with at least 2 written questions or comments in response to the readings (see Participation).

The primary focus throughout the course will be on the biblical texts and on cultivating the ability to ask informed questions about all the assigned readings based on the knowledge you gain along the way; the demonstration of your ability to formulate questions will affect the evaluation of your semester grade. Keeping notes on the readings is highly recommended. I would encourage you to use this form for the reading assignments (also on D2L).

Not all assigned readings may be covered in class or on exams, but they are assigned for your edification in achieving the goals of the course. The more you refer to them in class and in your work, the better your mastery of the readings will be. Your use of them in class discussion and in your work will affect the evaluation of your semester grade.

Occasionally I may assign additional readings, but these will ordinarily be short.

**presentation**

You will give a 5-minute presentation of assigned texts consisting of:

• the main ideas or arguments of the reading assignments (see the course schedule below for the texts to be presented)
• your critique or response to it (including references to previous readings)—this should be the focus and main portion of the presentation
  • Include in your report critical questions, challenges, discoveries, insights, etc. that you encountered while, or after, reading the assignment.
  • Avoid mere summaries or paraphrases of the assigned reading(s).

You are expected to have read the text(s) thoroughly and be able to share the penetrating questions or issues you dealt with in your reading, preparation, and further research. You do not have to understand everything before class, but you should demonstrate that you prepared and that you can discern and are familiar with the major issues in the text(s). Remember that questions are more valuable than answers.

All students are expected to do the preparatory work described above, not just the presenter.

See my Evaluation page under Presentations for evaluation criteria (do not be concerned about the “Communication Skills” section of the presentation evaluation page). If you wish to use a PowerPoint presentation or any AV equipment, let me know in advance.

**research paper**

You will submit on D2L a research paper on a particular (1) theme or controversy, (2) doctrine, or (3) theologian. Browse through the table of contents and index in the textbook for ideas or come up with your own topic for research. Whatever your topic and thesis, make sure that connections with course materials are evident in your final work. You may also find the Tips for writing papers helpful.

Make an appointment as early as you can in the semester to discuss (1) your paper idea and (2) your preliminary bibliography (bring a hard copy). The narrower and more specific your thesis—i.e., the argument you plan to make in your paper—the better.

• The paper should consist of 1,000–2,000 words.
• The paper should represent original work (i.e., your own thoughts), not a mere digest of other people’s opinions. Your own reading and re-reading of the relevant texts, as well as review of other materials, are fundamental to the task. I want to know what you discover in your engagement with your topic, whether or not you agree with the assigned readings or opinions presented in class, including mine.
  • Focus on honing your ability to argue for your opinions and conclusions by supporting them with evidence from texts (especially primary texts) and other relevant sources.
• Your final bibliography (not just “works cited”) must contain at least 8 sources used in your paper, including at least 4 academic journal articles (articles in newspapers or magazines are acceptable if appropriate for your paper).
• Electronic sources count only if you provide evidence that they are scholarly sources (usually in print).
• Use footnotes or endnotes to document your sources following the Chicago Manual of Style—for help: NoodleTools. Learn the automatic footnote (and endnote) function of your word processor.
• Follow all the instructions given on my Evaluation page under Written assignments.

You may choose to write a longer research paper instead of the final exam (written or oral—see below). You must meet with me as soon as possible before October 15 to discuss your preference. The longer paper should consist of 2,000–2,500 words.
• terms
Throughout the semester, you will be responsible for learning significant terms used in our texts or in class (see the “terms” file on D2L). You will be responsible for finding the definitions. Your knowledge of significant terms may constitute a part of a quiz or exam.

• exams
The midterm exam will cover all the materials in the course we will have covered by the time of the exam (e.g., the reading assignments and terms). The final exam will cover the entire sweep of the course. There may be pop quizzes, the results of which will affect the evaluation of your participation. See my Evaluation page under Quizzes and examinations.

In lieu of the final exam, you may take an oral exam (30–45 minutes). You must meet with me as soon as possible before Oct 15 to discuss this option.

• grades
Grades will be determined as fairly as possible. See my Evaluation page under Grades for more information. The final grade for the course will consist of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td>25% (or 50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final exam</td>
<td>25% (or 0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm exam</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participation is a significant part of this course. See my Evaluation page under Participation for more information and instructions.

• extra credit
You may earn extra credit any time during the semester.

- Submit a paper consisting of 700–1,000 words relating something from popular culture (e.g., movie, play, TV show, book, any performance) to an OT text or theme (consult the instructor).
- The paper should be mostly critique (not mere description or summary).

The instructor reserves the right to make the final determination concerning any extra credit. You can earn a maximum of 5% toward the final grade. You may write more than one, if you wish, but you will not receive more than 5% total in extra credit.

Required books


Recommended books (* = highly recommended)

The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha (NRSV). N.B.: table of contents, introductions, essays, tables, glossary, maps, etc. are all very helpful. In all cases, you are encouraged to use other English translations (e.g., NIV) and Bibles in other languages in addition to the NRSV. The Tanakh (the Jewish Bible) is especially recommended for Old Testament passages.*


---

**Resources to consider**

My Resources page, e.g., *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *The NT Gateway*.

Course materials on D2L; online resources, e.g., study guides

McGrath resources at alistermcgrathwiley.com: glossary of theologians and theological terms

Bible concordances (also in McGill library)


---

**Keeping in touch**

During the semester check your e-mail regularly for messages regarding course matters (e.g., changes in the syllabus). Visit and reload (refresh) this page for updates to the syllabus; see also my home page for other information and resources related to the course. Please feel free to make an appointment any time about any course matters.

**Tips from former students**

For some practical advice from former students, see the tips page.

---

**One last word . . .**

Regardless of how demanding all of this is, I promise to be as fair as possible. I recognize that you will be very busy this semester pursuing various obligations and passions. I understand. I have my passions too, e.g., my family, music, philosophy, nature, mountain biking, fixing things, food. But I am also very passionate about education, both yours and mine—I mean not just the business of acquiring knowledge but more importantly the total development of honorable human beings. I do not require you to share my excitement about all the things we will cover, but I do expect you to do your best to complete the requirements for the course. To help you do that, I will make myself available outside the class time and the office hours. I will be glad to help you when you are struggling with an assignment. Or if you have any questions, concerns, complaints, and even compliments, I will do my best to take the time to listen and offer my response. Keep in mind that I am here to help you learn. So again, welcome to Religion 160: Understanding Christianity.

---

**Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Aug 28 M, 30, Sep 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

General orientation: terms, concepts, approaches

What is Christianity? What is the Christian religion? What is Christian tradition? What is Christian faith? What is Christian doctrine?

- Course syllabus (including Evaluation link; review requirements, expectations, and criteria for grading—ask Qs, if you have any)
  - Westminster College: Mission statement
  - Fisher: Effective Learning
  - University of Chicago: letter to the class of 2020 (2016) [See link here]
• Remember: bring your written Qs & Cs to each class (see Participation).
• Copy all relevant Web pages and resources to your hard disk or flash drive, etc. for easy access. Keep the copies updated.

> notes in class
> Memorize the books of the Protestant canon in order (learn correct spelling). [also: comparison chart; canons; some early NT canons]
> recommended resources (old but helpful)
> maps and world(views); also this <<< n.b. <<<

Week 2  Sep 4, 6, 8  Jesus & “Christianity”

Sep ?: movie night at the Nas 7:46 PM-ish
Feel free to bring DVDs of movies you think your classmates should see. For directions click here.

• McGrath: ch. 1
✦ Brown: Intro to NT Christology, 155–61 (“A Brief History of the Development of the Royal Messianic Hope in Israel”)
> C. S. Lewis: historical Jesus

Week 3  Sep 11, 13, 15  The Bible

• McGrath: ch. 2
• Translation comparison
• Greek NT: 1st page
• Transmission errors
• Manuscript
> Xmas Quiz
> Easter Quiz (n.b.: take this “quiz” before reading the following)
  > 1 Cor 15.3–10
  > Mk 15.40–16.8
  > Mt 27.55–28.20
  > Lk 23.48–24.53
  > Jn 19.25–21.25
  > Acts 1.1–2.4
  > Gos Pet (N.B. Q10 on “Easter Quiz”)

Week 4  Sep 18, 20, 22  The Bible

• McGrath: ch. 2
✦ Sanders & Davies: Synoptic Gospels, 51–119 (skim; n.b. diagrams)
> Inf Gos Thom
> Synopses (very helpful for comparisons)
> coloring scheme for the Synopsis
> some synoptic solutions

Week 5  Sep 25, 27, 29  Creeds & beliefs

• McGrath: ch. 3 (pp. 54–82)
• McGrath on religious experience, the 4th resource for Christian beliefs and theology

Week 6  Oct 2, 4, 6  Creeds & beliefs

• McGrath: ch. 3 (pp. 82–102)
• Nicene Creed; also here and here and here
• Apostles’ Creed; also here
• Chalcedonian definition (excerpts); also here
• Lewis: preface; bk. 1

Week 7  Oct 9, 11, 13  Creeds & beliefs

• Oct 13: midterm exam

• McGrath: ch. 3 (pp. 102–20)
• The End Is Always Near (skim)
• Lewis: bk. 1
Course syllabus (including Evaluation link; review requirements, expectations & criteria for grading—ask Qs, if any)

**Week 8**  Oct 16 M, 18, 20  Oct 21–24 (break)
- McGrath: ch. 4 (pp. 121–48)
- Lewis: bk. 2

**Week 9**  Oct 25 W, 27, 30
- McGrath: ch. 4 (pp. 148–63)
- Lewis: bk. 2

**Week 10**  Nov 1 W, 3, 6
- McGrath: ch. 4 (pp. 163–80)
- Lewis: bk. 3

**Vote on Nov 7**

**Week 11**  Nov 8 W, 10, 13
- McGrath: ch. 4 (pp. 180–98)
- Lewis: bk. 3

**Week 12**  Nov 15 W, 17, 20  Nov 22–26 (break)
- McGrath: ch. 4 (pp. 180–98)
- Lewis: bk. 4

**Week 13**  Nov 27 M, 29,  Dec 1
- McGrath: ch. 6 (What do you think of the front cover?)
- Lewis: bk. 4

**Week 14**  Dec 4 M, 6, 8
- McGrath: ch. 7; Conclusion
- McGrath: “Breaking the Science-Atheism Bond” (or here); cf. Tertullian, Anselm re faith and intellect
- bring your Qs & Cs (esp. on synthetic judgment, analytic judgment, and language game)
- bring some examples that illustrate the issues Meyer discusses (esp. the 3 interpretative patterns and Meyer’s proposal)

**Final week**  Dec 11 M  0800–1030

**Final exam**

---

Without education we are in a horrible and deadly danger of taking educated people seriously. (G. K. Chesterton)

Health is merely the slowest possible rate at which one can die. (Anonymous)