Calling upon the Lord:
Thought and Spirituality of the Church Fathers
CH6304s
Austin Graduate School of Theology
Fall 2015

Professor: Daniel Napier
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Class: Tuesday 7-9:40pm (Note: No class 20 October. This will be a reading week.)

Course Description:
This meaty short course will utilize a mixture of lecture and seminar discussions to focus on three key developments in Christian thought and devotion over the first four centuries. The weight of Christian reflection shifts throughout this period as one cluster of challenges is addressed and another surfaces in turn.

The first challenge to Jesus’ people focused upon how to read the Jewish scriptures, and the Hellenistic past, in light of God’s act of salvation in Christ. The result (in the 2nd and early 3rd century) was a sweeping understanding of God in history and a spiritual mode of interpreting the Old Testament writings.

The second challenge required a precise way of articulating how Christians both worshipped Jesus and adhered to the One God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The great patristic doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are the result.

The third challenge involved finding forms of personal training and devotion adequate to those who had become limbs of the Christ who is ‘light of light, very God of very God’ amid changing religious, social, and political conditions. An array of spiritual disciplines and the ecclesial institutions of the catechumenate and monastery developed in response.

Learning Objectives: Upon completion of this course, the student will be able to:
1. Discuss the Hebraic Christian roots of theology and the significance of the distinction between catechetical “milk” and the theological “meat” of spiritual interpretation.
2. Accurately describe the characteristics of Messianic Jewish piety in the first few centuries.
3. Produce a narrative account of the emergence of the doctrine of the Trinity and a coherent explanation of its basic content and significance.
4. Describe the patristic approach to spiritual interpretation and explain the experience of contemplatively engaging the Psalms in this manner.
5. Provide a succinct account of Augustine’s anthropology and its significance both for understanding grace and embarking upon spiritual exercise.
6. Elucidate the concept of askesis or spiritual exercise and comment upon specific examples of spiritual exercises.
Course Requirements and Means of Evaluation:

- In this course we will examine the literary traces of the Church Father’s spiritual interaction with scripture. May I ask you engage in a similar process? As you will read in the *Letter to Marcellinus*, the Psalms were a primary focus of spiritual interpretation. **Students will pray through the Psalms once per month for the duration of this course and keep a journal of the experience. This psalter prayer journal will comprise 20% of your final grade.**

- **Full preparation for and participation in the seminars are mandatory and will comprise 20% of your final grade.** Minimally, preparation means having read the text to be discussed for the day and having a few intelligent questions concerning it to prompt discussion. Confer the attached page on ‘Ground Rules of Theological Conversation’ to aid preparation.

- Each student will present at least one seminar paper to initiate conversation on a patristic text. This written presentation will comprise 25% of your final grade. The date of each student’s presentation will be determined during the first class period.

- Each student will research and write one paper interpreting a patristic text. Typically, students’ final papers are greatly improved and annotated versions of the papers they originally presented in the seminar, although a new topic may be chosen for the research paper. **The final paper is due no later than 8 December 2015 and will comprise 35% of your final grade.**

Required Readings

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:

Tentative Course Outline

- What is Theology and Spirituality? Who is a Church Father?: Clarification of Course Objectives and Basic Terms

- Inhabiting Scripture and Legitimating Historical Lineage, Pt. 1
  - Milk and Meat: Learning to Live in the Scriptures
  - Jewish Piety after Messiah: The First Four Centuries of Messianic Judaism
  - 8 September – Seminar Discussion: Didache and Odes of Solomon

- Inhabiting Scripture and Legitimating Historical Lineage, Pt. 2
  - Christ’s Philosophy: Early Christian Self-Definition and Jesus’ Way
  - Tutors to Christ: How the Apologists Converted the Hellenistic Past
  - 29 September – Seminar Discussion: Origen, Commentary on the Song of Songs, and Athanasius, Letter to Marcellinus.

- Doctrinal Developments: Worshipping Jesus and Naming God Three in One
  - Inadequate Ways to Say ‘God’: From Glorious Angel to Modalism
  - Problematic Trinitarian Beginnings in Tertullian and Origen
  - Worshipping the Son with the Father: Arius, Athanasius, and the Nicene Creed
  - 27 October – Seminar Discussion: Athanasius, Life of Antony

- The Christocentric Self: Clarifying Spiritual Life as a Limb of Christ
  - Early Christian Catechesis: How to Train an Ordinary Martyr
  - For Christ’s Standing Welcome: Understanding Martyrdom and Monasticism
  - 17 November – Seminar Discussion: Sayings of the Desert Fathers
  - Augustine: Integrating Action and Contemplation in the Christian Soul
  - Augustine’s Confessions: A Life Stretched toward New Creation
  - 1 December – Seminar Discussion: Augustine, Confessions