

The Church Fathers and the Making of Christian Doctrine TRDL7075

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1 Introduction

Welcome to this module on Christian 'Orthodoxy'. I hope you enjoy your journey with me as you study.

2 Module Aims

This module outlines the making of Christian 'orthodoxy,' by introducing as the historical narrative the formation of classical Christian theology to A.D. 451 and by raising for consideration the theological question of what "orthodoxy" is. Along the way, attention will be given to some of the ways in which Christians articulated their beliefs, and thereby their collective identity. The end date for content enables us to study the work of the first four ecumenical Councils: Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451).

To understand these councils, we will consider the controversies that precipitated them – chiefly, the Gnostic, Arian, Nestorian, Donatist, and Pelagian controversies – and the theologians contributed to the debates and the decisions. This aspect of the module will provide us with an opportunity to reflect on key aspects of the late antique Christian imagination were shaped through internal and external dispute.

Additionally, we will study the major contributions made by influential theologians from this period, including Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappodocian Fathers, Augustine, Apollinaris, Theodore, Nestorius, Cyril of Alexandria, and Leo the Great. While studying their doctrines, we will attend to their immediate contexts in philosophy and in exegesis (or the interpretation of Scriptures).

The module is supported throughout by readings taken from early Christian sources. These texts are essential reading, since they give direct access to patristic theology. A crucial element in the study of Christian theology is the ability to read texts critically. This module provides students an opportunity to practice and enhance skills in critical reading.

Studying this content will show that the development of doctrine was a gradual, fitful, cumulative process. We will also have many opportunities to note how the answers produced by one generation often turn out to be the seedbed of new problems for the next. Upon completion of the module, students will be able to understand the historical development of classical Christian doctrine with reference to its theological and philosophical structures and themes, and will have an informed awareness of key aspects of the culture of the late ancient Mediterranean basin that helped to shape Christianity in its formative years.

3 *Module Structure*

This module is divided into seven units:

The World of the Fathers

Christology after the New Testament

The Christian Gnosis of Origen of Alexandria

Nicaea and its Legacy

The Pro-Nicene Theology of the Cappadocians

Augustine: A Vindication of Christian Mediocrity

Conflicting Pro-Nicene Christologies and the Definition of Chalcedon

Key writings or extracts from key writings will be provided to facilitate the study of this material. This module is transitioning from away from the heavy use of paper; however, this transition occurs in stages. As a temporary measure, the twelve or so items that illustrate these sections will be provided as a reading pack in hardcopy. It is envisaged that they will be available digitally for future versions of this module. Your patience during this period of transition is much appreciated!

4 *Resources*

Required reading:

Chadwick, H., *The Church in Ancient Society. From Galilee to Gregory the Great*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003

Chadwick provides a full and lively narrative history of our period, presents the material in brief chapters, and offers clear accounts of important texts and theological debates in their historical context. **Oxford Scholarship Online makes this volume available on the internet, via the University Library.**

Kelly, J. N. D., *Early Christian Doctrines*, London: Continuum–Mowbray, 2000.

Kelly provides unsurpassed expositions and detailed summaries of patristic doctrines. This handbook is a modern classic. It has been through several editions. These details are to the fifth edition. **Students can, however, make use of older editions and indeed may wish to consider purchasing a second-hand copy.**

Recommended reading:

- Brown, P., *The World of Late Antiquity*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1971, 2004.
- Casiday, A.M.C. and Norris, F.W., eds., *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 2: Constantine to c. 600, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Esler, P., ed., *The Early Christian World*, 2 vols. London, Routledge, 2000.
- Williams, R.D., *The Wound of Knowledge*, 2nd rev ed, London: DLT, 1990.
- Young, F., Ayres, L., and Louth, A., eds, *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Useful on-line resources

- <http://www.ccel.org/fathers.html>
- <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/>
- <http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/>
- <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>
- <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/browse?t1=religion>

5 *Assessment*

Assessment for this module is by two 2,500 word essays, each of which counts for 50% of the total mark.

Choose your topics from the following list:

- To what extent can orthodoxy be understood as the “consensus of the faithful”? Substantiate your answer with reference to the material studied in this module.
- Explain why Athanasius regarded the defence of the Homoousian doctrine as so important.
- Outline and discuss Augustine’s theology of grace.
- With detailed reference to a specific letter or treatise by Cyril of Alexandria, describe the major grounds of his difference with Nestorius.
- Give an evaluative account of the main issues discussed at
EITHER - the Council of Nicaea (325)
OR - the Council of Chalcedon (451)

6 *How to proceed with this module*

It is very important that you complete the work in each unit of this module before proceeding to the next. Within each unit, read the introduction, the associated chapter(s) in the text books and the unit's primary texts. At the end of each unit, there is some suggested primary reading and some questions which are designed to guide your thoughts and reflections. Items of particular importance are indicated by an asterisk (*). While it is not necessary to read everything in the further reading list, it is vital that you engage with as much material as possible beyond the text books. Finally, as part of your preparation for the assessed work, you are encouraged to write short answers to some of the questions at the end of each unit to help you reflect critically on the material at every stage. That exercise will prepare you to write the extended essay for formal submission. You are also encouraged to post the short answers to the module's Moodle page, for discussion with the tutor and the other students.

Once you have completed all seven units of the module, consider carefully which essays you would like to answer. Begin gathering your reading material, make careful notes, consider the issues in depth and plan your essay in detail before starting to write. The additional reading lists at the end of each unit are an important resource that you should also use at this stage.

Please do not wait until you have a complete draft in hand before contacting the tutor. Avail yourself of the opportunity to consult the tutor for discussion, advice and comment prior to formal submission. Regular contact with the tutor while you prepare your essay will substantially decrease the likelihood that your work might miss the mark entirely.

7 *Contact Details*

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