

Christology & Trinity in the Early Church:
(Through the Lens of Contemporary Film & Popular Culture)

Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary HIST 803

Course Syllabus: Spring 2025

PREREQUISITE: HIST 501 (*History 1*)

The Doctor:

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Synchronous Discussion Group Meeting Dates:

This course is an online course with some required synchronous meetings.

*All meetings are scheduled to be on TEAMS, from 6:30 am to 8:30 pm, US CENTRAL
TIME*

on the following Monday Evenings:

February 3, February 17, March 3, March 17, April 7, April 21, May 5

Course Description

This course is a history elective that begins with the foundation laid in the introductory course, *The History of Christian Thought and Practice I*, especially with regard to the development of doctrine. Here we will take a deeper dive into the doctrine of the Trinity and christology, not only reading farther into the primary sources, but also taking the opportunity to read the extant writings of some of the heretical positions from the early Church, as well as talk about the ways that Christ-figures are portrayed in popular culture, and how that influences perceptions of the Jesus of the Gospels.

A major emphasis of this course will be to explore expressions of Christology in contemporary popular culture/media, especially science fiction and superhero stories, as a way into the teaching of christology. For the purposes of this class, "contemporary" media is defined as anything from the second half of the twentieth century to the present. In many cases, we will be analyzing "classic" movies and TV shows, the goal being to develop a methodology for analyzing the worldview, anthropology, and christological/soteriological implications of any media expression of popular culture.

Course Requirements:

The course will consist of watching films/shows, readings in primary and secondary sources, and online synchronous discussion. It is expected that all students will watch all of the required films, even if they have seen the film before. Participation in the online discussion sessions is mandatory. Note that the first discussion meeting is in the second week of the semester, so there will be reading assignments required to prepare for that first discussion meeting. PhD students may take the course, but will have additional reading assignments.

It is assumed that students will normally access the films/shows on one of the generally accessible streaming services – but note that these services, and the individual films may not be available in all areas, and that many of the films will have to be rented for a fee. This fee is considered part of the student’s “book” costs for the course. Some substitutions can be made for individual films not available in a given place or at a given time. In that case, communicate with the professor for suggested substitutions if they are not already listed in the syllabus, and note that you will still read the relevant chapter(s) in the book that go with the movie or show in question. Fair warning: whenever you have not seen a film or show that we discuss, there will be spoilers.

Finally, a note about adult themes and language. Some of the films we will watch and discuss are rated for adult audiences. There may be scenes that make you uncomfortable for one reason or another. Such is the reality with art, however: 1) Since you are watching these films/shows on your own, you should always feel free to fast-forward over anything that you do not want to see; and 2) In our online discussions, you are always free to sit back quietly and not enter into the discussion if we get to talking about anything that makes you uncomfortable. You also always have the right to mute your camera for a while for any reason if you want/need to, though it is preferred that you keep your camera on most of the time. In addition, the actors in these films may use “earthy” language, including words that would be considered offensive by some people. If it is absolutely necessary to quote a line with offensive words in it, you may, but do so sparingly. Apart from that, let’s keep our language such that no one will be offended, at least as much as possible. Let’s not let the free-flowing nature of the dialogue in the films we watch make us think that we have to emulate that in our discussion. I know we’re all adults and we will be talking about a topic that may be fun and exciting to discuss, but let’s always keep in mind our responsibility to the emotional safety of our colleagues. With great intellectual power comes great verbal responsibility.

Except for the times we are actually online together, all communication for this course will be via email. It is a requirement of the course that students are able to use e-mail, receive e-mails (with attachments) from the professor, and communicate with the professor using a Garrett email account. If you need to send a document to the professor, DO NOT send a link to some cloud-based thing. Attach the actual Word document to the email. You must plan to check your GARRETT email account daily. Do not attempt to contact the professor directly through the “chat” functions in Moodle, Teams, MyGETS, Outlook, or social media. Just use email. Moodle will only be used to turn in papers, so don’t worry that you won’t see anything on moodle at the beginning of the course.

TWO REQUIRED PAPERS:

Analysis Paper – Using the methodology from the book *From Star Wars to Superman*, analyze a film or show episode of your choice. It must be something not already analyzed in the textbook. However, make sure there is a clear hero/Christ figure. For example, I found I could not include Firefly or Blade Runner in the book because they feature something more like an anti-hero. So when you choose your film/show, be prepared to demonstrate how you see the hero character as a Christ-figure, though it does not have to be particularly orthodox – you can teach orthodoxy by comparison with a heresy. The point of the paper is to show how the film or show you chose can be used to teach christology, or how casual viewers of the film or show might get the wrong idea about Jesus Christ from the portrayal of the Christ figure. You may imagine a

target audience of youth, young adults, adult learners, or some combination of those (but not children under age 13). As part of your conclusion, think about where your hero falls on the continuum expressed by the chart on p. 129 of *The Earliest Christologies* and make sure to include an orthodoxy score for your hero! Also, if your hero is an alien, don't get hung up on the fact that the hero is not technically human, in the sense of an earthling. You can find an analogy for a human nature in heroes that are not from this planet. You may consult outside commentary or analysis of your film or show, but do so only after you have done your own analysis, and use it as a comparison to your own. Don't start by looking for other people's analyses.

Final Essay (PHD Students will write a Research Paper) – TOPIC TBD - Possible Topic (subject to change): Imagine you are writing a blog or bulletin article in response to the question: Why do we consider Coptics to be legitimate Christians (not heretics) but the Jehovah's Witnesses are not treated as a Christian denomination? Behind this question is the question of why the boundaries set at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 are no longer considered the boundaries of orthodoxy, and yet the boundaries set at the Councils of Nicaea & Constantinople are still considered to be the defining boundaries of orthodox Christianity? Why is it NOT possible to be considered Christian and non-Nicene, but today one *can* be considered Christian and non-Chalcedonian? Review the relevant section of *Reading the Church Fathers* from your History 1 class for some of the details, and PHD students, make good use of the Frances Young book.

REQUIRED READING:

PRIMARY SOURCES *will be distributed as PDFs or links to be read online. They are included in the schedule below, but are subject to change.*

Required BOOKS (Secondary Sources)

Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy, by John McGuckin
(St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, ISBN: 978-0881418637) - \$45.00 on Amazon

From Star Wars to Superman: Christ Figures in Science Fiction and Superhero Films,
by James L. Papandrea (Sophia Institute Press, ISBN: 978-1622823888) - \$19.95 on Amazon

The Earliest Christologies: Five Images of Christ in the Post-Apostolic Age, by James L. Papandrea
(IVP Academic, ISBN: 978-0830851270) - \$18.00 on Amazon

Novatian of Rome and the Culmination of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy, by James L. Papandrea

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(Pickwick, ISBN: 978-1606087800) - \$25.00 on Amazon

And for REVIEW:

Reading the Church Fathers: A History of the Early Church and the Development of Doctrine
by James L. Papandrea (Sophia Institute Press, 2022) – You already have this from History 1

Trinity 101: Father, Son, Holy Spirit by James L. Papandrea
(Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2012) – You already have this from History 1

Additional Required Reading for PhD Students

Christ in Christian Tradition, Vol. 1: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451), by Aloys Grillmeier
(Westminster John Knox, ISBN: 978-0664223014) - \$37.78 on Amazon

To be read in its entirety, but spread out through the semester

Nicaea and its Legacy, Lewis Ayres
(Oxford, ISBN: 978-0198755050) - \$32.81 on Amazon

To be read in the first half of the semester

From Nicaea to Chalcedon, by Frances Young
(Baker Academic, ISBN: 978-0801039157) – \$27.49 on Amazon

To be read in the second half of the semester

COURSE SCHEDULE

Note: You may wonder whether it's better to watch a film/show first with no particular agenda, and then read my analysis of it in *From Star Wars to Superman*; or read the analysis of it first and then watch the film/show with that in mind, so you know what to look for. I wish I had a simple answer for that, but I think it depends a lot on your personal preference and how long ago (if at all) you saw the film or show in question. If you have already seen the film/show, I would like you to watch it again, though in that case you *may* want to read my analysis of it first, and then watch it, keeping an eye out for the things I talk about in the book. If you have never seen the film/show in question, then feel free to watch it first and just enjoy it, and then read the analysis. You can always go back to it, and usually even if you rent it you should have 24 to 48 hours to watch it again if you want to. Where I give you a choice between two or more films/shows, you should watch any that you've never seen. But at the end of the day, it's completely up to you. I want this experience to be fun, and I do not want the analysis of these films/shows to detract from your enjoyment of them. It is my hope that watching films/shows like these with eyes more wide open to issues of worldview, anthropology, christology, & theology will actually enhance your enjoyment, not to mention your enjoyment of discussing them with friends and colleagues.

Also: You may wonder why in some cases I've chosen older versions of a particular story (for example, why Michael Keaton's Batman and not Christian Bale's, or why not an Avengers movie?). The answer has to do with the fact that when we look at a hero as a metaphor for Christ, the christology we find will be revealed to a large extent in the hero's origin story. So I've tried to choose versions that have clear origin stories – though of course we can discuss other versions of each story, other adaptations, remakes, and reboots. Nothing is off limits in our discussion time (within reason).

So... here is our schedule for the semester:

To Prepare for Feb. 3 discussion:

Watch: Star Trek the Next Generation: Rightful Heir (season 6: ep. 23, on Netflix)

Watch: Spider-Man (2002 Maguire) OR Iron Man (2008) OR Captain America (2011)

Read Secondary Source(s): *The Earliest Christologies*, pp. 11-43

From Star Wars to Superman, chapters 1, 2, & 14 (pp. 275-294)

CHART: *Christology Continuum*, *The Earliest Christologies*, p. 129.

Read Primary Source(s): Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolichus*

Hermas, *The Shepherd* (excerpts)

Sibylline Oracles 8.569-641

Discussion Session February 3 – Adoptionism (Salvation by Personal Holiness?)

To Prepare for Feb. 17 discussion:

Watch: Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope (1977) OR The Terminator (1984)

Watch: The Matrix (1999) OR Tron (1982)

Read Secondary Source(s): *The Earliest Christologies*, pp. 45-84

From Star Wars to Superman, chapters 3, 7, 9, & 10

Read Primary Source(s): *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Acts of John*

Discussion Session February 17 – Docetism and Gnosticism

To Prepare for March 3 discussion:

Watch: I Robot (2004)

Watch: Men in Black (1997)

Read Secondary Source(s): *The Earliest Christologies*, pp. 85-127

From Star Wars to Superman, chapter 4

Novatian of Rome – whole book

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Read Primary Source(s): Novatian, *On the Trinity* (excerpt)
Hippolytus, *Against Noetus*, Dionysius of Rome, *Against the Sabellians*
Discussion Session March 3 – Modalism and Apollinarianism/Monothelism

To Prepare for March 17 discussion:

Watch: *The Fifth Element* (1997)

Watch: *Wonder Woman* (2017) OR *Man of Steel* (2013) OR *Superman* (1978) OR *Batman* (1989)

Read Secondary Source(s): *From Star Wars to Superman*, chapters 5, 14 (pp. 294-311)

REVIEW: *Trinity 101*, chapters 2 & 3, & COMPARE the elements in the Nicene Creed to the criteria in the Orthodoxy Score Chart on pp. 332-333 of *From Star Wars to Superman*

Read Primary Source(s): Athanasius, *Defense of the Nicene Council*

Arius, *The Thalia* (fragments excerpted from Athanasius' *Against the Arians*)

Discussion Session March 17 – Nicaea & Constantinople, Arianism

NOTE – there are 3 weeks between sessions here because of Spring Break

USE THE EXTRA TIME TO READ THE MCGUCKIN BOOK

AND get started on your film/show analysis paper

To Prepare for April 7 discussion:

Watch: *Pleasantville* (1998)

Watch: IF you watched the show *LOST*, rewatch the end (optional)

Read Secondary Source(s): McGuckin – the whole book

From Star Wars to Superman, chapters 6, 8

Read Primary Source(s): Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity*

Discussion Session April 7 – Salvation by Enlightenment?

APRIL 21 – ANALYSIS PAPER DUE

To Prepare for April 21 discussion:

Watch: *Doctor Who: Father's Day* (2005) and *The Power of Three* (2012)

Watch: *All of Me* (1984, the one with Steve Martin and Lily Tomlin)

Read Secondary Source(s): *From Star Wars to Superman*, chapter 13

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Read Primary Source(s): Cyril/Nestorius Correspondence

Discussion April 21 – Ephesus & Chalcedon, Nestorianism & Monophysitism

To Prepare for May 5 discussion:

Watch: The Time Machine (2002) OR The Time Machine (1960)

Watch: Planet of the Apes (1968)

Read Secondary Source(s): *From Star Wars to Superman*, chapters 11, 12, 15

REVIEW: *Reading the Early Church Fathers*, pp. 210-219

Discussion Session May 5 – Salvation by Progress?

MAY 12 – FINAL ESSAY DUE

(Note: “Third Year” students WILL need to turn in final papers earlier to graduate!)

NB: All work for this course must conform to accepted standards of academic ethics, including, but not limited to, the understanding that cheating and plagiarism are unacceptable (cf. Jeremiah 23:30!), and may result in failure of the course (all students are expected to read and understand the relevant sections of the Academic Handbook for further information about plagiarism). Copying and pasting from the internet or any other source (even with changes) is a form of plagiarism. No outside research is needed for this course, and students may not use internet searches for help on written assignments. The use of an AI or any other writing service does constitute academic cheating and will be treated as a form of plagiarism (NOTE: TRANSLATION ALGORITHMS SUCH AS GOOGLE TRANSLATE AND SIMILAR ARE CONSIDERED AIs and ARE NOT TO BE USED FOR YOUR PAPERS). Even the reuse of your own work from outside the course, if used without citation, constitutes a form of plagiarism/cheating. Students are not allowed to share their papers/scripts (finished or unfinished) with other students. Study groups are encouraged, but students may not collaborate on written assignments. Students who need editorial help on writing assignments may not consult other students, but must go to the Garrett Writing Center. All professors are required to respond to all suspected incidents of academic dishonesty, especially plagiarism. Incidents of plagiarism or academic dishonesty may result in dismissal from the school. The use of an AI for writing the papers (including Grammarly or similar tools) may result in failure of the course.

Please note that **permission is not granted to record this course** or any discussions that take place during this course. No one is allowed to record video or audio, without permission from the professor. Permission may be given for the recording of audio only, in the case of a necessary accommodation for a documented disability. If any part of the course will be recorded for reasons of disability accommodation, all students will be informed that the course is being recorded, though the identity of the person for whom it is recorded will remain confidential.

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Resulting audio-recordings are for personal use only, they may not be shared, and are to be destroyed at the conclusion of the course.

Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary is committed to providing the most accessible learning environment as possible for students with disabilities. Should you anticipate or experience disability-related barriers in the academic setting, please contact the Director of Academic Support and Student Thriving (melanie.baffes@garrett.edu or 847-866-3869) to get started with the established accommodation process. If you are a continuing student who has already established accommodations with Student Access, you should receive a copy of your access letter at the start of the semester when it is emailed to the faculty member of each course you are enrolled in. Disability information, including academic accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential under FERPA regulations, so no one other than the access coordinator and your professors will see your accommodation letter.