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The History of Christianity: From the Disciples to the Dawn of the Reformation

Course Guidebook

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Professor Luke Timothy Johnson is the Robert W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. Born in 1943, Professor Johnson was a Benedictine monk from the ages of 19 to 28. He received a B.A. in

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Professor Johnson taught at Yale Divinity School from 1976 to 1982 and at Indiana University from 1982 to 1992 before accepting his current position at Emory. He is the author of 29 books, including *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, which is used widely as a textbook in seminaries and colleges. He won the 2011 Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion for his monograph entitled *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity*. He also has published several hundred articles and reviews and has lectured at more than 100 colleges and universities.

Professor Johnson has taught undergraduates, as well as master and doctoral students. He has directed about 20 doctoral dissertations. At Indiana University, he received the President's Award for Distinguished Teaching, was elected a member of the Faculty Colloquium on Excellence in Teaching, and won the Brown Derby Teaching Award and the Student Choice Award for Outstanding Faculty. At Emory, he has twice received the On Eagle's Wings Excellence in Teaching Award, and in 2007, he received the Candler School of Theology Outstanding Service Award. In 1997 and 1998, he was a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar, speaking at college campuses across the country.

Professor Johnson is married to Joy Randazzo. They share 7 children, 13 grandchildren, and 6 great-grandchildren. Professor Johnson's other Great Courses are *The Apostle Paul*; *Early Christianity: The Experience of the Divine*; *Great World Religions: Christianity* (2nd edition); *Jesus and the Gospels*; *Practical Philosophy: The Greco-Roman Moralists*; *The Story of the Bible*; and *Mystical Tradition: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. ■

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The History of Christianity: From the Disciples to the Dawn of the Reformation

Scope:

Whatever one may think about Christianity today—and views on the subject are both lively and divided—it is impossible to deny the importance of this religious tradition in history. Beginning as an obscure sect of Judaism in the 1st century of the Common Era, over the course of 300 years, Christianity went from being a maligned and persecuted superstition to the official religion of the Roman Empire. Since that unexpected turn of events, it has never ceased being an important player in the shaping of culture and politics, above all, in Europe. Certainly, for the bulk of the period covered by this course, the Christian religion provided the shape of the symbolic world, both for the remnants of the Roman order called Byzantium and for the medieval synthesis that arose after the collapse of the empire in the west.

Given such historical importance, it is the more striking that ignorance both of Christianity's internal development and its cultural impact is so widespread, not only among the religion's detractors but equally among its most avid advocates. In place of solid historical knowledge, a variety of misconceptions flourish. Some of these have to do with the origins of the religion. Others concern its internal development. Still others distort problematic aspects of its history, such as the Crusades and inquisition. A first goal of this course, then, is simply to provide a reliable account of Christianity's first millennium and a half— an account that is superficial to be sure, given that covering 1,500 years in 18 hours requires both selectivity and a willingness to simplify complex realities. Simple attention to the facts as they unfold can have a clarifying effect and dispel some of the myths and misperceptions that somehow find their way into public consciousness.

A second goal of the course is to show how Christianity distinctively is shaped by, and gives shape to, diverse political and cultural worlds. In the final lecture, we will see that the designation of Christianity as an “ever-

adapting religion” is entirely appropriate. Christianity has been, from the start, astonishingly adaptive to its environment. We will consider its story in three stages: (1) We trace the original cultural context within which the religion came to birth (Judaism and Greco-Roman culture), its originating experiences and convictions, and its process of survival and self-definition through centuries of persecution. (2) We then show the consequences of Christianity’s being made the official imperial religion by Constantine and his successors, consequences that were both good and bad and never without a certain amount of ambiguity. Thus, we see how the religion expanded to meet its new cultural role, even as it experienced violent internal conflicts over matters of doctrine and practice. We also see radical versions of Christianity that began in the 2nd century resurface in the form of monasticism, arguably the most important of all Christian institutions in terms of its historical significance. This part of the course ends with a consideration of the stable Orthodox tradition of the East. (3) Finally, we sketch the process by which popes, monks, and German kings formed a new society in Europe that was called Christendom: We will show its positive cultural accomplishments (cathedrals and universities) and more negative political adventures (Crusades, investiture, inquisition); we will show both the glory of the medieval synthesis and the elements of corruption that called for reform, a call that many heeded even before the Reformation of the 16th century.

In addition to paying close attention to the way in which Christianity interacts with political and cultural contexts, the course will address what are usually regarded as the more “religious” aspects of Christianity: its experiences and convictions, its beliefs and practices, its mode of worship and its manner of life. All of these have undergone change through the centuries, and the course will provide some awareness of the roles played by monk and mendicant, mystic and inquisitor, crusader and theologian, pope and peasant. And because Christianity is so adaptive to circumstance, so defined by the changing societies within which it has been shaped and which it has helped shape, this course considers at the very end the question of the essence of the religion: Through all this change, does anything remain constant? ■