

Lecture 1 Transcript

Hello fellow travelers, and welcome to the History of Christianity I at Emmanuel College. I am your professor, Matthew Dougherty, and today we're going to begin with perhaps the most basic question of the course: why and how do we study Christian history?

To answer this, I want to start not with Jesus of Nazareth or the apostles, but with **Eusebius**, the bishop of Caesarea in what is now Israel, who was born between 260 and 265 CE and lived until 339 or 340 CE. Eusebius was the custodian of the largest Christian library of the time, and he used that library to write a number of scholarly works. Many of these advanced the theology of **Origen**, who two generations earlier had championed the integration of Platonic philosophy into Christian thought and whom we will meet again later in the course.

Eusebius's most important work for our purposes is the Ecclesiastical History, which was the first book claiming to tell the whole history of Christianity from its beginning to Eusebius's day, over two hundred years later. Like all historians, Eusebius had a purpose in writing: to portray Christianity as fundamentally compatible with elite Roman society as well as with the patronage of the Emperor **Constantine** who had recently elevated Christianity to the favour of the Imperial Court.

In the service of this goal, Eusebius does a lot of things modern historians frown on. He extols heroes of the new religion in ways that filed down their inconvenient edges, and made them into figures who expressed virtues much like those his elite Roman audience admired. To do that, he had to file down a lot of their rougher edges, and skirt around the fact that many of his heroes were **martyrs** who had been killed under campaigns of persecution waged by previous emperors. It was also a story about a unified, authoritative Church which expressed God's truth in the world, far different from the extraordinarily heated factionalism and high-stakes theological arguments that characterized Christian communities when Eusebius lived. By emphasizing the consistency and unity of Christianity, Eusebius defended it from non-Christian detractors who found it ridiculous that there were so many competing claims to "the truth" of Christianity. He also sought to reassure Constantine that he had thrown in his lot with the true religion of God, not with a bunch of cantankerous and often petty **bishops**.

Eusebius's ecclesiastical history sets the theme for many later Christian histories and still a lot of popular Christian histories: a story about heroes of the faith championing truth against error. That truth, as in Eusebius's case, often looks an awful lot like the forms of Christianity that the authors find beneficial and relevant in their own time. Some, like Eusebius, saw this as a story of the true church defending and clarifying the single true religion delivered by Jesus. Others, like many Protestant historians through the nineteenth century, saw it as a story of a single, true religion being delivered by Jesus and subsequently corrupted or misunderstood before its reformation in the 1500s. Still others, like some popular historians today, see it as a story of a single Christian truth emerging or evolving over time through imperfect humans who eventually hit upon the correct stance toward issues like the nature of Jesus, the meaning of salvation, and the inclusion of women in the church.

In this class, we're taking a different approach. We're going to begin from the proposition that everyone who placed **Jesus of Nazareth** at the centre of their religious world was a Christian, whose views of correct belief -- also called orthodoxy -- and correct practice -- also called orthopraxy -- had as much validity as any others. This radically changes how we look at Christian history. Rather than a story of a true church defending itself against error, or a story of Christian truth emerging over time, it becomes a story of multiple communities, trying to make sense of their lives in the light of the stories and practices they inherited. Although we will be tracking a majoritarian view that eventually gave rise to Catholic and Orthodox Christianity -- two groups that now make up about 60% of the world's 2.2 billion Christians -- we will be trying along the way to seriously consider the perspectives of other Christian voices that arose during the religion's first eight centuries. This is the "why" of this course: to understand the diversity of early Christianity in order to see the contingency and messiness of a history that is still too often presented as the inevitable development of a unified truth.

Many of these other voices are now hard to hear because they were subsequently suppressed or hidden due to their conflict with later majoritarian theologies. We know them only by fragments that survived by chance or from the writings of their opponents. But even the voices of majoritarian Christians can now be hard to hear, because, for the most part, only those with literacy, prestige, and often a measure of good luck had their writings distributed, copied by hand, and preserved through the intervening centuries. Our records over-represent priests and bishops over lay people, men over women, and the educated over the illiterate.

Hearing these voices will require us to grow new historical skills. Any historical argument about the past -- including the narratives told in textbooks-- is grounded in the disciplined interpretation of the often-fragmentary evidence we have left to us.

In preparation for our first session I've asked you to read two short articles on how to do historical interpretation. The first is an article on reading what we call **primary sources** -- the documents produced during the period we're studying. As you will see from this article, historians do not simply report what is said in the historical records because they are well aware that those sources are shaped by the author's perspective, motivations, and social setting. Instead, they ask questions like: What was the purpose this text was made for? What is the author's argument? And what presuppositions and values does the text reveal? The discipline of thinking about these questions prepares us to use primary sources effectively to create arguments about the past that are grounded in a careful understanding of sources.

The second article guides you to how to read that what we call **secondary sources**, that is, historians' arguments about the past. It will explain how historians read these arguments: not start to finish but in a selective way that amounts to careful skimming and re-skimming with occasional deep dives. When reading each others' arguments, historians are always alert for how the author deploys primary sources to support their central argument or thesis, and watch for stated or implicit presuppositions shaping what they write.

By the way, your textbook for the course -- and for that matter my lectures -- are also secondary sources subject to this same scrutiny. Always remember that both your textbook author, Justo González, and I are not "telling it like it was" so much as we're making an argument about how

it was based on the information available to us. You will note that our interpretations and emphases sometimes differ, which I see as a productive thing. As you learn to do analysis of the sources, you too will become equipped to make these kinds of arguments about the past and to disagree with me or with González by drawing on the primary sources we read.

I hope that you will enjoy internalizing this historical discipline not just because I find it useful and, in its own way, beautiful but also because it helps us gain perspective. Historians strive to examine their thinking for the assumptions of the present and their preconceived notions about the past and to try to read past those biases. Doing this allows us, in a fleeting way, to meet the dead: to see in them as people whose world and concerns are at once so like ours, and so radically different.

The primary expression of this historical ethic that I'm going to be asking you to take up in this class is to avoid theological judgments. Whether you're coming from a deep background in Christian education or whether this is your first class in Christianity, there are going to be Christian groups and beliefs and ideas in this class that are likely to dismay, shock, or confuse you. I ask you to remember that because a Christian belief or group seems wrong or strange does not make it a lesser form of Christianity. Still less does it mean that it is not "really" or "truly" Christianity. To make those judgments is to circle back to the kind of history Eusebius wrote: a history that in the end tells us much more about him than it does about the events he purported the chronicle.

Also for our first class we will be reading our first primary sources selections from some of the oldest parts of the collection of books that the Christians now call the New Testament: letters or epistles attributed to Paul of Tarsus, an important early Christian leader who lived from 5CE to between 64 and 68 CE. If you are from a Christian background you might be familiar with some of these texts. If you're not from a Christian background you might find them less familiar. However, I'm asking all of you to read them not as scriptures but as primary sources. That is, I'm not asking you to find spiritual truth or even aesthetic enjoyment in them, but to read the text as a letter written at a particular point in Christian history by a very human man

In the next episode of the podcast, I'll talk about the larger context of these letters: the separation of Christianity from second temple Judaism.

Our intro and outro music is "Cathedral Steps" by Martijn de Boer, gratefully used under a Creative Commons license. A link to the track is available in the transcript (<http://dig.ccmixer.org/files/NiGiD/47383> (Links to an external site.))

With that, I look forward to seeing you in our next class. Until then stay healthy and be kind to yourself.