MEDIEVAL CHURCH: A RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF CRISIS AND CREATIVITY

Meeting time
Tuesday, 3:00-5:45

Course presentation
Wielding nearly unlimited authority over the lives - and the after-life – of millions of Europeans, the Catholic Church was by far the most important political, as well as cultural, power of the Middle Ages. The only global institution of this era, the Church was at the same time able to nourish strong local roots: its cardinals and popes came from all over the continent and dealt with international politics at the highest level, while priests and friars brought home to the people a faith tied to the neighborhood church and confraternity, and personified by a saint’s shrine and relics.

Through a combination of lectures, students’ presentations, films and site visits, this course will explore selected aspects of the Medieval Church’s history: its often rocky relations with the other supreme power of the time, the Holy Roman Empire; the rise of monasticism and its different versions; the spread of heretical movements and their repression by the Inquisition; sainthood, and how “heavenly” women and men could serve to articulate very earthly ideologies on state, society, gender roles.

Site visits will connect concepts and names with physical places and their aura: the “agony” of a politically-minded preacher of doom whose life ended on the stake, Savonarola, will be followed in the cells of his convent of San Marco; we will relive the “ecstasy” of Francis of Assisi on the original backdrop of the rugged slopes of La Verna, on the Apennines, where the most popular saint of the Middle Ages received the stigmata.

Course contents
The aim of the course is to follow the evolution of religious ideas and practices in Europe throughout the period which goes from the conflict between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire in the late eleventh century, to the Protestant Reformation, which marked the end of Western religious unity, and indeed of medieval Catholicism, in the sixteenth century.

A brief introductory part (weeks 1-2) will discuss the original features of the medieval Church in the centuries of late antiquity, when the development of Catholicism brought the Roman see to a fateful partnership with Constantine the Great’s Empire. The first part of the course (weeks 3-6) will be devoted to the period 1000-1300. We will examine Gregorian reform, that is, a vast redefinition of religious structures, beliefs, and behaviors, which lead the Church to engage a long struggle against the German emperors, and at the same time a difficult confrontation with lay people. We will also analyze the rise of sainthood as a paradigm of Christian life, reflecting the increasing involvement of previously marginal figures - commoners, women - in the life of the Church.

In the second part (weeks 7-9), the course will concentrate on the transformation of the papacy into a secular power, and on how this change was perceived and judged in the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. We will see how influential intellectuals of a new type, the humanists, expressed a strong yearning for a reformatio (reform) of the Church, while similar concepts were popularized, at a different level, by itinerant, “freelance” preachers who were able to stir large throngs of followers. A close study of the life and ideas of the most brilliant of all humanists, Erasmus, will serve as the ideal bridge towards the next stage, the Protestant Reformation.

In the third part (weeks 10-11), a survey of the political and economic crisis of the Empire at the beginning of the sixteenth century will provide the background for the analysis of Luther’s theology and of his role as the leader of the German reformation. The course will then follow the various phases of the Reformation, especially in Switzerland and in the Italian states, with a particular emphasis on the ideas and the actions of the radical reformers, who often associated theological innovations to a call for political and social renewal.
Requirements
Students are expected to attend class regularly, to complete all assigned reading by the date indicated on the syllabus, and to lead at least one class discussion, on which they will be graded. More than one unexcused absence will result in the lowering of the final grade. Illness or natural calamity are the only grounds for excused absences; however, absences due to illness will be excused only if advised in writing by a physician (excused notes will not be given when a doctor’s certificate confirms solely that the student was visited). Participation to the two site visits and the field trip is obligatory: please note that they will take place on Fridays (see below the schedule of classes for details).

Evaluated work will consist of the following:
- class participation and management of class discussion (25%)
- one in-class mid-term exam (25%)
- one in-class final exam (25%)
- one term paper (8-10 pages, typed, with bibliography) on a subject of the student’s own choice (25%).

Students are expected to abide by New York University’s rules concerning academic honesty. The work that they turn in or present orally must be their own. All sources must be cited. Failure to do so may result in an “F” for the assignment, or, in some cases, for the course. Please consult the NYU website for more complete information on this subject.

Readings
It is recommended that the students buy the books marked by an “*”. Copies of all other readings are included in the reader prepared for the class (and most of source books are in the library of Villa Ulivi).


SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

9/7 Introduction

9/14 The Medieval Church: the Original Features
READ: LYNCH, The Medieval Church, 19-34, 35-45, 61-4, 105-13; “Gregory I’s Account of Benedict’s Life”, in KIRSCHNER-MORRISON, Medieval Europe, 8-17.

9/21 The Catholic Church in the XI Century: Clergy and Laity

Friday 9/24 Site visit: the Certosa of Galluzzo

9/28 The Investiture Controversy and Gregorian Reform

10/5 Medieval Religious Experience: The Saints

Friday 10/8 Field trip: Convent of La Verna (date to be confirmed)

10/12 New Religious Orders, Heretics and Inquisition Between the Twelfth and the Thirteenth Century

10/19 MID-TERM EXAM

FALL BREAK

Friday 11/5 Site visit: Convent of San Marco

11/9 The Late Medieval and Renaissance Papacy
11/16 Humanism and Religion from Valla to Erasmus

11/23 The Political and Religious Crisis of the Early Sixteenth Century

11/30 Martin Luther and the Outbreak of the Reformation

12/7 The spread of the Reformation in Europe. The “Radical Reformation”
READ: CHADWICK, The Reformation, 76-96, 153-170, 188-210; CANTIMORI, Italy and the Papacy, all.

12/14 FINAL EXAM

A NOTE ON REQUIREMENTS

Class presentations
Students will present to the class on a theme chosen among the weekly topics listed on the syllabus. They are first to show clearly the main points discussed by the author(s), expressing their personal point of view, comparing the readings examined to other texts read in class, and explaining whether they are convinced of the authors’ opinion and why. Presentations must be an exercise in critical thinking, not a mere repetition of the readings’ contents; they will have to be concise (max. 30 minutes), lively and to the point. After their presentation, students will chair the class discussion, that is, questions and comments from their peers. PowerPoint, handouts, and other creative methods of interaction/presentation are encouraged, but must be discussed with the professor. Students may have to read additional bibliography to prepare for presentation, and in any case must meet with professor beforehand. To prepare for presentation, students will normally have to read additional bibliography indicated by professor. Presentations have to be done normally in pairs, on the first class of the week chosen. The first week available for presentations is that of Oct. 5, the last one that of Nov. 30. Professor will circulate a sign-up calendar of presentations in the week of Sept. 28. All students MUST sign up for a presentation by that week. No rescheduling of presentations will be allowed.

In-class Examinations
They consist of two parts. The first part will be a list of names, dates and events which students have to identify with short definitions - 2-3 complete sentences each. The second part will be composed of four essay questions. Students will choose two, and answer them fully, that is, with essays approx. two pages long each. The final exam will not be cumulative. Professor will hand out study sheets before both exams.

Term Paper
Students can choose the topic for their term paper, but have to discuss it first with professor and have his approval. A bibliography for the paper will be defined in a discussion with professor. Papers should be 8 to 10
pages, double-spaced, including bibliography and notes. Students are encouraged to submit a draft of their papers by Nov. 23. The final deadline for the submission of papers is Dec. 7. No extensions.