

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Course Profile

Course # and Title SF/RHTH 501, “Desert Discipleship”

Instructor: Mark N. Swanson **Semester/Year:** Spring 2017

Course **Rationale** and Description

(Why do we offer this course? Which of LSTC’s degree program stated competencies does it address?):

The rise of monasticism in the Egyptian desert between the 4th and the 6th centuries is a critically important chapter in Christian history, not only for its contributions to Christian institutional history, but also and especially for the contribution of the “desert fathers and mothers” to the Church’s understanding of Christ, the Scriptures, sin and how to fight it, the nature of salvation, the role of the human body and of the passions, the importance of community, etc.—in brief, what it means to be a human being and to be a disciple of Jesus.

This course will deal with the holy men and women of Egypt and the literature by and about them, with special attention given to the topics listed above, and to their continuing influence on the Church in East and West. Particular figures to be studied include Antony, others mentioned in the “Sayings of the Desert Fathers,” some of the desert mothers (or “female fathers”), and such household names as Pachomius, Evagrius Ponticus, Daniel of Scetis, and Shenoute the Archimandrite.

We will seek some counterpoint to their lives and contributions from *outside* the Christian tradition, e.g. in the great ascetics and Sufi teachers of the Islamic tradition (e.g., in themes such as the call of the saint; female ascetics; spiritual psychology; forms of community; and similar literary forms).

M.Div. and M.A. students will find that the course is especially directed to:

- ❖ Learning Competency #1, “Personal and Spiritual Formation,” as we study these strange disciples of Jesus, who knew themselves to be “created and called to give witness to Jesus Christ, Trinitarian faith, care for creation, and community with human neighbors.”
- ❖ Learning Competency #3, “History and Theology,” as we seek a conversation with “our forebears in the faith” so as “creatively [to] relate the foundational theological texts, traditions and practices of the Christian faith to exigent questions and issues in contemporary contexts.”

Th.M. and Ph.D. students will find that the course gives them an opportunity to engage with recent research, to pursue their own inquiries, to communicate the results of this work orally and in writing, to teach others, and to relate what may be a new field to their principal fields of research.

Course Learning **Outcomes** (Learners will be able to):
(What *difference* will this course make to students' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices?)

As a result of this course, participants will have:

- ❖ acquired knowledge of the lives, teachings, and witness of the early Egyptian desert Christians, including a working familiarity with several of the primary texts (in English translation) that bear witness to their lives, teachings, and witness;
- ❖ pondered, perhaps in new and deep ways, their teachings (in word and example) about what it means to be a human being and a disciple of Jesus;
- ❖ learned to locate these “desert disciples” in the story of Christianity, so as to articulate how they have influenced the story as a whole (especially that of the churches for which monasticism is a continuing tradition, but by no means excluding the churches of the Reformation);
- ❖ through looking at parallel Christian and (e.g.) Muslim ascetic practices and teachings, appreciated both their similarities and the ways in which they are shaped by their particular traditions;
- ❖ gained a capacity to navigate the literature about these early Egyptian desert Christians; to do research and present results in written and oral form; and to articulate the ongoing relevance of their witness—for the later history of the Church and for issues of contemporary importance;
- ❖ come to see these strange Christians as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ and serious disciples of Jesus—who we can interrogate and from whom we can learn;
- ❖ been on a sort of pilgrimage!

Strategies for Learning:
(How shall we go about achieving these outcomes?)

- ❖ This course may be a kind of **seminar**, in which we shall all read widely, especially in primary texts, and share our discoveries.
- ❖ Short **reflection papers** (at least) will frequently be required. In these papers we shall strive **both** for academic depth **and** to seek edification from great teachers of the faith. In the past, these papers have been the basis of some of our best (and deepest) conversations.

- ❖ The three-hour class period will often be divided into three parts, for example: (a) discussion of reflection papers; (b) an exercise, in which teams of students read primary sources together, and then report to the whole group; (c) a presentation from the instructor (which may include slides), and more discussion.
- ❖ Depending on the number of students, we may devote three or four class sessions to special topics such as: the eight “thoughts” or seven deadly sins/vices; women in the early monastic literature; the influence of the Egyptian desert fathers and mothers on later church history; their influence in the late 20th and 21st centuries. Every student will have the opportunity to present a relevant article or book in one of these special sessions; bibliographies from which one might choose will be provided.
- ❖ The **final project/presentation/paper** may take a number of forms, e.g.
 - a study of a particular monastic leader or holy man/woman; or a careful review of a significant recent book; or a study of some significant theme – in the form of a paper that demonstrates careful reading and research, critical reflection, and ongoing questioning about how the material studied may (or may not) be of relevance to Christian discipleship today.
 - other projects of personal or congregational significance. Past projects have included, for example, a contemporary paraphrase/rewriting of a classic (but difficult) monastic text; or a book of devotional readings and exercises, inspired by the literature read in this course, for congregational use during the season of Lent.

Assessment:

(How shall we know if we—students and instructors—have been successful in achieving the outcomes?)

- ❖ As a seminar class, we shall constantly be presenting our work to the scrutiny of one another for encouragement, suggestions, and constructive critique. This goes for the instructor as well! We shall *all* be teachers and learners in this seminar.
- ❖ Time will regularly be devoted to checking on our progress toward desired Outcomes. Various possibilities for giving feedback to the instructor will be provided (privately or even anonymously as well as in group session).
- ❖ The instructor promises to provide feedback on written work in a thorough and timely fashion.

Bibliography: Required Primary Sources (in English translation)

Text Title	Author	ISBN# (Required)
<i>The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life</i>	Athanasius of Alexandria; translated by Tim Vivian and A. N. Athanassakis	ISBN-10: 0879079029 ISBN-13: 978-0879079024
<i>The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection</i>	Translated by Benedicta Ward	ISBN-10: 0879079592 ISBN-13: 978-0879079598
<i>The Lives of the Desert Fathers: Historia Monachorum in Aegypto</i>	Norman Russell and Benedicta Ward	ISBN-10: 0879079347 ISBN-13: 978-0879079345
<i>The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer</i>	Evagrius Ponticus; translated by John Eudes Bamberger	ISBN-10: 0879079045 ISBN-13: 978-0879079048
<i>The Life of Shenoute</i>	Besa; translated by David N. Bell	ISBN-10: 0879078731 ISBN-13: 978-0879078737

These are all paperbacks, and many of them can be purchased second-hand for a few dollars. All will be available on Reserve in the JKM Library.

One highly recommended secondary source:

Text Title	Author	ISBN# (Required)
<i>Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism.</i> Paperback, and available on Kindle.	William Harmless	ISBN-10: 0195162234 ISBN-13: 978-0195162233

A number of very important works, including Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint*; Philip Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt*; and Susanna Elm, *'Virgins of God': The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*; will be on Reserve in the Library.

Other resources will be available online or through the course website, and we will all spend time in libraries!

Additional information:

For more information, contact the instructor: mswanson@lstc.edu .