

RELS 4000 / Spring 2017

# Who Were the First Christians?

Instructor: Professor Tom Robinson

Professor Robinson has just had a new book released by Oxford University Press, and he is offering a course on the theme in Spring Semester 2017.

It has been widely assumed that there were 6 million Christians (or 10% of the population of the Roman Empire) by around the year 300. The largely-unexamined consensus view is also that Christianity was an urban movement until the conversion of Emperor Constantine. On close examination, it appears that these two popular views would nearly saturate every urban area of the entire Roman Empire with Christians, leaving no room for Jews or pagans.

That scenario simply does not work. But where does the solution lie? Were there many fewer Christians in the Roman world than we have thought? Was the Roman world much more urbanized? Or, is the urban thesis defective, so that the neglected countryside must now be considered in any reconstruction of early Christian growth? Further, what was the makeup of the typical Christian congregation? Was it a lower-class movement? Or was it a movement of the upwardly mobile middle-class? Should more attention be given to the countryside and to the considerable contingent of the marginal and the rustic within urban populations? How did Christianity sell its wares in the Greco-Roman religious marketplace?

Wednesday evenings: 6:00 – 8:50

Prerequisite:

RELS 2500 or permission from instructor.

Particularly designed for those with a background in Ancient History or early Christianity.

## What is being said about the book:

"In this fascinating and revolutionary study Robinson challenges the consensus that early Christianity was predominantly an urban movement. Through careful analysis he emphasizes the importance of the rural context. Robinson helpfully complexifies the discussion by highlighting the interplay between urban and rural communities. Inhabitants of cities comprised rustic, non-elites, and this demographic mix is essential for understanding early Christianity. This study provides key new insights into formative Christianity." --Paul Foster, School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh

"In this paradigm-shifting and innovative work, Thomas Robinson challenges the scholarly consensus regarding the urban origins of early Christianity. Robinson meticulously examines the ancient literary, inscriptional and archaeological evidence for the existence of a rural Christianity from its

first generation to the time of Constantine.

Future studies of Christian origins will be heavily indebted to Robinson's persuasive demonstration of the confluence of rural and urban factors in the expansion of the Christian movement." --James R. Harrison, Sydney College of Divinity, co-editor of *The First Urban Churches*

"Scholarly consensus identifies early Christianity as an almost entirely urban movement, comprising 10% of the population of the Roman empire. Robinson shows in this challenging study that the numbers and arguments simply don't add up. He reveals the profound uncertainty at the heart of so many careless demographic assumptions and scholarly readings, and makes a strong case that agrarian Christians will have to be readmitted to the early Church." --Brian McGing, Regius Professor of Greek, Trinity College Dublin

