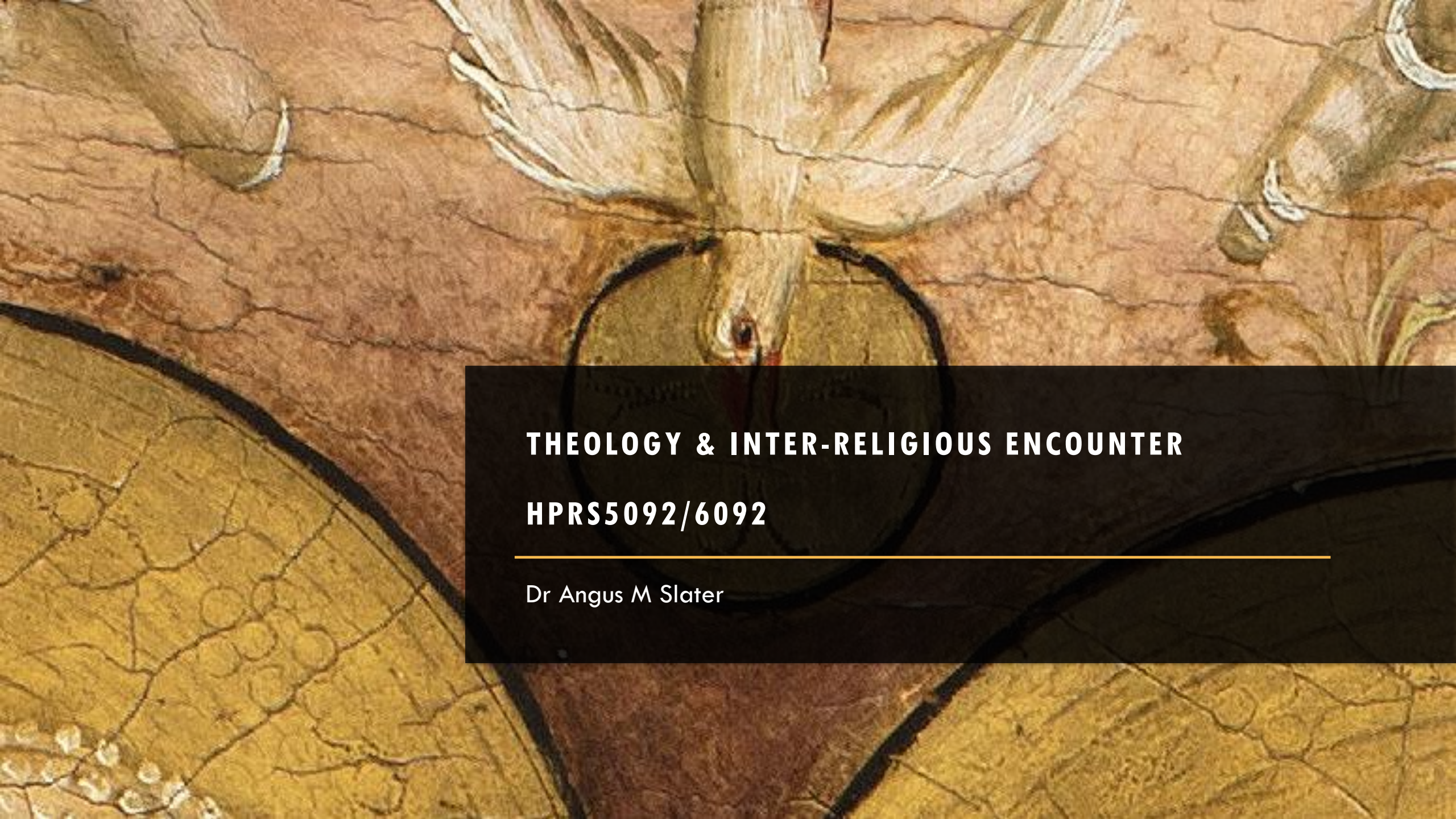


The background is a textured, cracked surface in shades of brown and tan. In the center, there is a circular, dark, reflective area. Above this circle, a white, dove-like figure with spread wings is depicted, appearing to emerge from or descend into the circle. The overall texture is reminiscent of old parchment or weathered stone.

THEOLOGY & INTER-RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

HPRS5092/6092

Dr Angus M Slater



1 - DOCTRINE, TRUTH, & REASON

REVISION

In your previous theological study, you will (probably!) have had the opportunity to explore both systematic approaches to theology, as well as studying specific aspects of theology in different contexts.

You will also hopefully have a firm grounding in the key principles and methods of theological enquiry, including different ways of approaching topics from a theological perspective.

Earlier modules should have left you comfortable and familiar with studying theology and reasoning yourself within it.



REVISION

I would recommend revising and going back to some of the more general readings provided on the topic, particularly readings dealing with the definition of theology and with the core commitments of the Christian tradition.

In this section, I want to cover some key aspects of the notion of doctrine in the Christian tradition, as well as aspects to do with what we mean by truth, and what role reason and faith play in developing our beliefs.

These are good building blocks for understanding the way in which the Christian tradition has come to understand other religious faiths.



A painting of a white dove with its wings spread, perched on a dark circular object, set against a cracked, textured background. The dove is white with a red beak and a red eye. The background is a mix of brown and tan colors with a cracked, leather-like texture. The word "DOCTRINE" is written in white capital letters on a black rectangular background that is partially overlaid on the painting.

DOCTRINE

DOCTRINE

We often think of the term ‘doctrine’ as denoted a fixed or unchanging position, against which other things can be measured or adjudged – for example, learning ‘Christian doctrine’.

In some circumstances, we use it to mean an overall guiding set of principles for action, for example, with military doctrine, or as a defining point of reference, for example, in international relations with the Monroe Doctrine.

When we use the term ‘doctrine’ in the Christian theological sense, its meaning and roots are a little different and we have to be aware of the precision and distinction needed for its use.



DOCTRINE

In theological contexts, rather than talking of fixed beliefs 'as' doctrine, e.g. a rote list of rules to learn, we tend to be referring to a process – a making, or becoming, of doctrine.

In this sense, while a belief in God may be a necessary part of Christian 'doctrine' for example, theologians are usually asking questions about how beliefs such as this *become* doctrine, or why beliefs such as this may be made doctrine.

This is a process of questioning that engages with the question of what makes Christianity – what are its definitional bounds and where and why are its limits set.



DOCTRINE

This concept and position of doctrine is connected to the etymology of the term, drawing on two related forms that both point to a relationship between doctrine and forms of teaching or practice.

This arises from the Latin '*docere*' meaning to 'teach', and the Greek '*doxa*' meaning to '(intellectually) accept'.

This leads to a position where doctrine is a moving process of accepted teachings – those principles and positions which are useful to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable.



DOCTRINE

Doctrine quantifies and qualifies belief — it provides a way of drawing a line between those who are inside the tradition and those who are outside the tradition.

This position has meant that we have often seen the notion of a fixed account of doctrine entangled with issues of authority, structure, hierarchy, and power within the Christian tradition.

We see this most clearly in the form of creeds, for example, where beliefs are enumerated that are required for correct belief.



DOCTRINE

Further to this, we must be aware of the distinction between forms of revelation, which enumerate both points of belief and of practice for Christians, and the formulation of doctrine based on that revelation.

An interesting question to engage with here is: who makes doctrine? Is it God, Jesus, the Church, individuals?

In addition, what is the difference between a propositional statement (God is love) and a doctrine about that statement (we should love others as God does)?





TRUTH

TRUTH

If you have picked up anything in the preceding theology modules it should be that truth is perhaps the central concern of theology.

Theology is an attempt at discovering the truth about God, and therefore the truth about everything else.

Further to this, making sure our theology is true, even if we can't be certain, is a vital part of ensuring we are believing the correct things.

After all, if theology is about EVERYTHING, then getting things right becomes very important.



TRUTH

Although this may seem rather simple, this ideal of truth contains within it many complex and difficult to answer questions.

What is truth and why is truth important?

How do we know what is true, and how can we be certain?

How can we ascertain what is true in new situations, where we do not have any contextual information?

How can we convince people of the truth, and how important is this?

Is truth singular, universal, unchanging?

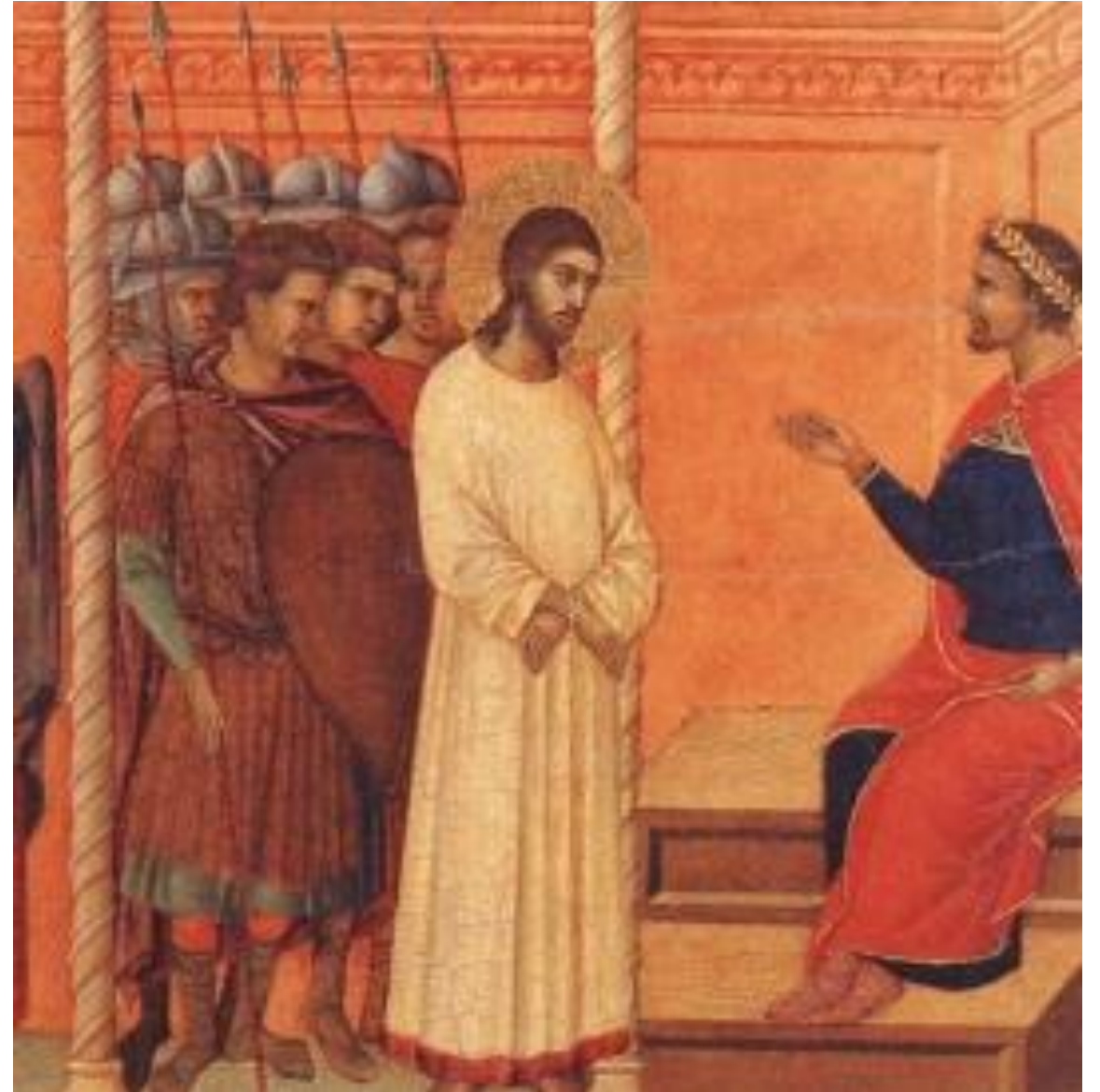


TRUTH

When Pontius Pilate interrogated Jesus before his crucifixion, Jesus proclaimed that **“Everyone on the side of truth listens to me”**. (John 18:37).

To this, Pilate replied **“What is truth?”** and immediately left Jesus to address the Jews who wanted Christ crucified (v. 38).

Although we have no record of any reply by Jesus, Christians affirm that Pilate was staring Truth in the face, for Jesus had earlier said to Thomas, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life”** (John 14:6).



TRUTH

There are a number of different ways of thinking through what Truth is and how we ascertain whether something is true. This question has exercised philosophers and theologians for centuries, with varied and competing responses.

It is not possible to address all of these debates within the discipline called epistemology, but I do want to look at three different forms of Truth and then look at the way in which the Christian tradition has also thought about Truth as a concept.



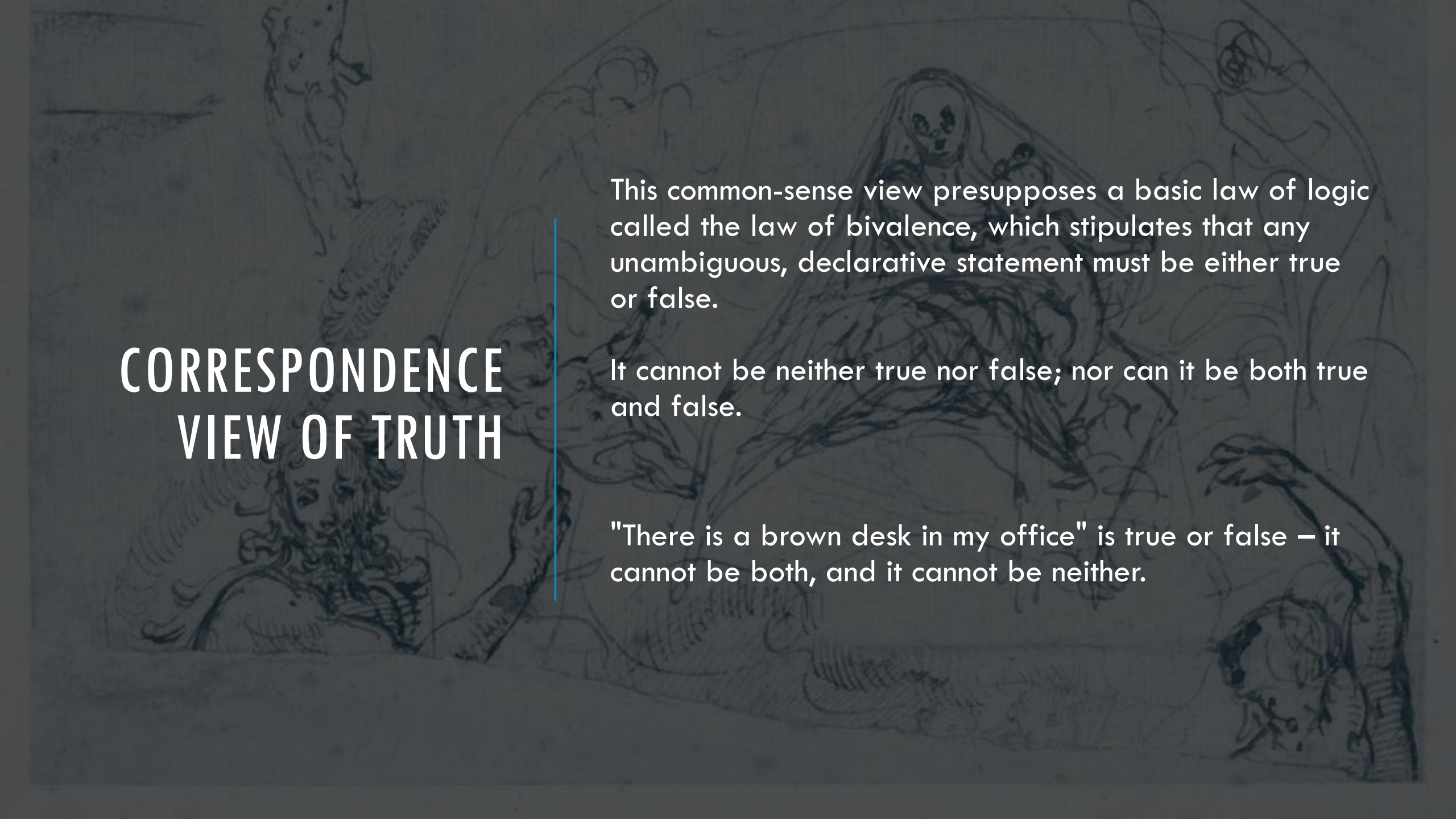
CORRESPONDENCE VIEW OF TRUTH

The correspondence view of truth, held by the majority of philosophers and theologians throughout history until recently, holds that any statement is true if, and only if, it corresponds to or agrees with factual reality.

The statement, “the desk in my office is brown”, is true only if there is, in fact, a brown desk in my study.

The statement, “there is no brown desk in my office”, is false because it fails to correspond to any objective state of affairs.





CORRESPONDENCE VIEW OF TRUTH

This common-sense view presupposes a basic law of logic called the law of bivalence, which stipulates that any unambiguous, declarative statement must be either true or false.

It cannot be neither true nor false; nor can it be both true and false.

"There is a brown desk in my office" is true or false – it cannot be both, and it cannot be neither.

RELATIVIST VIEW OF TRUTH

Relativism states that the truth of a statement depends on the views of the subject, not on whether statements correspond to objective reality (which is often disputed).

For a statement to be true simply means that a person or culture in the position to judge believes it or perceives it to be true.

According to this view, one person can say “Jesus is Lord” and another can say “Allah is Lord”, and both statements will be true, if they accurately express the sentiments of the speakers and their understanding of the situation.

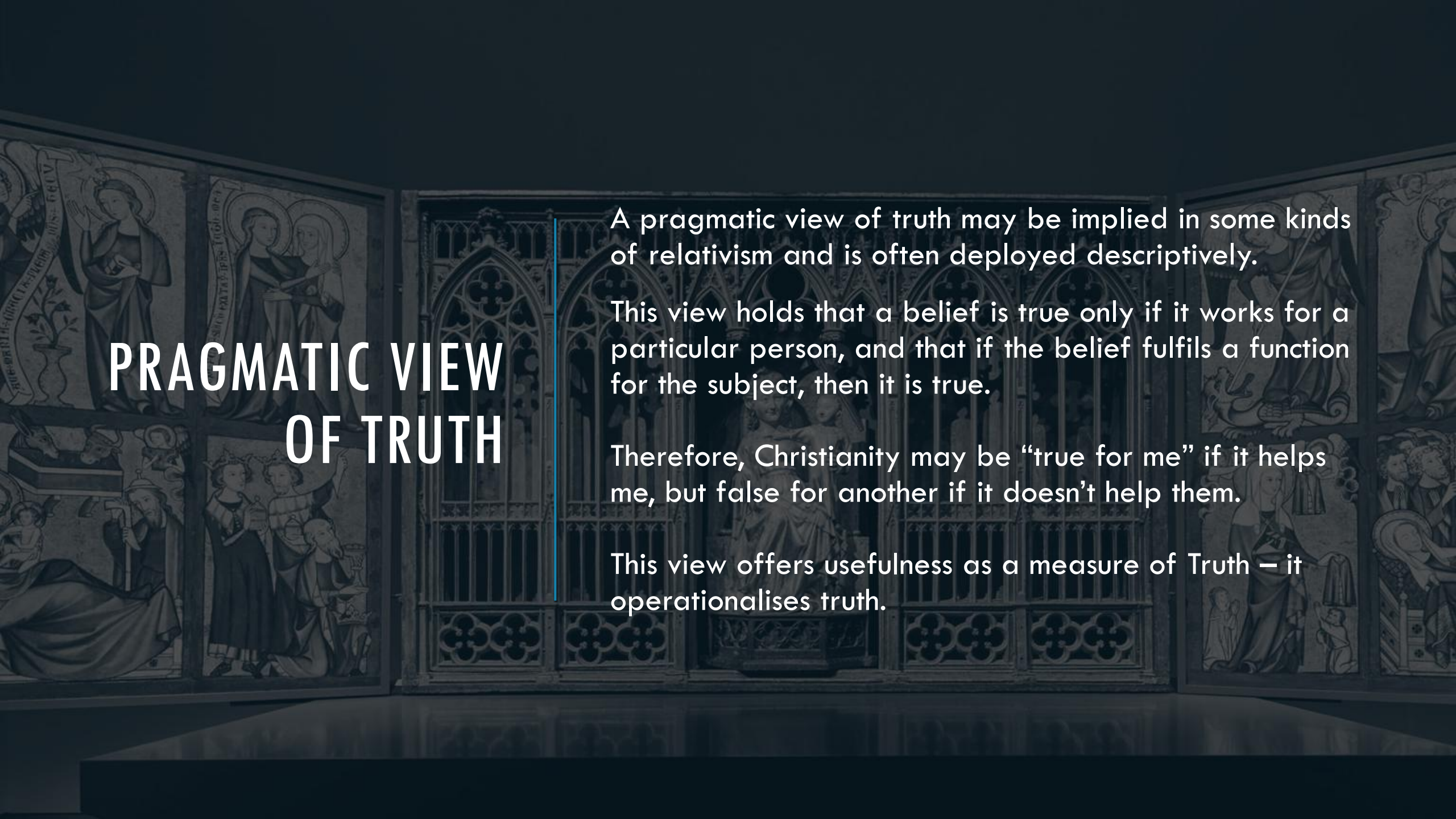
RELATIVIST VIEW OF TRUTH

If I say “Jesus is Lord” and you say “Allah is Lord” both statements cannot be objectively true because they describe mutually exclusive realities.

Jesus is known by Christians as God made flesh (John 1:14), while Muslims deny that Allah incarnates. If “Lord” means a position of unrivalled metaphysical and spiritual supremacy, then Jesus and Allah cannot be both be Lord because “Jesus” and “Allah” are not two words that mean the same thing.

When dealing with divergent claims to objective truth (as we often do in comparative religion and philosophy), contradictions emerge frequently and the correspondence view of truth becomes problematic.





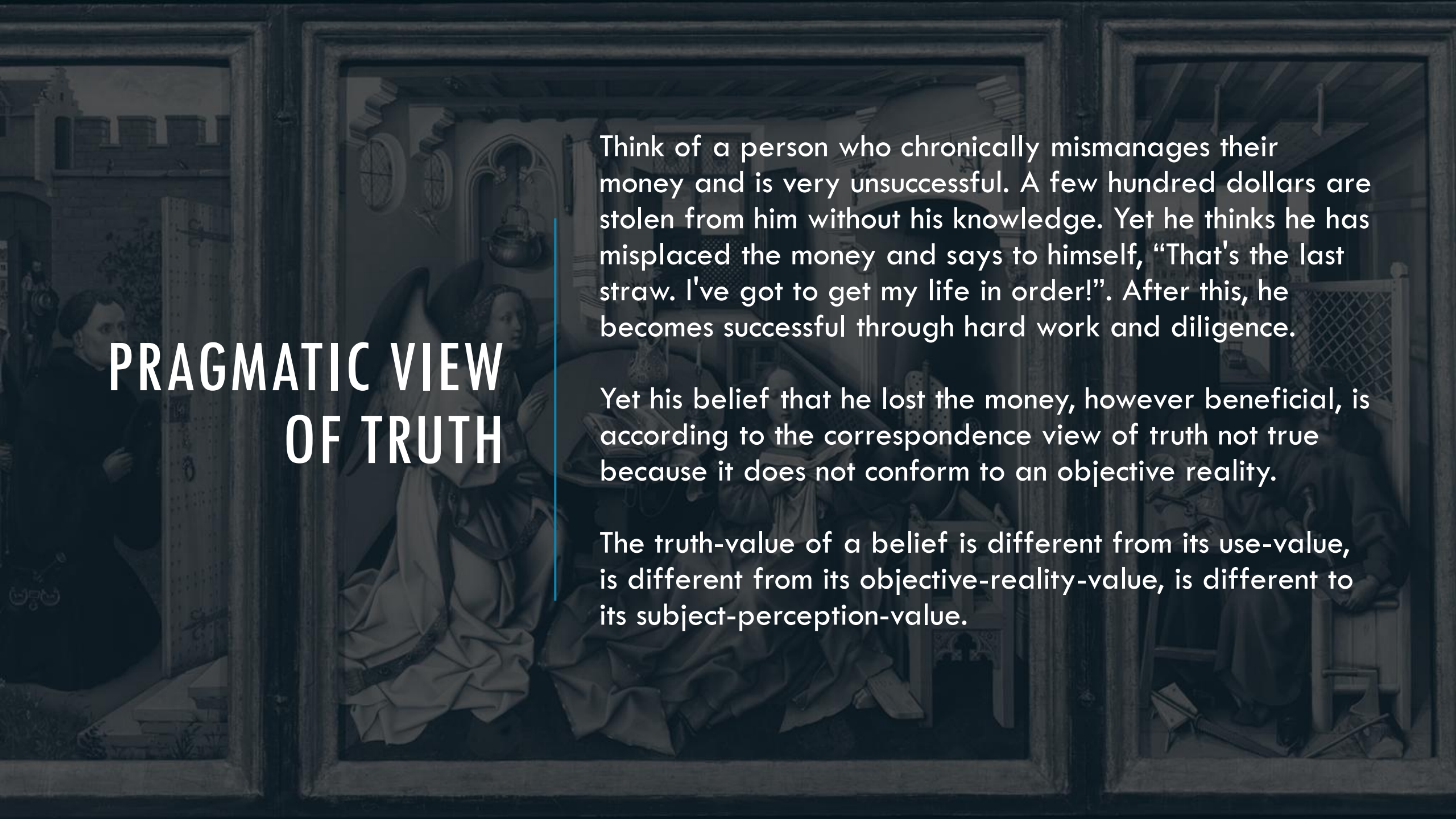
PRAGMATIC VIEW OF TRUTH

A pragmatic view of truth may be implied in some kinds of relativism and is often deployed descriptively.

This view holds that a belief is true only if it works for a particular person, and that if the belief fulfils a function for the subject, then it is true.

Therefore, Christianity may be “true for me” if it helps me, but false for another if it doesn’t help them.

This view offers usefulness as a measure of Truth – it operationalises truth.



PRAGMATIC VIEW OF TRUTH

Think of a person who chronically mismanages their money and is very unsuccessful. A few hundred dollars are stolen from him without his knowledge. Yet he thinks he has misplaced the money and says to himself, "That's the last straw. I've got to get my life in order!". After this, he becomes successful through hard work and diligence.

Yet his belief that he lost the money, however beneficial, is according to the correspondence view of truth not true because it does not conform to an objective reality.

The truth-value of a belief is different from its use-value, is different from its objective-reality-value, is different to its subject-perception-value.



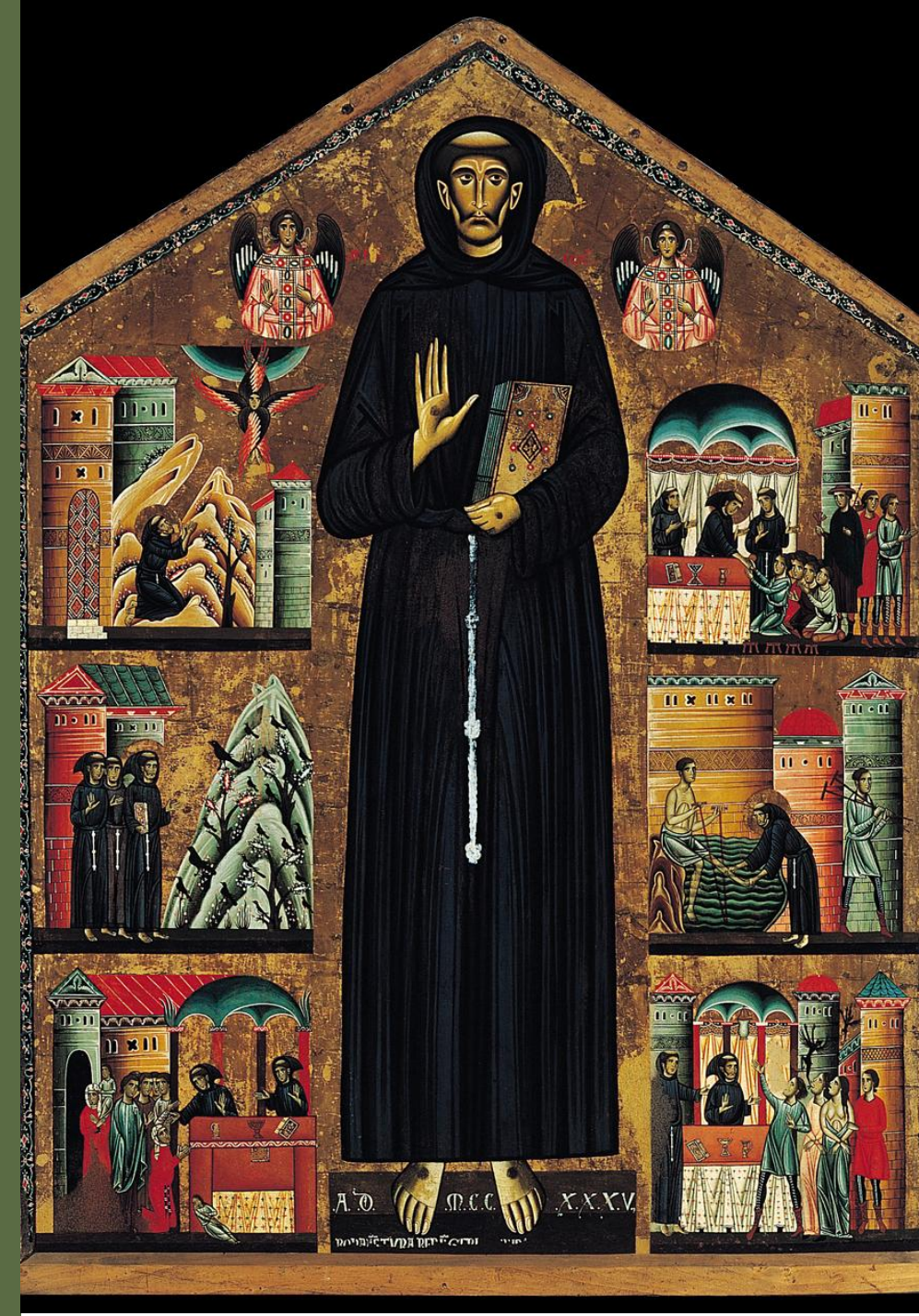
FAITH & REASON

CHRISTIAN NOTIONS OF TRUTH

Christian notions of truth rely on the certainty provided by God's actions – whether this is found in physical creation, inspired scripture, or the ongoing action of the Holy Spirit.

This means that in some senses the Bible is “true”, Christ is “true”, and the Holy Spirit is “true”.

Christians looking for truth turn to one of two sources for Truth – Faith & Reason – in order to see if their reasoning matches up with the certainty provided in various forms by God.

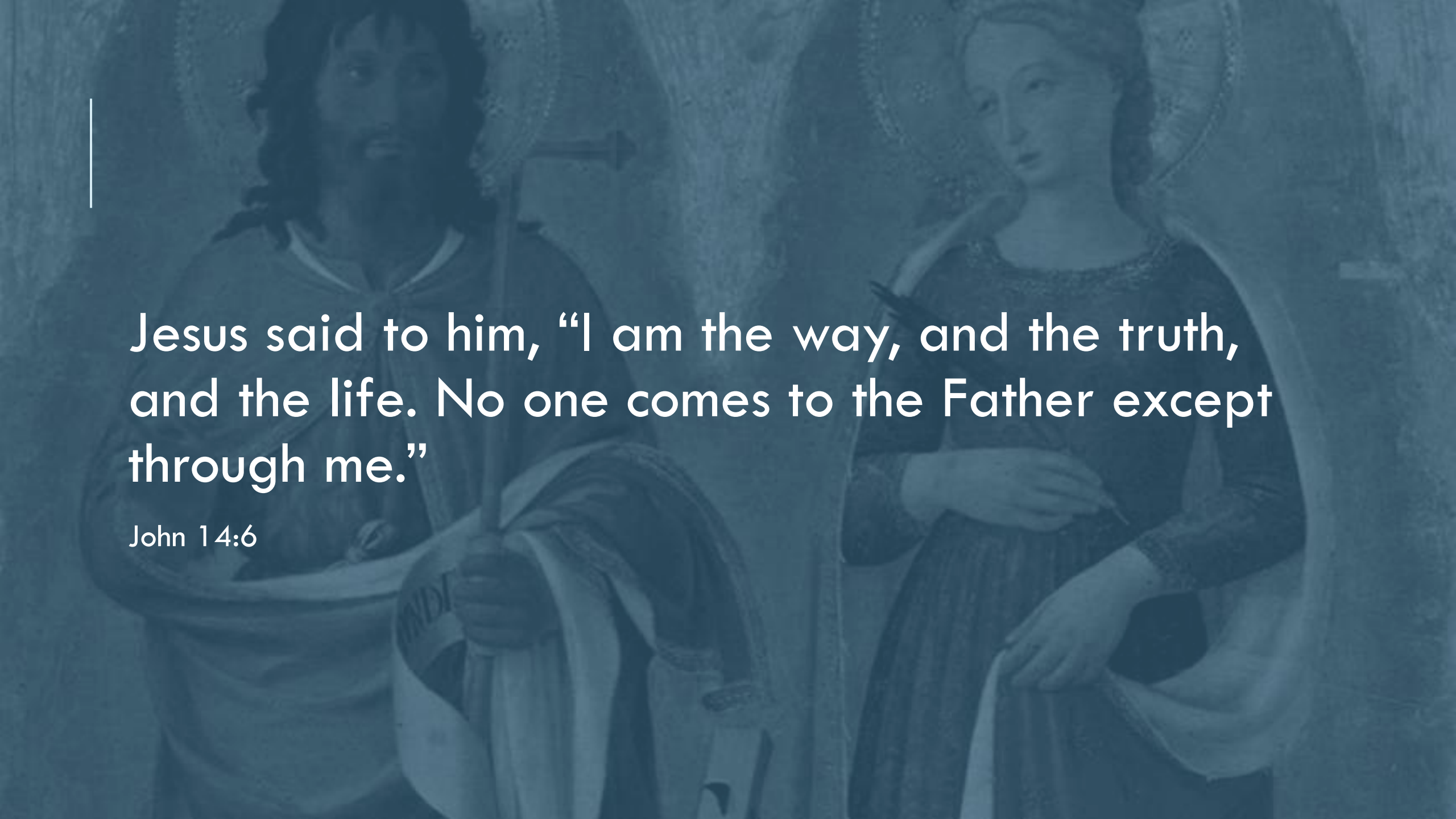


CHRISTIAN NOTIONS OF TRUTH

Examples of this can be found in the relationship of the Christian belief to Scripture.

Scripture functions as a resource for access to both truth, as it is inspired by God and reveals God's actions in the world, and certainty, the ability to know for sure that what we believe is correct. In each case, Scripture's claims are both self-proclaimed (e.g. Scripture tells us it is itself true and certain) and proclaimed by the broader traditions (the Church teaches scripture as truth).





Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth,
and the life. No one comes to the Father except
through me.”

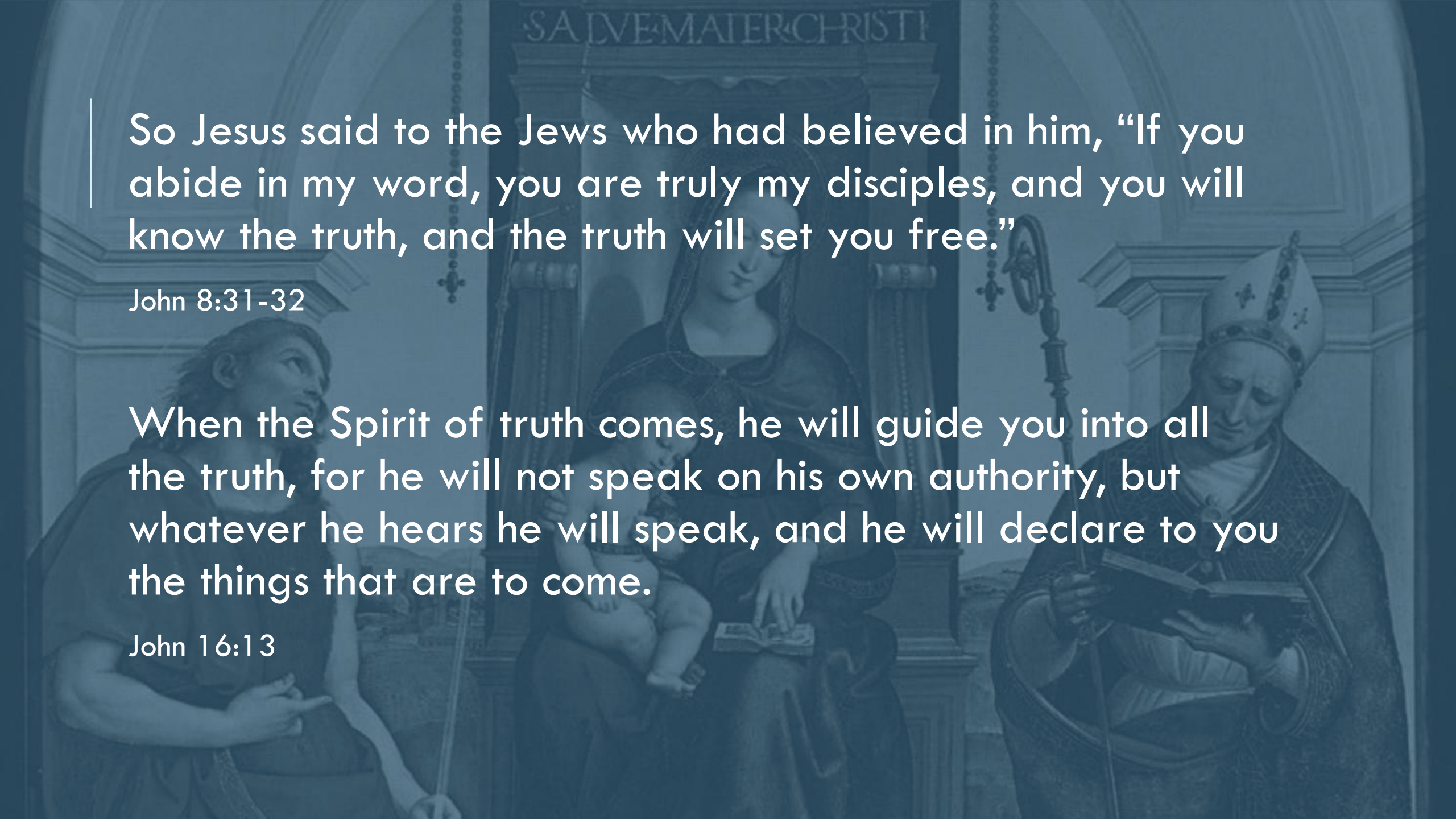
John 14:6

CHRISTIAN NOTIONS OF TRUTH

This is very obviously the case in the Gospel of John, which has a strong emphasis, because of its intended audience (educated Hellenistic people), on the notion of truth and its connection to Christ.

The two scriptural quotations opposite highlight both the connections between the text of Scripture which offers the truth, the actions of Christ which offer the truth, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit which offers the truth.





So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

John 8:31-32

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

John 16:13

CHRISTIAN NOTIONS OF TRUTH

Traditionally, faith and reason have each been considered to be sources of justification for religious belief — that is, we can come to the truth of something either through our faith (e.g. in the truth of scripture) or through our reasoning.

Because both can purportedly serve this same epistemic function, it has been a matter of much interest to philosophers and theologians how the two are related and thus how the rational agent should treat claims derived from either source, especially where these claims may appear to be in disagreement.



CHRISTIAN NOTIONS OF TRUTH

Some have held that there can be no conflict between the two: that reason, properly employed, and faith, properly understood, will never produce contradictory or competing claims – whereas others have maintained that faith and reason can (or even must) be in genuine contention over certain propositions or methodologies.

Those who have taken the latter view disagree as to whether faith or reason ought to prevail when the two are in conflict.

Kierkegaard, for instance, prioritizes faith even to the point that it becomes positively irrational, while Locke emphasizes the reasonableness of faith to such an extent that a religious doctrine's irrationality—conflict with itself or with known facts—is a sign that it is unsound.





READING

READING

Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* II.xl.60-61; in *Florilegium Patristicum*, vol. 29, ed. H.J. Vogels (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1930), 46.7-36

An example of theological writing that explores the nature of faith, truth, and reason.

“Chapter 9: Inquiring After God when Meditating on Scripture” in *Inquiring After God*, ed. E.T. Cherry (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 207-231

This series of readings (intro, Gospel of John, Augustine, Clifton Black) will give you a sense of how theology, scripture, and reading come together to produce Christian understandings.

