

Faith Seeking Understanding: God and Philosophy in the Middle Ages

The University and the Rise of Scholasticism

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The Renewal of the Latin West (10th-11th C)

- The 10thC saw innovations in agriculture — like the invention of the plow — which made farming possible over large tracks of land.
- Long periods of de-population had made the soil tremendously fertile (Southern, *Mid. Ages*, p. 17).
- Farmers had begun planting crops in three-year cycles, which made farming more sustainable and food production more predictable.
- Increasing food sources and a hiatus in the plague allowed population in Western Europe to double in size from the 10th-13thC (LeGoff, *Civ.*, p. 245).
- Money was being minted and trade began to pick up. Old trading routes from Pavia to Byzantium were reopened, and shipping routes from Venice enabled the movement of money and resources Westward.



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The Renewal of the Latin West (10th-11th C)

- There appears to be slight bump in the wages of people in this period. And though small, more were earning wages.
- Growth in trade and wealth drove urbanisation. Towns previously dominated by clerics and government officials were becoming populated by tradesmen and a new professional class.
- The reach of government extended and took shape as regional powers (Barons, Dukes, Counts) acquired lands and titles, and consolidated influence through marriage.
- This required new organisational and administrative procedures, including the updating and reconciling of old and often contradictory legal customs.
- Literate men, with knowledge of the law and philosophy, were needed to assist the task of governance, conduct official business, and carry on correspondence with the King or Pope.



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The Renewal of the Latin West (10th-11th C)

- For the better part of 400 years, the West had been locked in conflict with a surging Islamic caliphates. It spent most of that time in awe of capabilities that they did not have.
- But by the 11thC, Reconquista was seeing moderate successes against Moorish Spain.
- The first crusade (1096-1099) succeeded in pushing Arab forces out of Jerusalem, providing the West with a new sense of its power and agency. But this also deepened a sense of existential threat that Islam posed to the West.
- Peter the Venerable, after visiting Cluniac monasteries in Spain, envisioned a new front of the war: doctrine. He thus formed a team to translate the Koran to refute its teaching (LeGoff, *Int.*, p. 16).



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The Culture of the Monastic Schools

- Though Cathedral schools provided education for children in the diocese, Monastic schools were reserved for the brothers.
- Education was heavily oriented to contemplative practice and the *literary traditions* of the church.
- Study revolved around *lectio divina*, reading lives of the saints, the production of copies or glosses on Scripture, and florilegia/extracts of the Church Fathers.
- Monastic theology was quick to acknowledge the mysteries of faith, open to mystical encounter, aware of the need for humility, and resistant to rationalistic forms of thought. It is a form of theology oriented to *admiratio*.



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The “Masters”

- The wealth and booming populations in cities attracted “Masters”. This was a class of individual not seen in Europe since the Roman Empire — one that made a living by selling his *thoughts*.
- The profession paid little and was precarious. A number of masters lived in poverty trying to scrape enough students together, and it was sometimes difficult to secure payment.
- It was also competitive. Masters showed up to one another’s lectures to poach students. Students would try to show up their teachers to win paying students to themselves.
- Students were financed by family or benefices of an ecclesiastical office.



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Peter Abelard: “Knight of Dialectics”

- The first and most infamous of the new “intellectual class”. He was the eldest son of nobility in Nantes who left the estate to his brothers to study in Paris with William of Champeaux.
- Famously, Abelard regularly challenged and ultimately humiliated his teacher, stealing all his students.
- Becoming a master himself, he would become properly famous for his logical and rhetorical abilities, attracting hundreds of students.
- He would lecture from the site where he originally learned from William of Champeaux, Mount St. Genevieve, now the location of the Sorbonne (LeGoff, *Int.*, p. 36).
- Known initially as a logician and philosopher, he sought to master theology, studying with Anselm of Laon. He would write *Sic et Non*, a textbook of excerpts used to generate debate on Scripture and the Patristics.



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Peter Abelard: “Knight of Dialectics”

- Abelard is most known today for his affair with Heloise. Their affair is recorded in his *Historia Calamitatem* and their *Letters* which were preserved in her Abbey, The Paraclete.
- While canon at Notre Dame Cathedral, he spotted Heloise, a girl of not less than 20. Uncommonly, she was “famous for her learning” — the niece of Fulbert, another canon at the cathedral. Abelard offered to be her tutor and, in place of payment, to live with Fulbert and Heloise.
- “Her studies allowed us to withdraw in private, as love desired, and then with our books open before us, more words of love than of our reading passed between us, and more kissing than teaching. My hands strayed oftener to her bosom than the pages” (*Letters*, p. 67).



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Peter Abelard: “Knight of Dialectics”

- Heloise became pregnant. They fled to the country for her to have the child and for them to marry in secret. When word got out of the marriage, Abelard, who was meant to be celibate, sent Heloise to a nunnery. In anger, Fulbert broke into Abelard's house with some men and castrated Abelard.
- Abelard would retreat to a monastery in St Denis, but would eventually fall out with the Abbot after denying that Denis founded the monastery.
- Several years later (1140), he would be condemned for an unorthodox doctrine of the Trinity and his book would be burned, which he said was more painful than his castration!
- He finally retired to Cluny. After his death, Peter the Venerable gave his body to Heloise to be buried.



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Universities

- Cities with large numbers of masters formed guilds with independent validation (to manage unruly students!). Bishops exercised ecclesiastical oversight by reserving the right to licence teachers (*licentia ubique docendi*).
- All universities taught the *artes liberales* which was the foundation of learning. This included Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, and Astronomy.
- Specialisms after the acquisition of the liberal arts were focused around law, medicine, and theology.
 - Bologna (1158 AD) — was a centre for the study of law, initially run incorporated by students.
 - Paris (1200 AD) — all subjects, but esp. philosophy and theology. Flourished due to its size and the freedom that afforded (because harder to oversee!).
 - Oxford (1214 AD) — theology and philosophy.



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Scholasticism as Christian Humanism

- *Scholae*: “schools”; scholasticism — the method of the schools.
- As Southern argues, scholastic method should be understood as a kind of “Christian humanism” (*Schol. Hum.*, p. 22). Though renaissance humanism would pit logic-chopping against literary pursuits, the humanism of the Middle Ages was a *scientific* one.
- That is, it held the world order to be arranged in wisdom, the effect of a wise Creator. As such, nature, and human beings as part of it, have inherent dignity.
- Human beings, though fallen and sinful, are destined for an end of tremendous dignity — nothing less than communion with God.
- The intellectual life is a means to that end, with the ultimate aim of ordering human knowledge in every domain to God.



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Curating an Ancient Tradition

- Monastic schools focused heavily on the preservation and maintenance of Church texts and traditions.
- That work continued in the High Middle Ages. Sacred texts, supremely the Bible, but also writings of the church fathers were read intensively.
- But they were also read *critically and dialectically*. Abelard's *Sic et Non*, and later Peter Lombard's *Sententiae*, ("opinions") organised the sayings of the ancients topically. They often highlighted oppositions or tensions in these texts which they would attempt to reconcile.

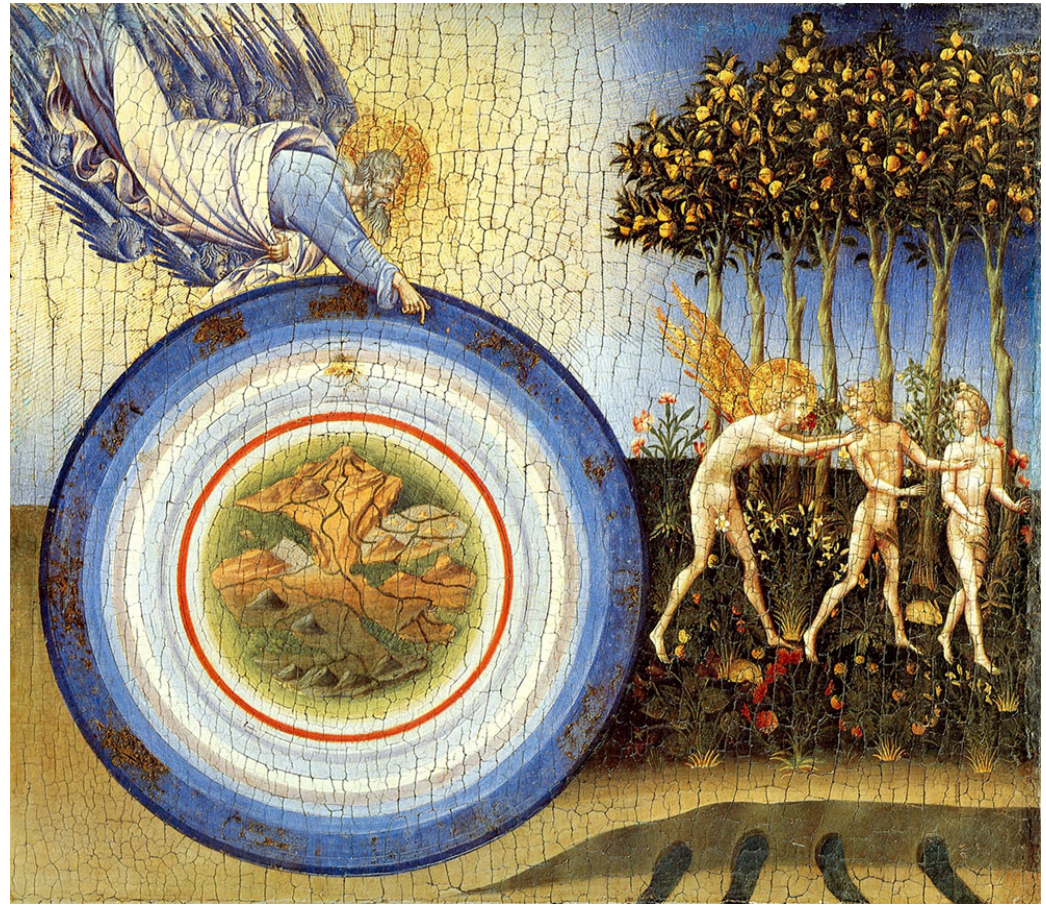


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Compile a Universal Body of Knowledge

- Both the natural and the supernatural were objects of inquiry, but the supernatural was the *principium* of the natural.
- Faith and reason here were thus assumed to be complimentary forms of knowledge.
- This in fact is the purpose of the “university” (*uni* — “one”; *versus* — “to turn”). It was devoted to the integration of human learning in its various forms.



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Cultivate Civic and Spiritual Friendship

- Following the Roman tradition, Medievals regarded “friendship” as a kind of mutual love between persons who share all things in common. Whole treatises were written on friendship, like Aelred of Rivaulx’s *De spirituali amicitia* (right).
- Salvation itself was understood as Christ befriending humanity (John 15:13) that they might become the “friend of God” (James 2:23).
- Medieval society depended heavily on tradition & reputation. The intellectual procedures reflected this.
- Resolving disagreement through *distinctions* was a way of dignifying venerable traditions while seeking to move beyond them.



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Antiqui & Moderni in the High Middle Ages

- In the 12th-13thC, there is a tremendous, almost eschatological sense of optimism.
- There is a renewed confidence in the powers of *reason* to expand understanding of the divine order in the universe, and in the divine life itself.
- The employment of reason was in fact the fulfilment of the Christian's vocation to exercise "dominion" over the earth, bringing it into use of the service of God.
- This brings about a new consciousness of history. Originally, the term *moderni* described a contemporary link in the chain of *traditio* that stretches back to the *antiqui*. By the 12thC, *moderni* comes to be *contrasted* with the *antiqui*. To be "modern" is to be marked by a mode of thought that *differs* from that of the ancients.



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