

Faith Seeking Understanding: God and Philosophy in the Middle Ages

History & Salvation

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History and Salvation

- The ancients regarded the world as eternal, and so tended to see history as somewhat episodic and cyclical (Walsh).
- Aristotle, for instance, regards history to be the study of a series of contingencies, each particular of which may shine light on some universal. But their significance as a series is largely in shedding light on moral and metaphysical principles (Powell).
- In that sense, poetry and philosophy help us make sense of history. Yet in itself, history is a revolving door — it moves, but without any definite end or consummation.
- For this reason, ancient religion was very this-worldly in focus. It provided a means for pursuit of the good life, by rituals to discern the will of the gods or seek their favour. In some cases, also, it provided some fairly loose moral instruction.
- The gods offer “salvation” in the sense that they provide knowledge, or deliverance from some perilous, temporal event.



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The History of Salvation

- The Abrahamic religions, by contrast, hold that God is the Creator of the world, and thus that the world was willed by God and exists for God's purpose.
- This purpose is fellowship with God, and the form of this fellowship is contained in God's law.
- Humans are thus dependent upon God in two respects:
 - Naturally — God is the source of all life, and the end in which their life is fulfilled.
 - Morally — creatures depend upon God to guide them toward that end that will fulfil their nature.
- However, as we are morally free (and corrupt) creatures, we are unjust and so fail to realise this purpose. This is dramatised in the fall narrative of Genesis. Creation and teleology, history and eschatology, are closely inter-related here. The *beginning* is like the *ending*.



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- Adam and Eve's inability to cleave to the good here reveals a universal failing endemic in the human condition — pride, envy, and a weakness of will that fails to cleave to the good.
- Creatures are inherently *finite*, and so naturally liable to decay. But death here acquires the character of a *judgment*. “Sin and death” thus becomes biblical shorthand for the powers that determine the character of humanity's existence as alienated from God.
- In the Abrahamic religions, history is conceived as God's salvation of humankind from this condition (and its effects), reclaiming us for fellowship with God's self.
- In Christianity, that divine purpose turns on the person and work of Christ.



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The History of Salvation

- This, of course, is a function of Christian faith in the divinity of Christ. New Testament scholars now commonly believe that this conviction emerged in the Christian community quite quickly after the Easter event.
- Its implications are far-reaching, though, particularly for a Christian vision of history. If the life and history of Jesus is the life of *God* in the flesh, then this is an event within time that illuminates the whole course of human history.
- For this reason, Christians understand the history of the world to exist within the narrative arch of the Bible — beginning with creation, continuing by Christ redeeming sinners from the fall, and finally culminating in the union of God with his creatures.
- Time, in other words, is to be understood as the history of God's works for our salvation, the central event of which is the incarnation.



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Patristic Conceptions of Christ's Saving Work

- The fathers often think of Christ's saving work as a function of his teaching office by the communication of divine wisdom. This certainly has historical force; and it speaks to the fact that Christ's life and teachings opened the eyes of the church and revealed the nature of God to them.
- They also speak of Christ as the reconstituted head of humankind — a new Adam, who takes on our mortality to communicate his immortality to us:
- “He, the Mighty One, the Artificer of all, Himself prepared this body in the virgin as a temple for Himself, and took it for His very own, as the instrument through which he was known and in which He dwelt. Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished.” — Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, p. 34.



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Patristic Conceptions of Christ's Saving Work

- Some of the church fathers, like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, speak of Christ's death as a ransom (Mark 10:45) paid to the devil.
- Just as the devil tempted Adam and Eve, so by becoming flesh Christ tempts the devil. By allowing himself to be taken and killed, Christ gains a right over the devil so as to reclaim the sinners which the devil had unjustly taken captive.
- The trouble with this view is that the devil does not have a *right* to the sinner's obedience, God does. So it is hard to see why Christ would need to offer himself to the *devil*, if he has no right to them.
- That leaves us with a question — why did Christ need to become a man in order to redeem humankind?

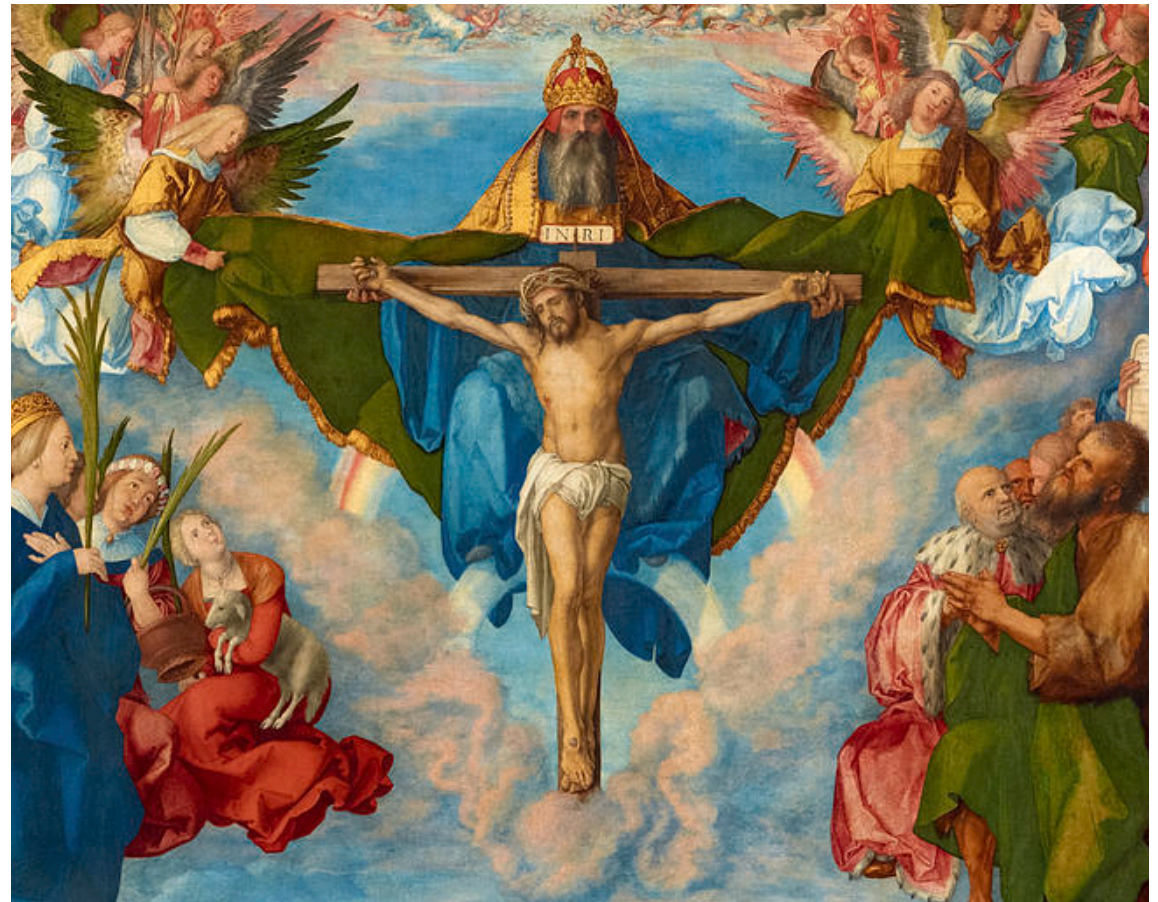


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The Work of Christ in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*

- Anselm argues that, in order to see the wisdom of God in the death of Christ, we have to suppose the *necessity* of the incarnation. Then, by examining its form, we can discern its intended purpose.
- Christ was divine, and according to Scripture he submitted to death voluntarily. This is clear, Anselm argues, in the Garden of Gethsemane, where contrary to all his natural desires, Christ determines to bear the cross.
- By the testimony of Scripture, Christ is said to have come to “seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). And the cross is the crucial event in which Christ “reconciled all things in the body of his flesh through death” (Col.1:21-22).
- The nature of this reconciliation becomes clearer if we consider the nature of sin.

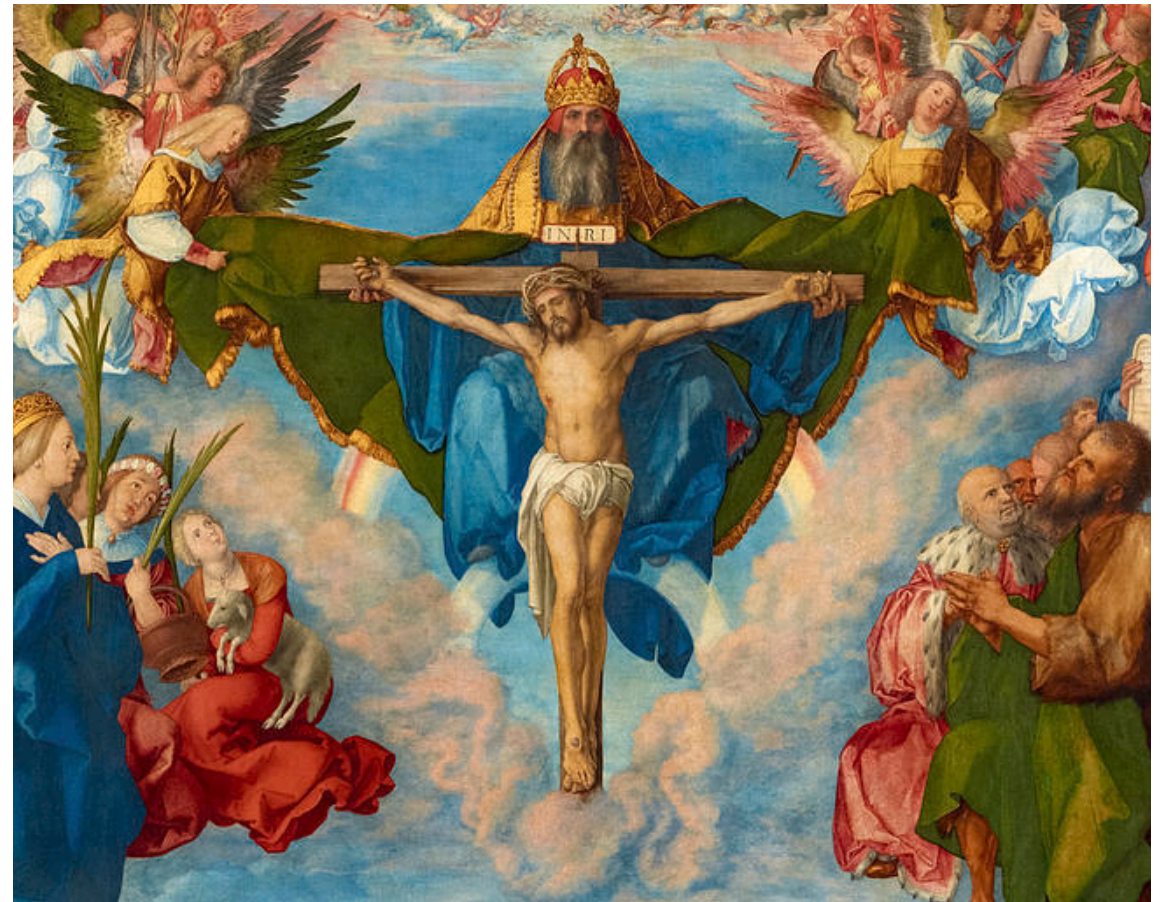


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The Work of Christ in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*

- We are created by God, and so it is right that we render him all our service. Sin denies God his right to our honour. Denying God his due, we commit injustice and become liable to punishment.
- It would be unfitting for God to forgive sin without requiring restitution. Because it is for the good of all creatures that they are subject to God. But sin is destructive of God's government. And the unrepentant sinner can only be subject to God by means of punishment:
- "If the divine Wisdom did not impose these forms of recompense in cases where wrongdoing is endeavouring to upset the right order of things, there would be in the universe, which God ought to be regulating, a certain ugliness, resulting from the violation of the beauty of order, and God would appear to be failing in his governance"(I.14-15).

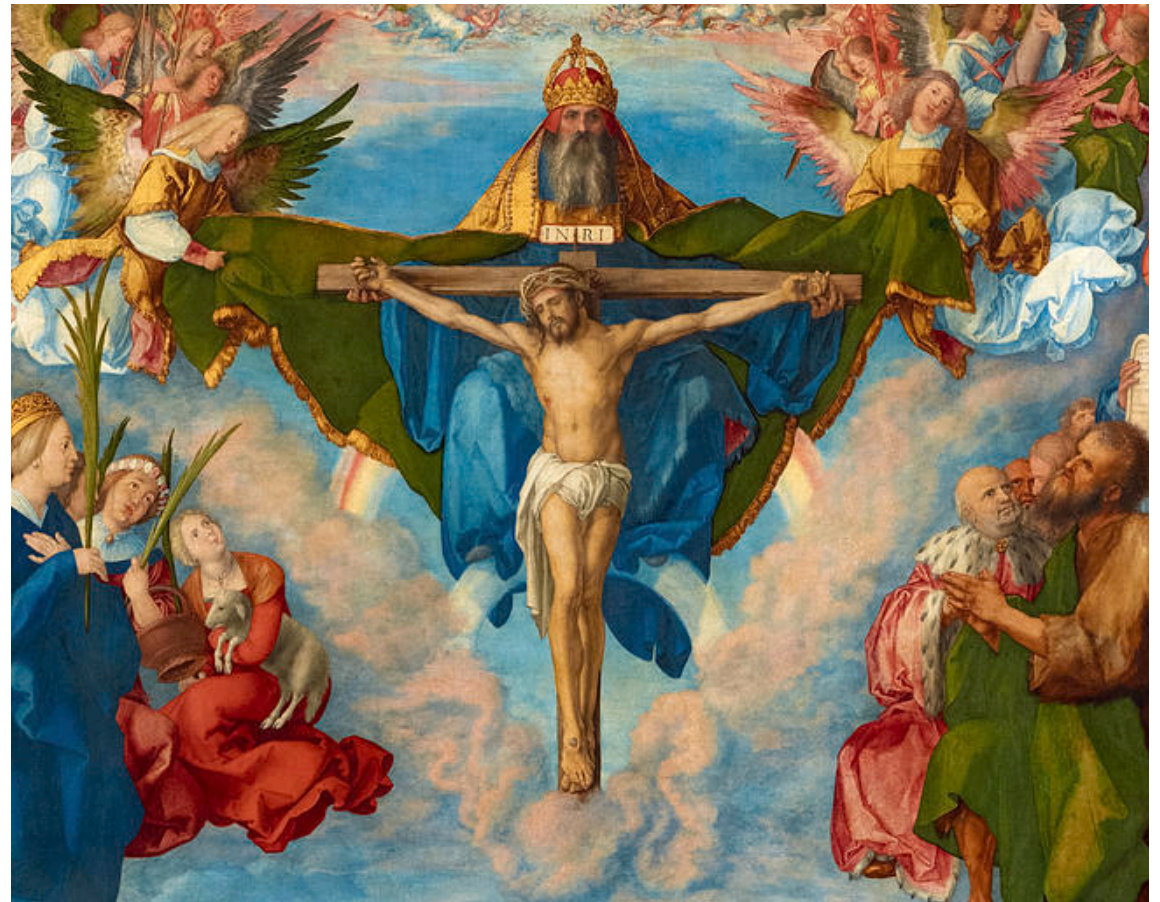


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The Work of Christ in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*

- Because sin dishonours God, and God is infinite, the debt sinners owe to God is infinite.
- Sinners cannot make restitution for themselves because they are finite, and they owed their whole selves to God even before their sins.
- They therefore need one to voluntarily give his life on their behalf, and to perform an act of love that brings infinite honour to God.
- Christ can do this because as he is himself *God*:
 - He does not need to merit for himself and can donate his merit to others.
 - His lowering of himself to be made incarnate is an act of love and condescension of infinite merit.



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Treasury of Merit

- Aquinas: “When two men are united in charity, one can satisfy (*satisfacere*) for the other” (*ST* IIIa, q. 48, a. 2). In the *Supplementum* of the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas roots this in Galatians 6:2 — “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ”.
- Christ’s incarnation is of infinite merit. This is the basis of the church’s salvation. It is communicated to the church through the Holy Spirit and is mediated by the sacraments of the church.
- By baptism, original sin is remitted, along with all eternal punishments. Confirmation increases grace. Penance lessens all temporal punishments. The eucharist endows creatures with Christ’s grace.
- Moreover, this treasury of merit includes the saints’ works of “supererogation” — acts of love that go above and beyond what God’s law requires.



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Penance & Auricular Confession

- Aquinas: “But it is not the same where confession and contrition are concerned; satisfaction has to do with the exterior act, and here one can make use of instruments, a category under which friends are included” (*ST IIIa*, q. 48, a. 2).
- In the middle ages, auricular confession was typically required before you could receive the eucharist each year.
- This was a process by which you would go to the priest and name the sins you committed that year. He would give you some task for your penance which might include prayer, giving of alms, or performance of some good deeds.
- Priests were given manuals to encourage people to give a full and complete confession of their sin. These would include divisions of different sins, and include questions to ask to encourage further reflection. When he was satisfied with your confession, he would remit your sins.



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Penance & Auricular Confession

- In the later Middle Ages, these confessions became increasingly scrupulous, creating an anxious and abusive spirituality in many parts of the church in Europe.
- If you have to give a complete confession of all your sins before you can be confident that you have been forgiven, can you ever be certain of God's forgiveness?
- The means by which the church was communicating these merits was watered-down.
- People could purchase indulgences from the church. These were used to fund various projects of the church, and were essentially contracts that guaranteed an endowment from the saints' treasury of merit.

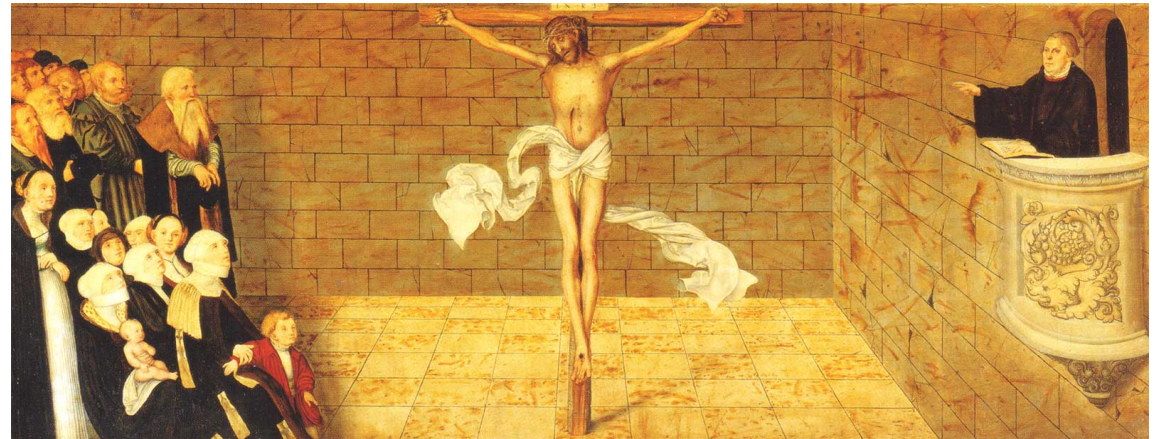


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Luther: Justification by Faith Alone

- Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone was an attempt to vest the power of forgiveness not in the priest, but in the Word of God encountered in faith.
- Christ's work of satisfaction is perfect and complete. The church does not continue that work or add to it. The church does not even *mediate* Christ's grace, but simply announces it.
- These differing visions of salvation are accompanied by different accounts of time. Catholics think of salvation as mediated by the church because the church is the vicar of Christ, completing Christ's work on earth.
- Luther, by contrast, sees the church not as perfecting or completing Christ's ministry. Christ's crucifixion represents for the end and terminus of time — it is the judgment seat revealed in history.



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