

Faith Seeking Understanding: God and Philosophy in the Middle Ages

Why Study Medieval Religious Thought?

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The Medieval Period

- “Medieval” is a modern term used to designate a hiatus between two great Western civilisations: the ancient and modern.
- Medieval: *media* (middle) + *aevum* (time)
- Beginning:
 - Battle of Milvian Bridge (312)
 - Sack of Rome (410)
 - Close of the Platonic Academy (529)
- End:
 - Fall of Constantinople (1453)
 - Age of Discovery (1492)
 - Reformation (1517)

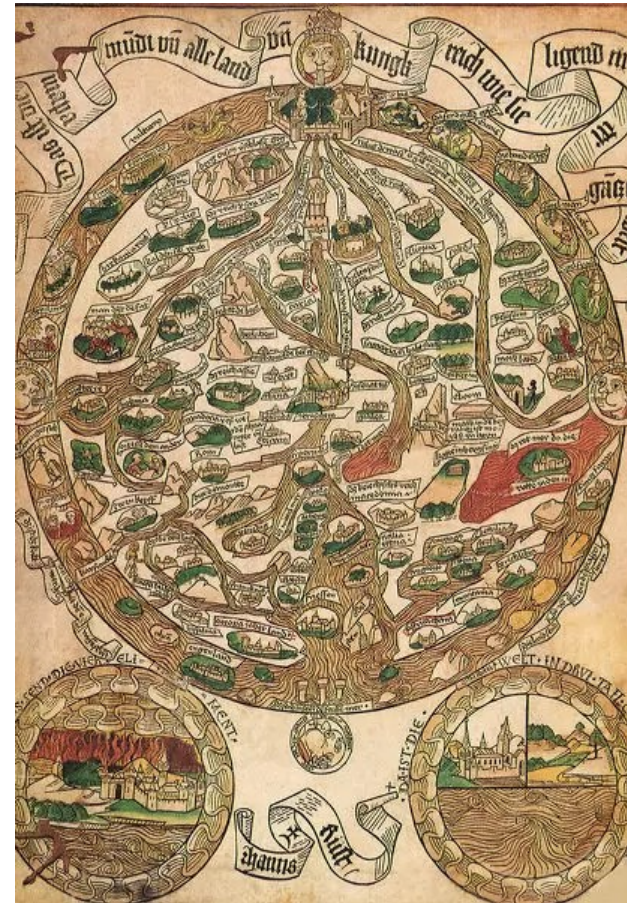


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In the Middle of What?

- Historiography is selective by nature so the story we tell about any culture inevitably reflects the interests of our own time.
- For this reason Medieval history has sometimes been overly-determined by a contrast with “Modernity”.
 - Critically, it is thought of as “the Dark Ages”
 - Nostalgically, it is seen as “the Enchanted Age”
- The truth is somewhere between these, but the fact that we remember this period in these ways reflects how formative it is for the way we understand ourselves and our time.



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Western Culture

- Identities crucial to contemporary self-understanding are formed here — what it means to be “Western”, “European”, “Christian” and/or “woman”.
- Some of our oldest and most influential institutions were created in this period, e.g., the University.
- Innovation in technologies, as well as in the methods and forms of art and literature.
- Many of our most deeply held values, morals, and visions of the good life are informed by its stories, ideals, and myths, e.g. the social ethic of Robin Hood, and the romantic ideals in Arthurian legend.



Thought

- Some of the world's greatest philosophical and theological thinkers lived in this period of about 200 years.
- Huge portions of our legal system is the product of developments that took place in the Middle Ages.
- Parliamentary rule comes into existence as the result of the English crown seeking to up-end the precedent of common law in the 13th century.
- Individual “rights” have their basis in Medieval moral theory and in debates between Dominicans and Franciscans over what “ownership” is.



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The Middle of What?

- Medieval History thus informs us about how we became who we are.
- It does this by a strange distance — the Middle Ages was a time very different from own.
 - This distance affords us opportunity to see where we have progressed.
 - It can also awaken us to traditions long forgotten that might yet enrich our lives and communities.
- So while you don't need to hate the Modern world to study the Middle Ages, we shouldn't think this culture has nothing to teach us.



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Religion and Social Order

- One of the chief differences between Modern and Medieval life is the relationship between religion and society.
- Allowing for some variation, most people today think some separation between religion and politics is both desirable and appropriate either because religion corrupts politics, or politics corrupts religion, or both.
- We tend to think of religion as something private rather than something public.
- But this not a necessary state of affairs. In many cultures around the world, religion plays some role as an organising principle of society.



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Religion and Social Order: A Typology

- The nature of the integration of politics and religion can vary. Drawing on Veit Bader's typology ("Religions and States"), we might distinguish broadly between three kinds of societies:
 - Strong Establishment — one religious institution established in legal, administrative, political and cultural aspects of society.
 - Weak Establishment — one or more religions w/ constitutional and legal protections, but with protections for religious pluralism.
 - Separatist — religion is formally separate from all political and legal functions of government.



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Religion and Social Order

- Modern States cross the spectrum:
 - Greece, Saudi Arabia, and Israel represent a tradition of strong establishment.
 - England, Australia and a number of African and South American nations represent the weak establishment.
 - The United States, France, Belgium, and China are examples of the separatist tradition.
- For most of the history of civilisation, religion has been strongly established within government. This was particularly true in the Ancient world.
 - A number of civilisations were theocratic, including Egypt, Persia, and Israel.
 - Ancient Rome established and regulated the worship of ancestral gods, and operated under various forms of theocracy.



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Religion and Social Order

- Religion not only provided guidance and gave meaning to life, it also played a crucial cultural role. It bound political society together through a common set of beliefs, morals, and practices.
- Cicero lists two things that “most conspicuously contribute to the stability of a State — religion and the spirit of tranquility” (*religione atque clementia*) — *De Re Publica*, II.I.XIV.
- He also claims that “disappearance of piety towards the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself” — *De Natura Deorum*, I.ii.4.
- Religion, in other words, is a kind of “social cement” that gives unity and coherence to a culture (Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, p. 38).



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Christendom: An Integrated Religious-Political Social Order

- Latin Christendom, like the Byzantine Empire or the Umayyad and Abbasid Islamic Caliphates of the southern Mediterranean (from 6th-15th C), is a Medieval example of “strong establishment”. Peter Sarris calls these “Empires of Faith”.
- Here, faith — what we believe to be true about the world — forms part of the principles that organise the society as a whole.
- Richard W. Southern has described Latin Christendom as “the most elaborate and thoroughly integrated system of religious thought and practice the world has ever known” (*Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, p. 15).
- Christendom is Old English = cristen - “Christianity”, and -dom, “judgment or decree”



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Christendom: An Integrated Religious-Political Social Order

- These societies are often regarded as closed, insular, and hostile to outsiders. In reality, they were more tolerant and open to exchange than is commonly thought.
- Still, the church in the Middle Ages was a “compulsory society” in the same way that the Modern state today is a compulsory society:
- “The identification of the church with the whole of organised society is the fundamental feature which distinguishes the Middle Ages from earlier and later periods of history. At its widest limits it is a feature of European history from the fourth to the eighteenth century — from Constantine to Voltaire. In theory, during the whole of this period only orthodox and obedient believers could enjoy the full rights of citizenship” (Southern, *Church in the Middle Ages*, p. 16).



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Christendom: An Integrated Religious-Political Social Order

- Beliefs don't change over night. It was gradual. Britain, the final part of the Roman Empire to be converted, was not fully Christianised until about 800 AD, 400 years after the end of Roman rule.
- Still, that means in order to understand the Middle Ages, or the thought which develops in Europe during that period, we have to contend with its religious and theological dimension.
- Beliefs are crucial, not just because they inspire, but because they define what we take to be *true*, and so determine what we think to be *possible*.
- In that sense, the symbols, concepts, and doctrines of the Latin Church, even when not explicit, have a decisive role in shaping the character of Medieval thought and culture.



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Some Cautions

- Don't conflate "Christendom" and "Christianity" — they are not co-extensive.
 - Christian communities existed outside of the Latin West in Byzantium, Africa, and the Middle East throughout the Middle Ages. (Right: St George's Church, Ethiopia, 1200 AD, built after the fall of Jerusalem).
 - These communities sometimes lived as minorities, without the protection of ruling authorities.
 - Many developed traditions that were distinct from those of Latin Christendom, with important theological, moral, and liturgical differences.
- There was also a lot of diversity within Latin Christendom. Religious authority licenses a great deal, but these claims were routinely contested, particularly in political contexts.



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Some Cautions

- Latin Christendom was not a Handmaid's-Tale-style police state run by church officials.
 - Medieval Europe was so decentralised that this would have been impossible.
 - Law and government had a wide degree of regional variation. In some places, it exercised no practical influence at all. This typically worked to the advantage of local interests.
 - The church had no police/armies. Any coercive power it exercised was finally dependent on the "consent and cooperation of independent secular rulers" (Southern, *The Church in the Middle Ages*, p. 20).
 - More often, the efforts of the religious and secular authorities was directed to containing the violence of the people.



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Some Cautions

- Latin Christendom was not necessarily a “golden-age” of Western civilisation.
 - This marked a time of consolidation of political identities, but also a great deal of warfare.
 - Poverty, disease, and starvation were the fate of many.
 - There was a yawning gap in the prospects of the aristocracy and peasantry.
 - While the church’s influence and social reach was great, peasants often knew more about local superstitions than the Nicene Creed.
 - And the church was constantly in need of reform as it regularly found itself entangled in scandals of corruption and abuse.



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And yet . . .

- For all this, Latin Christendom gave the world some tremendous gifts, particularly in its intellectual heritage.
- The faith and religious culture of the Medieval church played a sizeable role in shaping that heritage.
- The purpose of this course is to explore the way that tradition gave shape to the Medieval world.



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