



Teaching Medieval History: The Age of Light with Dr. Junius Johnson

Lecture 7: Medieval Theology

Outline:

“As a professional theologian...in my opinion, the Middle Ages are the height of Christian theology. And one of the main things I want to communicate to people with my work... is that medieval theology is not Catholic theology. It’s really the common heritage of all Christians.”

In this lesson, Dr. Junius Johnson delves into medieval theology as viewed through a variety of lenses: church councils, key theological doctrines, and the influence of culture.

Introduction

- The Middle Ages represent the height of Christian theology and a shared common heritage.
- Non-Catholic Christians may disagree with aspects of Catholic theology, but medieval thought represents some of the biggest and best body of work from this period. Examples:
 - The Trinity
 - Christology
 - Atonement

Church Councils

- Church councils were gatherings where theological issues were discussed and resolved.
- The [First Council](#) was held under Constantine the Great at Nicaea.
 - The church historian Eusebius describes this tumultuous period in which Constantine defeated 5 other imperial claims to become the sole emperor of the Roman Empire.



- After the infighting ceased, Constantine reportedly brought secular and spiritual peace to the Church.
- Seven great ecumenical councils are recognized, with three occurring in the medieval period.
 - The medieval councils spanned from 553 AD (5th ecumenical council) to 787 AD (7th ecumenical council).
 - They all took place in Asia Minor and were largely represented by eastern bishops.
- These councils established fundamental Christian doctrines that set the boundaries of orthodoxy as represented by the Creed:
 - One
 - Holy
 - Catholic
 - Apostolic
- Church councils established other key doctrines such as the full divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit; Jesus' two natures in one person; and the approval of using images in worship.
- The West started holding its own councils after the last ecumenical council in 787.
- The [Fourth Lateran Council in 1215](#) was the fourth council held at the [Cathedral of St. John Lateran](#), the papal basilica.
 - It represents a logical progression of the ecumenical councils, clarifying doctrines about the divinity, unity, and natures of the three persons of the Trinity.
 - Lateran IV also introduced the term *transubstantiation* to describe the substantial conversion of the bread and wine into the actual Body and Blood of Christ.
- The [Second Council of Lyons](#) in 1274 was significant because of the large body of Eastern representatives, and the work to lift the [Great Schism](#) of 1054.
 - [St. Bonaventure](#) was recognized as the leading theologian at this council (as St. Thomas Aquinas had died on the way there.)
 - Cardinal Bonaventure succeeded in getting both sides to lift their mutual condemnations and they celebrated mass together, effectively ending the Great Schism at this time.
 - The Cardinal was discovered dead in his rooms a few days later (poisoned, according to his Secretary) and the brief reunion between East and West fizzled out.



- Ecumenical councils continue to this day. The Catholic Church counts Vatican II in the 1960's as the 21st Ecumenical Council, averaging just over one council every 100 years.¹
- Church councils outline the fundamentals of orthodoxy that a Christian is not free to depart from.

Christology in Medieval Theology

- Christology deals with the nature and person of Jesus Christ.
 - *Who* is Jesus?
 - *What* is Jesus?
- Medieval theologians focused on understanding Jesus as fully divine and fully human and determining which of these attributes he would have.
 - The contemporary approach is to emphasize Christ's humanity to show that he can identify with our lives and suffering.
 - Medieval Christians emphasized Jesus' divinity as a sign of the future greatness in store for them as saints.
- Theological discussions considered the divine and human attributes of Jesus and how they coexisted.
 - For example: did Jesus as a baby have a divine mind or a finite human mind?
 - Answer: he had both the human mind of a baby and the divine mind of God, but his human nature was fully united with his divine nature so that he received the fullness of grace and knowledge from the moment of his conception.
- What about Luke 2:52?

And so Jesus advanced in wisdom with the years, and in favour both with God and with men.²

- The medieval theological response is that Jesus gradually revealed the knowledge that he had to avoid alarming others.

Two Examples of Medieval Historical Theology

¹ "The 21 Ecumenical Councils," The Catholic Encyclopedia, accessed July 22, 2024, https://www.newadvent.org/library/almanac_14388a.htm.

² *Knox Translation*, <https://www.newadvent.org/bible/luk002.htm> (Westminster Diocese, 2013).



- Theology is influenced by the cultural context in which it is developed and should be understood within that frame.
- One of the tasks of the historical theologian is to restore to theologians of the past their own voice.

Historical theologians work to restore the original voices of past

- ***Cur Deus Homo* (“Why God Became Man”) by St. Anselm.**
 - *Cur Deus Homo* is one of the most influential and important books on the question of how Jesus saves humanity.
 - [St. Anselm](#) aims to write the book in a way that even nonbelievers would find the argument compelling.
 - He avoids relying on the authority of the church, instead reasoning his points logically.
 - Anselm's concept of sin is deeply rooted in the context of a feudal society.
 - Sin is defined as failing to render to God what is due.
 - Sin includes any thought that strays from the will of God, regardless of its size.
 - Sin's severity is measured by the importance of the one sinned against.
 - Sinning against higher social ranks (knights, marquises, dukes, the king) is progressively worse.
 - Offending God, who is infinitely worthy, results in infinite blame and guilt.
 - Humans cannot atone for sin because they lack anything of infinite worth.
 - All good deeds or promises to God (prayers, obedience, charity) are already owed to Him.
 - Any additional efforts still fall short, similar to being unable to repay a debt by offering what is already due.
 - Only God possesses something of infinite worth to atone for humanity's sins.
 - Therefore, only God can make the necessary atonement, but it must be done by a human since humans incurred the debt.
 - Feudal context and debt:
 - In a feudal society, debts incurred by one family member bind the entire family.
 - Similarly, humanity's debt of sin binds all humans.



- Anselm argues that if an angel or non-human being atoned for humanity, humans would owe their salvation to that being, conflicting with the obligation to serve God alone.
- Therefore, the incarnation of God as a human (Jesus Christ) is essential for salvation.
- As both divine and human, Jesus can offer something of infinite worth for human atonement.
- Several steps of the above argument rely heavily on the feudal assumptions of Anselm's society.
- ***Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich**
 - Julian of Norwich's book *Revelations of Divine Love* discusses divine love.
 - Her concept of love is influenced by the notion of courtly love in 14th century England.
 - Courtly love, derived from Arthurian romances, is not considered an admirable form of love.
 - This form of love has shortcomings similar to modern romantic love.
 - Julian starts with the idea of courtly love because it is her cultural understanding.
 - She then expands and transforms this notion, distinguishing divine love from human love.
 - God's love is not subject to the sinfulness and limitations of human love.
 - This transformation reflects the common process where personal understandings of God's love are modified by deeper theological insights.
 - Julian interacts with the culture of her time but also transcends it. Her work is valuable across different times because it goes beyond the cultural limitations of her era.

Angels in Medieval Theology

- Medieval people believed in the reality of angels.
- Angels held an important role in medieval theology.
 - As created beings, angels are less than God but higher than humans.
 - Angels create a "buffer zone" that prevents the elevation of humanity to a divine level.



- This belief system maintains the distinction between humans and God by positioning angels as superior yet still subordinate to God.
- One of the famous caricatures of medieval theology is the argument of “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”
 - This was an actual discussion but is usually taken out of context today. This question is about how spiritual substances work.
 - Because spirits don’t have the same relationship to space that bodies do (i.e. extension), there is no limit to the number that can inhabit a given space.
 - So this argument actually teaches us metaphysical truths about the differences between physical and spiritual being, with implications for doctrines such as the Eucharist, grace, etc.
- Another teaching about angels from the Middle Ages is that they are truly individual, i.e. their own species.
 - Gabriel, Raphael, and Michael are not of the same species in the way humans are.
 - Humans belong to the same species (e.g., Junius, Chris, and Jesse are all humans).
 - "Angel" is not a species name but a job description meaning "messenger."
 - Michael should be compared to humans as a species, not to individual humans.
 - Each angel embodies the full characteristics of its species.
- Medieval beliefs hold that fallen angels cannot be saved.
- God cannot become a member of Satan’s race to save him because Satan’s race has no other members.
- To save Satan by becoming a member of his race would be to replace Satan entirely, which equates to destroying him rather than saving him.

Eucharistic Theology and Transubstantiation

- The Eucharist and the doctrine of transubstantiation were major theological concerns.
- Medieval theologians believed in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, even before the term *transubstantiation* was coined.
 - This is the literal understanding of the 6th chapter of John.
- When the bread and wine are consecrated on the altar, several things are present at once.
 - The sacrament, as the visible sign of grace that God wants to give.



- The reality (or matter) of the sacrament.
- The first move of the doctrine of transubstantiation is to distinguish between the outward appearance and the inward grace.
 - This is really a philosophical distinction rather than a theological one.
 - The theological doctrine is the [Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ](#).
- The Zwinglian view of the sacrament as a memorial was proposed in the 9th century by [Ratramnus of Corbie](#).
 - [Innocent III](#) gives scriptural arguments against Ratramnus' view in his treatise on the Eucharist.
 - So [Zwingli](#)'s arguments were not new in his time, but they diverged from the traditional view of the Church Fathers.
- [William of Ockham](#), a 14th century theologian, pointed out that if God had not revealed the doctrine of transubstantiation to his Church, it would have believed in a doctrine of *consubstantiation* instead, i.e. that the bread and wine remain on the altar *with* the Body and Blood of Christ.

Marian Dogmas

- Mary is a significant point of contention between Protestants and Catholics.
- Key Marian dogmas include:
 - The Immaculate Conception: Mary was conceived without sin.
 - The Virgin Birth: Pertains to Jesus.
 - The Assumption: Mary was taken up into heaven without dying.
 - The Sinlessness of Mary.
 - The Perpetual Virginity of Mary.
- In the Middle Ages, these were doctrines or pious opinions, not mandatory beliefs.
- It wasn't until later (beginning with the [Council of Trent](#) and through the 19th century) that these doctrines became mandatory dogmas in the Catholic Church.

Medieval Speculative Theology

- Medieval theology was characterized by a broader acceptance of various theological viewpoints.
- This period is seen as the height of theological exploration due to the freedom to speculate on divine matters.



- Speculative theology explores the vast possibilities of God's actions and interactions with the world.
- This exploration enhances appreciation for the manifold ways of God.
- Understanding various possible interpretations and actions of God increases awe and reverence for the divine.
- The Church allowed for diverse theological opinions as long as they were not incompatible with core Christian beliefs.

Recommendation for Further Study

- Take time to delve into medieval theology to appreciate its contributions and insights.
- See the recommended texts and resources accompanying this lesson for a deeper understanding of this common Christian heritage.
- Studying medieval theology offers valuable perspectives for the modern church.