

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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MEDIEVAL MEDITATIONS FOR MODERN TIMES: RECONSIDERING CONTEMPORARY QUESTIONS THROUGH PREMODERN FRAMEWORKS

Sean Hill

This semester saw a unique reading group at the Study Center delving into that period of the Christian tradition we often overlook: the Middle Ages. The group fell on the same semester that the Center's main lecture series, "Theism, Reason, and Faith," addressed the relationship between belief and intellect with talks from the perspectives of theism, atheism, and agnosticism. As I attended the lectures and led the medieval reading group, I began to notice unlikely connections between the two. Immediately apparent was how both emphasized the importance of contemplating the beliefs we hold and knowing why we believe them.

In a striking moment after the lecture by Dr. Manuel Vasquez of the UF Religion department, Dr. Vasquez posed a question to the audience regarding whether the apostle Paul's theology was dualistic. Before this, the discussion examined whether the fall of Genesis was inherently dualistic, manifesting itself in physical consequences like birth pangs and soil unwilling to yield fruit. This challenge is a worthwhile one. Christians have often dichotomized the material and spiritual, suggesting these dualistic tendencies arise from their scriptures. When no one offered an immediate reply to Vasquez's question, he remarked, "You guys need to know your tradition!" Amid the robust but nervous laughter that followed, I found myself revisiting several discussions from the medieval reading group. For this and many other challenges, medieval

Christianity offers perspectives that are worth our attention.

Because of their reputation for asceticism and self-denial, medieval Christian authors offer perhaps one of the best avenues for discussing dualism in Christianity. The hyper-ascetic lifestyle of many medieval religious communities propagated negativity toward the human body. Additionally, mystical literature that abounded in the high to late Middle Ages (roughly 1050-1400) described how to obtain foretastes of heaven through spiritual experiences. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), who practiced extreme asceticism and avoided starving to death only by the strong exhortation of a friend, illustrates the negative attitude Christians have often had toward humanity in its fallenness.

Even the most ascetic medieval authors, however, are familiar with the non-dualistic core of Christian doctrine. Worthy of consideration is Bernard's ranking of the degrees of love. In the midst even of his extreme asceticism, Bernard considered the highest form of love to be the love of self for God's sake. This utmost level lay beyond loving God for the sake of his caretaking and even beyond loving God for the sake of his nature. Bernard denied himself to the brink of starvation, but realized this was not the ideal. Something inhabits the human's earthly existence that deserves to be loved unselfishly. Doing so would achieve the highest level of love in Bernard's

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mind, eliciting him to plead that “any who have attained so far bear record; I confess it seems beyond my powers.” Bernard thus points us to the essence of his lament: we were created to be deserving of God’s love. Perhaps because of modern materialist culture, the concept of appropriately appreciating humanity carries just as much poignancy today as it did in Bernard’s time. To value our humanness for God’s sake as being made in his image may, as Bernard laments, seem impossible in our current condition.

This first example of how a medieval text can be useful to modern questions necessitates a few remarks on how medieval resources should be used. A text that has gained lasting popularity is Hugh of St. Victor’s *Didascalicon*, a summary of the basics of Christianity. One particular excerpt has survived into modern philosophy via Frederick Auerbach and Edward Said, who both liked to quote Hugh in their own writing. The passage they used treats the importance of preserving detachment from earthly things, even one’s own fatherland:

It is, therefore, a source of great virtue for the practiced mind to learn, bit by bit, first to change about invisible and transitory things, so that afterwards it may be able to leave them behind altogether. The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.¹

Auerbach and Said used this quote to articulate the alienation they felt from the Western World and its prejudice against those cultures unfamiliar to it. While using medieval resources can broaden one’s theoretical foundations, Hugh’s comments are not cogent without the logical end that the only real citizenship is the heavenly. Hugh’s definition of exile as realizing the grief of deserting “the poor cottage” and the freedom of

despising “marble dwellings and paneled ceilings,” bespeaks his disinterest not just in nationalistic or ethnic prejudices, but in everything transient. By detaching Hugh from his theological groundings, modern theorists have only scraped the surface of Hugh’s understanding of eternity. For Hugh, membership in his true homeland becomes tangible only after death.

An author who may be more fruitful for modern use is St. Francis of Assisi. His “Canticle of the Sun” relates to issues of how Christianity and naturalism each regard death, a topic one audience member raised after Vasquez’s lecture. In the naturalistic view, humans are creatures of the mud who need to embrace their humanity, warts

and all. The central difference between Christianity and naturalism in this regard (as this audience member pointed out) is the valuation of death; for Christians, death is the consequence of sin, while the naturalist embraces it as part of the beauty of humanity. Though the Christian view of death is undoubtedly a negative one, Francis of Assisi describes how “our Sister Bodily Death” gives praise to God. Rather than venerating death as a rescuer from bodily evil, Francis places it in a lengthy list alongside the

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sun, moon, wind, fire, and other natural elements as a glorifying part of God’s creation. This is another instance where medieval observations merit closer attention. For Francis, death is a curse, but it serves its purpose along with “Brother Fire” and “Mother Earth.” The redemption that brings glory to God in ways unintelligible is foreshadowed in how the Hebrew patriarchs died, were gathered to their people, and were buried. It is important that Hebrew scripture distinguishes between being gathered to one’s people and being buried. This necessitates that the patriarchs had people to be gathered to who were ready to receive them after death.

It is this afterlife where Hugh’s citizenship lies. The portrait he paints is not of a bodily existence saved from its materiality through death, as a dualistic view of Christianity suggests, but one waiting for the redemption of its material existence to be complete. “Sister Bodily Death,” a moniker that doesn’t make the cut in the modern

English hymn adaptation, “All Creatures of our God and King,” reveals Francis’ conception of death as existing to glorify God, as with the rest of creation.

It is not hard to imagine a train of thought similar to this one occurring in Hugh of St. Victor’s mind as he considered the heavenly as his homeland. Vasquez’s question (and my lack of a quick answer to it) reminded me of how Hugh and his contemporaries had a firm grasp on the entirety of scripture. Hugh classifies Solomon’s writings to illustrate the distinction between meditation (being occupied with one single issue) and the two types of contemplation, which involve spreading out to consider many things, “even the universe.” According to Hugh, Proverbs is a meditation, Ecclesiastes is the first grade of contemplation (considering earthly things), and the Song of Songs is the final grade of contemplation, (considering God).

These categories not only revealed an exemplary familiarity with the text, but made me think about these books in a way I had not. It is not surprising that, as a member of the monastic community at the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris, Hugh saturated his daily routine with Psalter and New Testament recitations. The literature that results from these practices effortlessly winds from one scriptural reference to another, often assuming its reader’s Biblical literacy by replacing references with phrases like “it is written somewhere.” Thus, when Hugh sets about answering the question of how there could have been day and night before the creation of the sun, he meanders in a curiously logical progression to how it was a foreshadowing of the sun’s true light like the way we look “through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12) and are instructed not to “believe every spirit,” but to “try the spirits if they be of God” (1 John 4:1). From here, Hugh recounts how foreshadowing abounds in the Bible: “Thus the law preceded grace; the word, spirit; thus John as a precursor, Christ...and Christ himself first showed his humanity that he

might thereafter make manifest his divinity.” The admonition to know my tradition reminded me of the intimacy that these people had with scripture and how their writings can expose modern readers to unique observations like Hugh’s. These have increased my understanding of the way the Bible has challenged and enriched the lives of Christians through the last two millennia. While parts of Hugh’s work may struggle to meet a modern standard of theological accuracy, our reading group found it a valuable exercise to spend time with the writings of people who knew scripture intimately, often

memorizing large chunks of it, particularly the entire book of Psalms. Their enthusiasm survives in thousands of treatises, summaries, and other writing, the bulk of which remain untranslated from Latin.

The fact that medieval people have survived through their writing brings to the fore a larger question that the “Theism, Reason, and Faith” lectures considered: the role of faith in academic work. Relevant to this discussion is the outcome of a roundtable discussion on ecologies that I attended at an international Medieval Studies conference in Michigan a few weeks ago. At this roundtable, medieval scholars in various disciplines from throughout the world

gave short papers on environmental perspectives brought to bear on medieval attitudes. The topic was relevant given the current state of scientific attention to our environmental footprint and the fact that the medieval relationship with the natural world was filled with similar tension. On the one hand, nature provided nourishment and sustenance for the feudal European economy. An appreciation for nature and necessary attachment to it was inherent in the medieval agrarian society and evident from the countless monastic houses with gardens that often provided the only manual labor monks performed. At the same time, nature was a thing that was to be subdued, and did not offer up her fruit without struggle. Medieval literature, particularly Arthurian romances, are structured around the dichotomy

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Religious lines of inquiry were effective at addressing the worth of academic pursuit and discerning the role it played in society.

REVIEW

**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
LITERATURE OF MEDIEVAL
SPIRITUALITY**
by Matthew Delvaux

Perhaps the most striking takeaway from this semester's reading group on Medieval Meditations has been the extraordinary diversity of Christian expression found in medieval literature. From the ruminative *Confessions* of Augustine (354-430) to the ecstatic visions of Julian of Norwich (c.1342-c.1416), the millennium that spanned from the fall of Rome to the advent of the Italian Renaissance was anything but homogenous, empty time. Instead, it was a thousand years of wrangling and controversy, defining and defending Christianity as we know it today. The diversity of Christian literature available from the Middle Ages can best be understood as a prolonged discourse among many brilliant and discerning minds over interpretations of the message of Christ. Throughout the Middle Ages, ecclesiastical authors focused on the organization of the Church, the pastoral needs of their congregations, discerning heresy from orthodoxy, and reconciling Christian theology with Greco-Roman philosophy. However, some Christians also recorded their intimate religious experiences, witnessing deep personal relationships with the divine. The best medieval authors have left us texts that not only arouse scholarly interest in the development of Christian thought and doctrine, but also inspire us with their lasting testimony to the Christian message of faith, hope, and love.

Augustine of Hippo was in many ways the first medieval Christian author.¹ He converted to Christianity during a period of civil war, and he died in a city besieged by barbarians. The Roman world was nearing its end. In this time of crisis, Augustine relentlessly pursued the most pressing theological, doctrinal, and pastoral concerns of his day. He was especially concerned with formulating an orthodox Christianity that could triumph over schismatics and non-Christians alike. To show just how compelling the arguments for Christianity were, Augustine set out to narrate his own conversion experience. He did so in the form of an extended prayer, reflecting on how his acceptance of Christianity changed his entire perspective on life and the world around him. Although these *Confessions*² have been an enduring source of Christian inspiration—most recently adapted by the postmodernists Jean-François

Lyotard and Jacques Derrida³—Augustine's original text carries a poignancy unsurpassed: "Too late have I loved you, O beauty so ancient, beauty so new, too late have I loved you!" (Book 10, Chapter 27). Augustine's *Confessions* remains valuable for the contemporary Christian as a source of prayerful companionship in times of doubt, grief, and loss, as well as times of blessing, providence, and grace.

Francis of Assisi (c.1182-1226)—commonly known from lawn statuary as the monk with the birds—is another famous medieval convert to Christianity. After indulging in a pleasurable and mercenary life, Francis returned home and heard the call to rebuild the Church. He initially interpreted this to mean the literal reconstruction of a dilapidated local church, but gradually he came to understand his purpose as the reformer of Christianity itself. Ecclesiastical institutions were at the height of their temporal power, and Francis began urging a return to the Gospel by imitating the life of Christ, emphasizing the mandates of apostolic poverty and care for the sick and poor. Although some feared that Francis might challenge the authority of the Church, his reputation was unassailable. Francis attempted to avoid any sort of worldly power, but eager followers gathered around him, seeking his guidance. Eventually, Francis drafted a rule for them outlining his interpretation of the devout life. Whereas most monastic rules were long legal documents detailing standards of communal living, the Franciscan rule is a patchwork of Scriptural citations that defined Christian living for Francis. To this day it remains as an important collection of the admonishments of Christ and a reminder that Christ called his disciples to a radical change of life. Among his other writings, "The Canticle of the Sun" is especially renowned as a celebration of all the Creations of God as brothers and sisters to man. The Classics of Western Spirituality series has published *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, (\$15) which also includes the letters, rule, and final testament of Clare of Assisi (1194-1253), who followed Francis and organized the female counterpart to the Franciscan friars.

Clare was not alone as an inspired female ecclesiastic in the Middle Ages. Julian of Norwich, mentioned above, received visions of Christ's Passion and recorded the vivid sights, sounds, touch, and feel of her experience in her Showings or *Revelations of Divine Love*. Her near-contemporary Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) is most famous for her correspondence with the kings, emperors and popes of her day, instructing them in Christian values. She too

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MEDITATIVE POETRY

Canticle of the Sun

Francis of Assisi (1181/1182 - 1226)
trans. Regis J. Armstrong, OFM, Cap.,
and Ignatius C. Brady, OFM

Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
 Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing.

To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
 and no man is worthy to mention Your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
 especially through my lord Brother Sun,
 who brings the day; and you give light through him.
 And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!
 Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praise be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon
 and the stars, in heaven you formed them
 clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
 and through the air, cloudy and serene,
 and every kind of weather through which
 You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
 which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
 through whom you light the night and he is beautiful
 and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,
 who sustains us and governs us and who produces
 varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Praised be You, my Lord,
 through those who give pardon for Your love,
 and bear infirmity and tribulation.

Blessed are those who endure in peace
 for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord,
 through our Sister Bodily Death,
 from whom no living man can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
 Blessed are those whom death will
 find in Your most holy will,
 for the second death shall do them no harm.

Praise and bless my Lord,
 and give Him thanks
 and serve Him with great humility.

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of the city surrounded by farmland where nature is domesticated, and the wilderness where humans are at the mercy of nature and can no longer control her course.

The most remarkable of the papers delivered at the roundtable was from a professor who described her work on the artistic trope of the "green man," a human head with branches growing out of his mouth and ears. Images of the green man are common in medieval architecture, inhabiting religious and secular buildings alike. Given the complexity of medieval views of their relationship to the environment, the symbiosis between man and nature represented in the green man fascinated this professor as a relevant commentary on our own interdependent relationship to the environment. While visiting a chapel with stone reliefs of the green man, this professor turned from photographing one of the leafy figures to see a shrouded woman huddled against a wall, wearing barely enough outerwear to be protected from the cold weather outside. The simplest way to describe her would be as someone who looked homeless. After the professor noticed her, the woman slowly walked out of the church as they both went their separate ways. The juxtaposition between the green man, a synthesis of the human and the vegetal, and the homeless woman, a person struggling to protect herself from the elements with which she was at odds, had haunted this professor since the experience. It also jarringly forced the audience to consider the role of academic work in a society that often struggles to meet basic human needs.

This anecdote relates to that Christian tenet so opposed to dualism: service. Investing time and effort in other people and objects that are nothing more than an evil counterpart to the spiritual is entirely illogical. The relationship between humans and their environment, illustrated by the green man image, also provided a transition into the roundtable discussion centered on the question of what we do next. Not only as citizens, but as people engaged in academic work, what role do we have to play in our responsibility to our society and our ecosystem? For the first roundtable respondent, the answer was simple: writing. No matter the audience or the purpose, writing is the only thing that will remain after humans are gone, our only permanence and sentience. The centrality of writing is a common view, particularly among academics – our work will have its appropriate effect, and we need not worry whether it is

positive or negative. As for meaningful human interactions, teaching duties are often considered the necessary evil one must endure to achieve the reward of (rarely collaborative) research intended for a minute, privileged audience.

A member of the roundtable audience challenged this model, asking whether the university should be a force for intervention in the community. Indeed, this was the premodern, European conception of the university as a place that trained scholars to work as academics who also had work to do in their society through teaching, praying, preaching, or care of the poor – service in some capacity. This observation brought me full circle to the Study Center's lectures on the relationship between reason and faith. The religious element that existed in the medieval precursor to the modern university was not there simply to predetermine research conclusions. Religious lines of inquiry were effective at addressing the worth of academic pursuit and discerning the role it played in society. In an academic culture several centuries removed from this model, the purpose of the academy and its social responsibility are much harder to discuss, let alone identify.

For the ecologies roundtable, the principle of service, which undergirded the medieval university model, provided a basis for broadening the pursuit of the question of where we find our purpose as academics. The image of the green man has remained in my mind as a helpful illustration of the liminal space that academics, and humans more generally, must often inhabit. The medieval tradition provides useful commentaries on this compromise such as Hugh of St. Victor's meditation on the temporality of the earthly spaces through which we sojourn, waiting for the realization of an eternal homeland. Bernard of Clairvaux describes the state of perfect love for which we were all made, but cannot achieve in our current state. Francis of Assisi's title of "sister death" suggests death's necessity to the human condition despite our enmity with it. This ability to occupy different intellectual spaces characterizes how numerous medieval authors come to us. Since the medieval university model and the monastic community provided for both research and service, medieval authors have survived in both their writing and their actions in community. There was room for scholars to write and research as well as teach, pray, and preach. It is important to point out these acts of service did not always actually serve those around them – Dominicans and Franciscans,

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monastic orders founded to make the preached word more sufficiently available to laypeople, often promoted inhumane attitudes toward their Jewish neighbors that can be linked to tragic violence. The helpful aspect of the medieval example, however, is its promotion of service in the academic environment, showing that thoughtful work need not require an ivory tower. Incorporating these traditions into our modes of thought by chronologically broadening our reading lists and intellectual backgrounds may help in grasping our purpose in a foreign land.

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received visions, and these were transcribed in *The Dialogue*, a conversation between God the Father and an eternal soul, presumably Catherine herself. Some of the most powerful visions of the Middle Ages belong to the Scivias of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), who is also remembered for her hymns and a musical morality play, *Ordo Virtutum*. For helpful translations of these authors, two series in particular offer informative notes and introductions: HarperCollins *Spiritual Classics* (\$10) and Paulist Press *Classics of Western Spirituality* (\$15-\$20). Cheaper editions are often available (Dover Thrift Editions are almost ubiquitous at \$1-\$4), but the tradeoff in price is often the readability of translation.

The works mentioned above are by no means an exhaustive overview of medieval Christian literature. They are merely highlights, selected from texts and authors I find most inspirational. Today's readers have better access to the wealth of medieval liter-

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¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, Chapter XV, "Of the four degrees of love, and of the blessed state of the heavenly fatherland."

² Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, (Harvard, 1983), 259.

ature than did the authors themselves. I encourage you to start hunting for gems.

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¹An authoritative biography of Augustine is Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 2d ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

²The translation by F.J. Sheed, published by Hackett Publishing Company (\$10), expertly balances loyalty to the text with well-composed English.

³Lyotard's *The Confession of Augustine*, a project ongoing during his terminal illness, is a meditation on Augustine's text, almost a sequel. Derrida's *Circumfession* (in Geoffrey Bennington's *Jacques Derrida*) is his own autobiography, but reflecting the structures and tropes of Augustine. Both texts are worth a read, Lyotard's being more readily accessible to readers unfamiliar with postmodern theory.

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by Sean Hill

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Review: An Introduction to the Literature of Medieval Spirituality
by Matthew Delvaux

Matthew Delvaux, UF graduate student in Medieval History, explores some helpful avenues and offers practical advice in becoming acquainted with medieval literature.

Meditative Poetry: Canticle of the Sun
by Francis of Assisi, Cap., and Ignatius C. Brady, OFM

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