

Premodern Approaches to Truth

Quote of the Day:

“For understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that you may understand.”

-- Augustine of Hippo

The arc of the course

Readings/videos/podcasts. Helpful to know something about the author and the outlet before engaging the piece.

Reminder on weekly response memos. Upload to Canvas by Thursdays at 10:00 PM.

Three approaches to truth, and when they emerged in the West: a simplified view

premodern: 380-

modern: 1600s-

postmodern: 1960s-

Emphases of the different approaches and their reactions to the previous ones:

premodern

faith

revelation

authority

custom

deference

tradition

obedience

modern

reason

evidence

science

data

freedom

progress

universal

postmodern

power

cynicism

subjectivity

relativism

language

narrative

discourse

Understandings of truth within each approach:

- **premodern: truth comes from God and is confirmed and communicated by authorities**
- **modern: truth is that which can be established through reason and evidence**
- **postmodern: there are no universal truths, for truth is always local and relative**

All three approaches coexist in the West today, sometimes in the head of a single person.

Quotes that capture each approach:

**premodern: “Fides quaerens intellectum,” translated as
“Faith seeking understanding”**

-- theologian Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

**modern: “Nullius in verba,” translated as “Take
nobody’s word for it”**

-- motto of the Royal Society, founded in 1660

Read/watch/listen for next class

Quotes that capture each approach:

**postmodern: “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” translated as
“There is no outside-text”**

-- philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)

Now on to the premodern mindset. Imagine that the Vargans are spreading in Puget Sound. How do you respond?

Augustine (354-430): one of the most influential Christian theologians. Shaped Christian doctrines on salvation, predestination, original sin, free will and God's foreknowledge, and the sacraments.

Augustine: there is a book of nature (“general revelation”) and a book of scripture (“special revelation”). All truth comes from God, so the two books must agree.



Until the Reformation, special revelation (God’s direct communication with human beings) was understood to come through two forms: the Bible and Church tradition. Protestants rejected the second of those and relied on the Bible alone.

The need for certainty in knowing God’s special revelation eventually led to the doctrines of papal infallibility (for Catholics) and biblical inerrancy (for conservative Protestants).

Scholasticism: a method of intellectual inquiry in medieval European universities. It illustrates the premodern mindset.



- **Start with intellectual authorities**
- **A matter arises where the answer isn't obvious, or where there seems to be conflict among these authorities**
- **The scholastic method resolves any apparent contradiction among the authorities**
- **Scholasticism involved rigorous elaboration of concepts, questions, responses, counterarguments, and conclusions**

Linking back to Augustine: When can political authorities legitimately persecute someone? When is such persecution illegitimate?

<http://courses.washington.edu/smithint/augustine.pdf>

Cathars: A Christian offshoot (12th – 14th centuries) whose beliefs included dualism and gnosticism. Slaughtered and executed as heretics.



Besides heresy, blasphemy was also both a sin and a crime in the West until the last few centuries. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274): blasphemy (an offense against God) is a more serious sin than murder, but should be punished less severely.

Treating heresy and blasphemy as sins and crimes requires widespread agreement on fundamental religious questions, with few dissenters. That agreement has evaporated in the West, to the point where we now have extensive religious pluralism.

The premodern approach to truth also relied historically on agreement about political authority, lodged in a king or other hereditary monarch.



Richard I, 1193: “I am born in a rank which recognizes no superior but God, to whom alone I am responsible for my actions.” (divine right of kings)

Grounding for the divine right of kings (and rulers more generally) appears throughout the Bible, most explicitly in Romans 13:1-2: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”



Monarchs were not shy about claiming their authority came from God, and theologians backed them. Martin Luther referred to the Romans passage six times in the short piece we read.



http://zimmer.csufresno.edu/~mariterel/against_the_robbing_and_murderin.htm

Was there any room for dissenters? Up to the 1600s, Christian theologians drew a distinction between freedom of conscience, which political authorities must allow, and freedom of speech and religion, which they must not.



Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and other premodern theologians: Error has no rights.

Pope Pius IX, Syllabus of Errors (1864). #15 builds on the long tradition saying error has no rights. Others, such as 3, 4, 5, 8, and 9, reject the modern approach to truth.

<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9syll.htm>

On why the premodern approach to truth (and to society more generally) can be appealing. Fiddler on the Roof, “Tradition”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWSoYCetG6A&t=4s>