Monty Python and the Holy Grail

O’Neill Stacks
Feature Film Collection

Trauma of 1348-1350:
Plague/Fortuna/Distance/Uncertainty

13 September 2007
Week 02 - Lecture 02
V. Architecture

Cultural meanings
of the Gothic Cathedral

Gothic Cathedral
[Chartres, France]
Perfect numbers: 2-part & 3-part divisions
[cathedrals, three orders, heaven/hell/purgatory]

12th-13th centuries: an “Age of Reason” [geometry]
and an “Age of Faith”
Or perhaps: age of “reasonable faith”
Medieval Eucharist [Mass]:
Mediation between states of being [God/humanity; Creator/created; Body/bread]
Cultural meaning of the Trump Tower

Divine Order v. Human Initiative
[Humility v. Hubris?]

Not so much in the “fact” of the architecture -- e.g., its soaring vertical rise -- as in the meanings and values inscribed in the building and ascribed to the style.
VI. Sculpture

Cultural meanings of the Gothic Cathedral

Optimistic Mediation: The Tympanum at Chartres
Mary sleeping: earthly created body that gave birth to Creator lies on her bed. [Chartre’s relic: Mary’s clothing]

NB: top is a “bread basket” --- holding Christ child … as bread?

Mediation / Great Chain

Joseph and Mary hold up Christ child --- like a monstrance holding the eucharistic bread.
Mother and Child → Queen of Heaven  
(cathedral built by French monarchy)  
supremely confident / optimistic period  

cf. Aristotle’s *Children*: scholasticism = optimism
VII. Images of Order / Disorder
A. Sanctuaries / Gargoyles
Mary Douglas: the margins are where the danger is.

My “self” = safe
My totally “other” = safe
(I can never become the other)

HOWEVER:
Boundaries between self and other = danger
It’s just possible that I can be contaminated by the margins … especially dangerous if porous…
Skin = boundary area between self and other

Center <-> Margins
Order/Purity/Safety <-> Disorder/Pollution/Danger
MADNESS:

If I “go mad” --- lose my memory --- do I lose my self-identity? my continuity? is bodily continuity enough?

Sander Gilman: “It is the fear of collapse, the sense of dissolution, which contaminates the Western image of all diseases.”

cf. werewolves...
and Alzheimer’s
The Center Sanctuary of safety/refuge and its dangerous frontiers

B. The Printed Text:
Orderly Center and Polluted [?] Margins
Text:
Center and Margins

NB: Anthropological boundary markers: sex
[ fornication / sodomy (anal intercourse) / bestiality ]
I have everything I need.
He lets me rest in green meadows;
He leads me besides peaceful streams.
He renews my strength.
He guides me along right paths,
bringing honour to His Name.

Even when I walk
through the dark valley of death,
I will not be afraid,
for You are close beside me.
Your rod and Your staff
protect and comfort me.

You prepare a feast for me
in the presence of my enemies.
You welcome me as a guest,
anointing my head with oil.
My cup overflows with blessings.
Surely Your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me
all the days of my life,
I will live in the house of the Lord forever.

Psalter and its marginalia
I have everything I need,
He lets me rest in green meadows;
He leads me besides peaceful streams,
He renews my strength.
He guides me along right paths,
bringing honour to His Name.

Even when I walk
through the dark valley of death,
I will not be afraid,
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love will pursue me
all the days of my life,
I will live in the house of The Lord
forever.

Fear of Margins /
boundary-crossing
VIII. A Persecuting Society:

Purging the Margins

R.I. Moore: *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*

Heretics (especially about the Body of Christ --- cf. werewolves);

Jews; Witches; Lepers

John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*

“Sodomites”

Gavin Langmuir, *History, Religion, and Antisemitism*
Paolo Uccello: “Profanation of the Host” (1465-1469)

Based on legend: Paris, 1290: “Miracle of the Profaned Host”

“Christian woman forced to redeem her cloak at the price of a host.”

http://www.myartprints.co.uk/a/uccello-paolo.html

Jews don’t believe that hosts are the body of Christ --- why would they roast it?

Gavin Langmuir: it is the Christians themselves who are doubting this… but feel anxious about doubting it.

Mechanism of scapegoating: project anxieties about self onto another.

Cultural fantasies (e.g., bleeding hosts!!!) are surface symptoms of deep underlying cultural anxieties!! [Note borrowing from psychoanalysis / genealogy]
“Jewish Pawnbroker roasting the host in the fire”

The Jewish Pawnbroker and his Family Burned at the Stake
Architectural diagram for crematorium at Auschwitz
“Repentant Christian woman is hanged for pawnning the host”

Prof. Reinburg: HS292 – “The Witch, the Church, and the Law”
http://www.bc.edu/schools/cas/history/faculty/alphabetical/reinburg_virginia.html

“The Pope returning the consecrated host to the altar”
Pollution on the margins (Jews and women) … and the restoration of cosmic order to the center

Paolo Uccello:
“Predella of the Profanation of the Host”

SUMMARY of the “HIGH MIDDLE AGES” (1200s):
A HIGHLY-ORDERED HIERARCHICAL ORGANIC GREAT CHAIN OF BEING ---
CLEAR BOUNDARIES BETWEEN PURITY (CENTER) AND DANGER (MARGINS)
The Black Plague in

*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*
Q: WHAT IS SO CRUCIAL ABOUT THE BLACK PLAGUE AS A TRAUMATIC EVENT?

A: THE POLLUTION COMES INTO THE CENTER OF --- INFECTS--- THIS HIGHLY-ORDERED SYSTEM WHICH WAS THOUGHT TO BE IMPERMEABLE

I. FIRST, THE FACTS (then, the metaphors):

Plague as a Malthusian Crisis?
Thomas Malthus (1766-1834)

THESIS: The rate of increase of the population tends to be out of proportion to its means of subsistence.

THEREFORE: population must be controlled --- mainly by sexual restraint.

IF NOT: Nature depletes population for us --- dustbowls; famine; plague.

John Boswell: “Those who celebrate the ‘Law of Nature’ don’t know much about nature.”

1250: “High Middle Ages”
Europe at its limits

- Geo-political shift: ca. 1000 A.D.:
  - End of Viking Invasions

- Economic shift: sustenance expansion
  - drains marshes for farming
  - resumes trading with “East” across Mediterranean

- Eco-system climate shift:
  - Weather: colder / wetter
  - Lessened agrarian yields
  - ca. 1300: series of famines and epidemics
“Geography of Disease” --- The Silk Road
1330s: Plague kills 2/3 of China’s population
1338: Arrives in Central Asia
1345: Volga River
1347: Lower Egypt/ Southern Italy/ Palestine
1348: Arabia/ Tunisia/ Northern Italy/ Iberia/ France/ England
1349: Northern Germany

http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/hms/medieval/Advanced%20Searching/BlackDeath.htm

http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/endmiddle-blue-dot-blackdeath.html
Fact: plague “invaded” from China
Fantasy: Jews – the margins -- poisoned wells of Europe from within…

“The Plague, SARS, and Gay Rights”
http://www.familyresearchinst.org/FRR_03_05.html

Cultural fantasy not a thing of the past…
1348: Plague invades France -- Most populous of kingdoms

- Bubonic Plague: incubation of 6 days; 60% chance of dying
- Pneumonic Plague: incubation of 2 days; spread by coughing
  - 100% chance of dying in 15th century
- Kills 1/3 of Western Europe

Malthusian Crisis?
Eco-balance restored: population proportionate to means of subsistence
Plague is endemic: keeps coming back for 300 years
England recovers only in 1500s. France recovers only in 1700s