Medieval Order: 
A World of Mediation

Week 03 - Lecture 01
22 September 2004

Point of this lecture:
set up the ordered world
that
Plague will destroy.

Why “mediation”?

Medieval world: a mediated world.

How did the Medievals
order
their world?

KEY: NOT BY “RACE” OR “CLASS”
Cf: “the Christian race”
“Class”: a capitalist invention
“Who owns the means of production?”

RATHER:

“ORDERS” OR “ESTATES”

[cf.: “What is the Third Estate?”]

i.e., LAND [property]

passed on through blood / family / “marriage”

I. Society:
the Three “Orders” [or: “Estates”]
• First Order:
  – “Those who pray” [mediators]
    • Bishops, Monks, Priests

• Second Order:
  – “Those who fight”
    • Knights, i.e., Nobility

• Third Order:
  – “Those who work”
    • Peasantry; Laborers; Merchants; the other 95%!!!
    • Hence: “What is the Third Estate?”

Note traditional “culture” [ideas and values]:
Not about “class” [19th-c. concept]
-- e.g., “meritocracy,” change, individual effort
Rather: UNCHANGING: BLOOD / GENEALOGY / INHERITANCE / PRIVILEGE

“Privilege”: only the nobility could HUNT
PROPERTY = LAND: a land-based economy

“fixed”… unlike moveable capital

15 September 2004!

How do we read a visual text?
“Anthropological boundary markers”:
  
  hair / clothing / gender

The boundaries of the social body are inscribed on the individual body.

Anthropological boundary markers: maintain social order/s
Anthropological boundary markers: maintain social order/s

Head-dress / Head-covering / Hair

“nimbus” = eternal: UNCHANGING
[cf. wedding ring: circle without end = “perfect motion”]
ENDLESS REVOLUTIONS [i.e., revolving…]

“nimbus”

Christ / Orders:
Inscribed in eternity
Traditional = unchanging
II. Great Chain of Being: A Mediated world

“Christ in Majesty”  
Spain, 1150-1200 [fresco], Boston MFA  

Cultural significance / meaning of nimbus?  
The social order is eternal --- it is not a social compact --- to alter it is an act of rebellion [cf. Shakespeare!]

“Revolution”:  
Endless revolving???  
Or sudden revolt???

The Great Chain of Being: An organic world  
Everything is interconnected; not an “atomistic” world

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• A hierarchical ladder of Being
• “Higher” beings “participate” more in Being [God]
• “Lower” beings “participate” less in Being [God]

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Contrast with Darwin’s “evolution”:
– Darwin idea: Evolution: things get better (evolve) over time
– Medieval idea: if things change, they must devolve
  • Started with perfection? Only one way to go is down.
  • Hence: “conservative” = conserve
– Medieval value: “being” better than “becoming”
– Modern value: “change” is a good thing

Christ the Geometer:
Measures out the world
Center = order
Outer = chaos
[e.g. Leviathan: sea monsters]

KEY FOR CANTOR chapter: Aristotelianism / Thomism

• Aristotle / Thomas Aquinas:
• The “essence” of a thing is what it is or its “what-ness”
  • Key point: “essences” are unchanging
  • “Essence” [what a thing is] precedes its “existence” [the fact that it is]
  • Corollary: your identity / meaning is fixed and unchangeable even before you are born
    • “Biology as destiny”
  • NB: WILLIAM OF OCCAM DOES NOT BELIEVE THIS
    – Things win what we name them: nominalism
    – cf: What is Marriage For? (What it is = What is to become)
• Unchanging: BLOOD / GENEALOGY
• Changing: meritocracy: individual effort
Contrast Modern:
Jean-Paul Sartre [1908-1980]

• “Existentialism”: our existence precedes our essence

• What we are [i.e., our “meaning, identity”]…
• is created by us…
• … as we live out our existence [i.e., the fact that we are]

Pre-modern [essentialism]: our identity given to us by outside ourselves
Modern [existentialism]: we create our own unique individual identities

IV. Architecture

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]

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“Requiem Mass”: a ritual sacrifice performed as a mediation — i.e., to pay for “[redeem,” cf. empty bottles redemption!] the sins of the dead and release their souls from purgatory into heaven.

“Indulgence”: a redemption/release obtained by performing a certain ritual and/or good act. Instituted in 1300.

By 1400s, indulgences can be obtained by substituting a monetary payment for ritual/good act.

Music for Week One:
Dies Irae from Requiem Mass

A World of Mediation in Great Chain of Being

Martin Luther [1500s]:
The Folly of Indulgences

By 1400s, indulgences can be obtained by substituting a monetary payment for ritual/good act.

Music for Week One:
Dies Irae from Requiem Mass

Durham, England
Gasson Hall, Boston College

Cultural meaning of the architecture?
A cosmic harmony: mediated chain of being uniting the divine and the human / faith and reason.

Trump Tower

Cosmic Order v. Human Initiative
Not so much in the “fact” of the architecture -- e.g., its soaring vertical rise --- as in the meanings and values inscribed in and ascribed to the style.

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] on 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:  
supremely confident / optimistic 13th century  
cf. Cantor: Thomism = optimism

V. Images of Order / Disorder
A. Sanctuaries / Gargoyles

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?
cf. werewolves...

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 / bestiality
<inter-species>]

Image on the Edge
The Margins of Medieval Art
Michael Coutelle
Center and Margins
NB: Anthropological boundary markers: food cannibalism
Text: Center and Margins
Psalter and its marginalia

Hybrids =
Mixtures =
Monsters =
Perversions =
Against nature
C. The Musical Text: Center and Margins

Hildegard of Bingen: The Order of Virtues

- Note Hildegard’s drawing: perfect human being within circle [nimbus] --- eternal order.
- Individual within a cosmos: “humility”

What does the music signify?

- Music for ancients/medievals: represents cosmic order, cosmic harmony
  - cf. Aristotle: the perfect motion of the planets [“harmony of the spheres”]

What do the words signify?

- An ode to “humility”:
  - humus = “ground” [cf. Human / humble]
  - human is made from humus
  - humble person: one whose feet on the ground --- knows their place in the order of the cosmos
Cf. Myth of Daedalus/Icarus and Tower of Babel: those who want to “fly too high” have lost sense of their place [i.e., the virtue of humility] in the cosmic order.

The Virtues sing to their sister, the virtue of Innocence

- Mourn for this, mourn, oh Innocence, you who in your fair modesty lost no perfection, who did not devour greedily <the apple!> with the gullet of the Serpent of old. 
  <allusion to Garden of Eden>

Then, enter the Devil!

- NB: the Devil speaks/shouts but does not sing: song=cosmic harmony; he is cosmic disorder.
- He tries to tempt them to abandon their humility before the cosmic order and follow his own “rebellion.”
- cf. Satan: led rebellion of angels... cf. Chain of being

- What power can claim that there is no power but God?
  I say: whoever wants to follow me and do my will---
  I’ll give them everything!
  <NB: allusion to temptations of Christ in the desert>

As for you, Humility, you have nothing that you can give your followers: none of you even know what you are!

Cf. Garden of Eden -- serpent’s temptation: eat of the Tree of Knowledge !!! You will not be humble; “You will be as gods.”

My comrades and I know very well that you are the dragon of old who craved to fly higher than the highest one: but God himself hurled you in the abyss.
Cf. Myth of Daedalus/Icarus and Tower of Babel: those who want to “fly too high” have lost sense of their place (i.e., the virtue of humility) in the cosmic order.

Virtues conclude:

• “As for us, we Virtues dwell in the heights.”
  – Nos quiem omnes in excelsis habitamus.

• NB: as in Greek tragic “catharsis”: all return to proper place in the universe: virtues, Devil, we ourselves [humility]