

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

Workload, the readings/videos/podcasts

**Reminder on weekly discussion questions,
due Thursdays at 1:00**

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 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.

Readings/videos for next class

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).

For premodern thinkers, faith and reason reinforced each other (quote of the day, by Augustine). Use reason to interpret special revelation and understand general revelation.



Continuing with Augustine: When can political authorities legitimately persecute someone? When is such persecution illegitimate?

Until the last few hundred years in the West, blasphemy and heresy were both sins and crimes. Thomas Aquinas: blasphemy (an offense against God) is a more serious sin than murder, but should be punished less severely.

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



“What is your present religion, if any? Are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, something else, or nothing in particular?”



American population, 2014

Protestant: 47%

Catholic: 21%

Mormon: 2%

Other Christian: 2%

(total Christian 72%)

Jewish: 2%

Muslim: 1%

Buddhist: 1%

Hindu: 1%

Something else: 2%

Atheist: 3%

Agnostic: 4%

Nothing in particular: 16%

(total unaffiliated: 23%)

Pol S 334 students

Protestant: 10%

Catholic: 13%

Mormon: *

Other Christian: 1%

(total Christian 24%)

Jewish: 6%

Muslim: 1%

Buddhist: *4.5%

Hindu: *4.5%

Something else: 6%

Atheist: 14%

Agnostic: 23%

Nothing in particular: 17%

(total unaffiliated: 54%)

Sometime after 380: Europe was overwhelmingly Christian. Divided into Catholic and Protestant beginning in 1517.

2. “People hold beliefs about whether God exists, whether a particular book contains God’s divine revelation, whether heaven and hell exist, etc. Are you certain that your beliefs on those and other religious questions are true, or is it possible that some or all of your beliefs are wrong?”

_____I’m certain

_____I could be wrong

Pol S 334 students:

24%

76%

Sometime after 380 and up to 1517: high levels of certainty and agreement in Europe about religious questions.

Also high levels of agreement on political authority, lodged in a king or other hereditary monarch.



A premodern approach to truth requires agreement and certainty over religious and political questions.

Political certainty in the premodern era was captured in the divine right of kings. Richard I, 1193: “I am born in a rank which recognizes no superior but God, to whom alone I am responsible for my actions.”



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.”

Is this an accurate summary of the first part? Whoever is in power was put there by God.

Is this an accurate summary of the second part? “Obey the laws of the government, because God has ordained the government for his purposes.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=js4wcaPqSow>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-hV67w6oYA>

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

The Catholic Church claimed that its authority also came from God. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus says to Peter, on this rock I will build my church.

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>