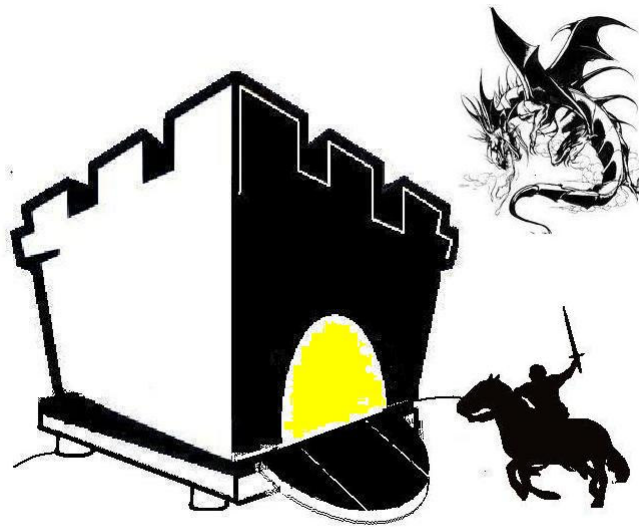

Fortress Living



Three Solutions for Your Greatest Problems in Life

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Lesson Seven

Medieval Solutions to the Greatest Problems in Life

Seven Historical Periods

PERIOD	YEARS	Normative Solutions (Philosophy and Theology)	Situational Solutions (Arts and Culture)	Relational Solutions (Ethics and Spirituality)
Ancient	5 th Century BC to 5 th Century AD	The State Gives Norms ----- <i>Rationalism</i>	Classicism ----- Stauary	* Ethical Hedonism * Bad: religious persecution * Good: religious purification
Medieval	500 AD to 1400	The Church Gives Norms ----- <i>Scholasticism</i>	Mysticism ----- Byzantine	* Ethical Legalism * Bad: Biblical illiteracy * Good: Piety and Devotion
Renaissance	1400 to 1600	Reason Gives Norms ----- <i>Humanism</i>	Naturalism ----- Giotto	* Ethical Dualism * Bad: compartmentalization * Good: helpful inventions
Enlightenment	1600 to 1800	Subjective Mind Gives Norms ----- <i>Rational Idealism</i>	Neoclassicism ----- Beethoven and J.L David	* Ethical Utopianism * Bad: idolatry of the state * Good: religious liberty
Scientific	1800 to 1900	Science Gives Norms ----- <i>Empiricism</i>	Romanticism ----- R. Wagner <i>Ring Cycle</i>	* Ethical Positivism * Bad: reason over revelation * Good: reasons to believe
Modern	1900 to 2000	Self Gives Norms ----- <i>Pragmatism</i>	Impressionism ----- <i>Monet Poplars at Giverny</i>	* Ethical Individualism * Bad: social isolation * Good: inner spirituality
Post-modern	2000 and Beyond	No Norms ----- <i>Nihilism</i>	Deconstructionism ----- <i>Picasso Le Demoselles</i>	* Ethical Relativism * Bad: reject tradition * Good: truth alone

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Medieval	500 AD to 1400	The Church Gives Norms ----- <i>Scholasticism</i>	Mysticism ----- Byzantine	* Ethical Legalism * Bad: Biblical illiteracy * Good: Piety and Devotion
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The Period: 500 AD to 1400 AD

There was no New York Times or network news broadcast blaring the headline: “Roman Empire Falls—Details To Follow.” Even if there were newspapers or media broadcasts, the fall of Rome was not a one time event. It took place gradually and over decades. So, when I suggest that the Ancient Period was over in 500 AD, ushering in the Medieval, we must understand what that looked like in reality. There were elements of Ancient philosophy, art and ethics that continued to have influence, long after Rome fell. And there were foreshadows of Medieval ideas and practices even before the 6th century. These dates, therefore, are more a convenient memory device. The same can be said of the end date of the Medieval Period. There was nothing magical about what took place in 1400 AD. There were changes that year, and in the years before and after, that represent the culmination of Medieval thought and the transition to the next period.

Dominant Normative Solutions: Scholasticism

If the State was the final authority for normative solutions in the Ancient Period, by the time we get to the Medieval, there was no longer a single “State” strong enough and big enough to do the job. After the days of centralized power and control of the Caesars, Europe became increasingly fragmented and characterized by dozens of little power centers and weak rulers. Therefore, one of the reasons the new source and authority of norms during the Medieval Period was that the political powers of the former period had become so corrupt and so impotent.

There were other factors, however. For the new center of power was none other than the Christian Church. Though Christians had originally been tortured and persecuted under the Caesars for their faith and practice, something happened in the fourth century to change all that. An emperor named Constantine professed to become a Christian himself and set out to turn the Roman Empire into a Christian Empire. By the end of the fourth century, Christianity had not only become a legally accepted religion. It had become the official religion of the realm. If you wanted to be a good citizen of Rome, you had to first be baptized as a Christian and then become an active member of the Roman Church. All this was taking place even prior to the ultimate destruction of the Roman political system.

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But even as the Roman political system declined and collapsed, the Roman Catholic Church expanded and advanced. It is important to understand that when we talk about the Church of the Medieval Period, we are talking about more than a building with a steeple and a group of members. For one thing, there were no steeples in those days. Those would not be invented for hundreds of years! But beyond that, the Church of this period was a highly organized system of norms, situations and relationships. Nor should we imagine the Church of that day simply to be a collection of pastors and people. The leaders of churches—called bishops--functioned more like kings than shepherds. And there was one bishop whose power and authority to create and enforce norms for life took precedence over all the others. He was the bishop of Rome. Eventually he was called the “pope” which means, “father.”

In many ways, the Church, like the State, tried to solve the greatest problems of life: the problems of danger, pain and failure. It certainly offered superior answers to those proffered during the Greek and Roman times. However, as we will see, they were still inadequate and that’s because of the foundations, structure and access.

The dominant normative solutions offered by the Roman Church are characterized by the term Scholasticism. Technically, Scholasticism did not reach its mature development until the end of the Medieval Period, but the philosophical and theological ideas of Scholasticism were certainly evident early in the Period. The word “scholasticism” has its roots in the Latin word “schola” from which we get our word “scholar.” Scholasticism was literally a movement determined to make “scholars.” How? Though scholastics read and studied the Christian Scriptures, most of them were products of the old Greek-Roman academies and were still enamored of those ideas. In other words, even though the Scholastics professed to be doing their work as Christians, often what they did is restate pagan ideas with Christian terminology.

Recall that the Socratic philosophers attempted to define two realms of knowledge: the Universal and the Particular—like a two story house. The Upper Story was the realm of perfect ideals and was knowable by reason. It was from this realm that normative solutions for life should come:

The Ancient Rationalism:

UPPER LEVEL: Universal Ideals
(Known by Reason)

LOWER LEVEL: Particular Things
(Known by Experience)

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The Scholastic thinkers simply adopted this view and added something new:

The Medieval Scholasticism:

UPPER LEVEL: Eternal Truths (Known by Faith)
Universal Ideals (Known by Reason)

LOWER LEVEL: Particular Things
(Known by Experience)

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The Scholastics were staunchly committed to the powers and possibilities of human reason. Theologians like Thomas Aquinas believed that “honest” reason was capable of leading a person to the knowledge of God. The so called “Theistic Proofs” for the Existence of God devised by Aquinas were examples of how this works. One didn’t need a Bible to know God exists. All he needs is his mind.

Scholasticism believed there was a role for faith in living the Christian life. But it was not absolutely essential. This is why, especially during the end of the Medieval Period, so many Christian thinkers began protesting the errors of the Scholastics. In fact, they were eventually forced to leave the Roman Catholic Church and begin their own. Because they spent so much time pointing out errors and protesting common practices, they became known as “protestants” and their departure from the historic Catholic Church became the Protestant Reformation.

Dominant Situational Solutions: Mysticism

It seems ironic that art and culture in this period, so intent on human rationality, would tend toward mysticism. Rationalism is the very opposite of mysticism. Rationalism emphasizes things like logic and debate and facts. Mysticism, on the other hand, is willing to dispense with all of them in its quest for experience.

But this is what happened: the Catholic Church of the Medieval Period consisted of two very different groups: the Western (centered in Rome) and the Eastern (centered in Constantinople). I’m going to oversimplify a very complicated process, but let’s just say the Western Church was more interested in reason and the Eastern Church favored religious experience. The Eastern Church likewise developed artistic forms and techniques we would call “mystical.”

It’s not hard to see what happened. Throughout history mysticism has arisen as a reaction to rigid rationalism and intellectualism. If you look at the two-story diagram, you will see that while the upper story is dominated by *reason*, the lower is dominated by *experience*. The Mysticism of the Medieval Period, visible particularly in the paintings, music and architecture, was the triumph of experience over rationality.

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Mysticism was furthermore a situational solution to the great problem of pain. It was a way of ordering and arranging the experiences of life, trying to create meaning and trying to make sense of it all. One of the greatest examples of this pain was the pain of physical suffering. And the Medieval artists found a rich resource for these situational solutions in the biblical stories of suffering, especially of Jesus, the Apostles and the subsequent martyrs of church history.



The image above was from a large Eastern Church in Macedonia, and created approximately 1100 AD. It is titled the Descent from the Cross and pictures the crucified Jesus who has died, being held by Mary his mother and the Apostle John. Note that the figures in the art, though carefully drawn, are not what we would call “realistic.” No one looks like that in real life. Facial features are unrealistic, the hands of Jesus and John don’t look like real hands. And then there’s the strange orange circle around all their heads. It was called a “nimbus” and was invented by Medieval artists as a way to portray the holiness and sainthood of certain characters.

The point is, the artists were attempting to create a mystical experience for the viewer. When looking at the work, no one would be tempted to think these were ordinary people in some ordinary suffering. And their hope was that by studying and embracing the pain and sorrow evident in the faces and postures of the characters, the worshipper would feel both a connection to that suffering, but also hope in his own. After all, though Jesus was shown in death, the worshippers knew that three days later, he rose again.

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Dominant Relational Solutions: Ethical Legalism

In the outworking of their normative and situational solutions to the greatest problems of life, the dominant relational solution of this period was what I call Ethical Legalism. We use the term “legalistic” nowadays to describe someone who is more focused on external behavioral than internal intent. A “legalist” is someone who further tells everyone else what to do (norms) but often lives totally the opposite. Jesus confronted the legalism of his day, especially with the religious leaders: the Pharisees and Sadducees.



¹ Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”

³ Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ ⁵ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is ‘devoted to God,’ ⁶ they are not to ‘honor their father or mother’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition (Matthew 15).

The Pharisees were good at establishing rules for everyone to follow. But Jesus reserved particular hostility for them because they had no intention of submitting to those rules themselves. In much the same way, the Scholastic system of ethics and religion was legalistic.

In the early days of the church, Christians were known for their love and good works. Though certainly there were norms and rules of life put forth in the New Testament, these were secondary to a life of service. By the Medieval Period, Christianity became primarily a system of rules and social controls. More often than not, the rules were invented not simply out of a desire to serve God or obey the Bible, but to empower the Church and its officials. For example, in most of our churches today, giving an offering is a voluntary practice. But in those times, it was nothing short of a tax, and anyone who refused to pay it could be put in jail—or worse.

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The Limits of Scholasticism

- **The Medieval Foundation –The Norms of Life**

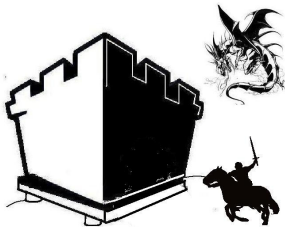


As a normative solution for the greatest problems of life—danger, pain and failure—scholasticism had superior answers to the pagan rationalists. Often, Scholastic theologians and philosophers displayed a great love for the Bible and reliance upon it. However, their methods of study and analysis were so heavily influenced by their pagan education that they often missed the truth. For example, many of the Christian pastors, teachers and thinkers of the period adopted a method of Bible study called “Allegorism.” Allegorical interpretation of Scripture meant that the historical truth of a passage was often lost in an effort to look for the deeper (mystical) meaning.

While such an exercise may seem harmless, actually it was not over the long term. Allegorical interpretations were highly subjective and personal. As such they were like the Byzantine artistic renderings. But as allegorism persisted over time, the historical and “actual” meaning of Bible events and truths got lost in the allegorical enterprise. Furthermore, it was not unusual for allegorists to use the method in their preaching and teaching and to further resort to allegoristic interpretations of Scripture to justify all kinds of political, social and ethical ideas—often at the expense of other truths clearly described in the Bible.

Recall that normative solutions require a trusted authority. Because they are derived apriori—before experience—we must receive them from those who have gone before. By the end of the Medieval Period, this had totally broken down. So much of the allegorism of Scripture had gotten bizarre and confusing that early Renaissance thinkers, in their quest for an authority for truth, not only rejected allegorism, but rejected the Scripture also. We would call that throwing out the “baby with the bathwater.”

- **The Medieval Structure –The Situations of Life**



It is up to the sensitive men—the artists and craftsmen—to define situational solutions to the greatest problems of life. The artists in the Western Church approached this task somewhat differently than those in the East. As we saw, the Eastern artists were more inclined to mysticism. But those tendencies did not remain in the East. The influence of Mysticism was felt throughout the entire Christian Church. Situational solutions are oriented toward balance, and as long as the artistic displays contained both fact and experience, even the Mysticism was acceptable. However, even as allegorism resulted in greater fancy than fact, so mysticism in the arts tended to degenerate into the bizarre, outrageous and erroneous.

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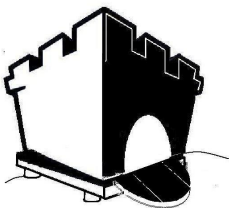
Untethered to a properly understood Bible, there was no limit to the imagination of some of these artists. Perhaps you've seen some of the medieval bestiaries. A bestiary is a collection of drawings of beasts. They became popular in the Medieval Period because of the ever present fascination with the natural world. The bestiaries were also added to many of the handcopied texts of Scripture.

While bestiaries included such "real" animals as sheep, rabbits and horses, some of them favored more mysterious beasts--like monsters. I'm not just talking about dragons and reptiles but the most frightening: werewolves (half man half beast) and gargoyles (demons). Gargoyles were often placed on churches to depict demons and some scholars believe were intended to scare other evil influences away. Even today, there is a fascination with monsters and demons that lingers from this period.

As in allegorical interpretations of Scripture, this fascination with mystical monsters ended up collapsing under its own weight. For in the Renaissance and Enlightenment Periods, when natural scientists determined that there were no such beasts in existence, it made the Scripture texts to which they were attached all that much more antiquated and suspicious.



- **The Medieval Access – The Relationships of Life**



Even when all else fails around us, we like to think that our family and friends will prevail. The normative and situational solutions of the Medieval Period tended toward a growing mistrust of the Bible. But at least they still had their relationships! Right? Wrong!

For ethical legalism, the dominant relational solution of the Medieval Period, pulled the proverbial rug out from under even those most intimate relationships. When the focus of our interactions with others is primarily what they do rather than who they are, the result is the destruction of relationships. Thus, the drawbridge of access to the castle—our relationships with others—ceases to be a solution to the greatest problems in life. It just adds to the problem. The legalism preached from the pulpits and proclaimed from the thrones did not bind people together but drove them apart through increased suspicion, doubt and mistrust. This was especially evident in that most sacred of relationships: pastors and congregations. Over time, parishioners lost all confidence in their spiritual leaders. And, at the end of the period, new preachers and teachers rose up to point that out. They were called Protestants and they attempted to create a new point of access to the fortress of truth.

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Quiz 7 Questions:

1. The Medieval Period covers what years?
 - a. 3rd Century BC to 5th Century AD
 - b. 5th Century AD to 1400 AD
 - c. 1st Century AD to 1500 AD
2. The dominant normative solution of the Medieval Period was
 - a. Rationalism
 - b. Skepticism
 - c. Scholasticism
3. The philosophers and theologians of this period borrowed most of their ideas from and tried to make them sound “Christian”
 - a. The Egyptians
 - b. The Greeks and Romans
 - c. The Persians
4. The dominant situational solution in the arts of the Medieval Period was
 - a. Mysticism
 - b. Classicism
 - c. Cubism
5. As a system of ethics and spirituality, Ethical Legalism would most likely agree with which motto:
 - a. “Do as I say, not as I do...”
 - b. “If it feels good, do it...”
 - c. “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again...”