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The New Style of Christian Thought

1. Introduction

This life is a journey. In it we encounter not only obstacles, triumphs and failures but also multitudes of opinions, views and philosophies. Our perception of these philosophies, through rejection or acceptance can even entail successful survival and – as many Christians would argue – *correct* survival. The “Allegory of the Theologians” is a mechanism for analyzing content from four different perspectives: literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical. The literal perspective is concerned with the details of what actually happened, it is narrative in nature. The allegorical perspective is used to evaluate events and art not for exactly what occurrences they contain but for what said occurrences symbolize. Proper use of the moral perspective entails understanding events and artistic forms as they pertain to our choices in life; it helps us know how we should live our lives. Lastly, the anagogical perspective is concerned with studying depictive forms for the understanding of our destiny, to discover where we end up. I claim that Medieval Christian architecture, and literature (such as *Dante’s Inferno*) illustrate that modern Christians hold significantly different views on Christianity than the Medieval Christians held.

2. Chartres Cathedral



Figure 1: Interior, at the Crossing

The above image of the interior ceiling of Chartres Cathedral is a prime example of this difference in thought. In a literal view we see a huge structure with many archways. We see a couple of lights, however, most of the lighting comes from the many windows (most of which are stained glass, few of which are not). In the literal sense we can reasonable conclude that this cathedral is architectural marvel that surely costed a fortune. This literal interpretation reflects into the allegorical interpretation. The light coming into the church is symbolic of Christ as the “light of the world” and also of church-goers as being “children of light” (Cite...). The size and the many arches seem to be declaring the glory of the church.

The third mechanism, the moral interpretation that the cathedral provides is one of distance. The cathedral’s huge size coupled with the hight of the ceiling seems to imply a distant, almost fearful relationship with God. It implies that Christians are lowly and ought to have a great fear of a great God. Even the high placement of the stain glass windows, depicting Bible stories, seems to emphasize the distance between God (along with things of God) and man. The anagogical perspective is, in may respects, derivative of the other three interpretations (especially

the moral). The supreme distance reminds us that heaven is not close to us, it is not of this world. The beauty and complexity of the cathedral inspire reverence implying that heaven will be a large, sanctuary-like haven for those who have adequate reverence and fear of the Lord. Overall, Chartres Cathedral presents the Medieval church's high view of heaven as a far off and beautiful place. The cathedral serves as an architectural modelling of the Medievals' view of heaven. To every coin there is a flip-side. To present their view of hell, I will next examine the 5th Canto of *Dante's Inferno* and the themes that proceed from therein and are present throughout the rest of the book.

3. *Dante's Inferno*

By literal analysis, the reader is show Dante and Virgil entering the second circle of hell (it is divided up into rings). They then see a large, specie-less creature named Minos, having a long tail. Minos wraps its tail around sinners entering hell, encircling them a number of times specifying the number of the circle of hell in which they will reside perpetually (Dante 37). The canto continues on, pointing out individual sinners who are entering, however, I will focus on the former details and what they entail throughout the story. From the allegorical perspective, this canto has implications throughout the rest of the book. Allegorically, the very fact that there is assignment implies that there are different levels of sin (i.e. some sins are worse than others). The different circles of hell (and the different punishments) imply that hell has no uniform method of punishing sinners, and the different sins in life merit different punishments in the afterlife.

Using the moral perspective from "Allegory of the Theologians," we see that the process of the allocation in hell for different sins provides a clear model on how Medieval Christians should live their lives. By Dante's normative, Christian's ought to live their lives in repentance walking the straight path and that we ought not, as he says through Odysseus in canto XXVI, "live as a mere brute does, [b]ut for the pursuit of knowledge and the good" (Dante 223) His assignment of perpetrators to the center circle (where the punishment is the worst) shows Medieval Christians

that fraud is the worst sin they can commit and that some sins can be categorized into different magnitudes of wrongdoing. As stated earlier, where Chartres Cathedral presents a model of heaven after earth, *Dante's Inferno* paints a picture of hell. Anagogically, and very clearly, Dante is saying that people, even those claiming to be Christians, who live non-repentant lives will suffer perpetually and physically in hell. The physical pain is the main component he stresses, as the sins and punishments grow increasingly "worse" and he explores the deeper recesses of hell. Also, Dante presents a singular, one-to-one nature of punishments to crimes.

4. Conclusion

The Medievals' line of thinking seems to be very discrete and physical in nature. For example, in Chartres Cathedral, the emphasis of the church is in the building itself, the magnificence and glory of the structure. In *Dante's Inferno*, hell is described as categorical sinners' piggy-holes, the purpose of which is physical torment for eternity. Dante makes clear distinctions regarding the "magnitude of sin," and his tailored symbolic retributions. As stated earlier, I believe that modern Christian views digress from the Medievals' views of the Christian life and afterlife. Where Chartres Cathedral symbolizes a distance between God and the individual, modern Christians speak of a *personal* relationship with God (through Christ), and they call themselves "friends of God." Where the cathedral in itself is the emphasis of the cathedral, modern Christians believe that the people are the church, and that the building is secondary. Regarding Dante's view of life and hell, modern Christians will contest that "a sin is a sin" and will state that the only true punishment in hell is eternal separation from Christ.

Although I believe that the Christians of the present day would disagree with many of the themes of Chartres Cathedral and *Dante's Inferno*, I also believe they would find some virtue and worth in their methods of making sense of the world. Though extravagant and non-simplistic, the cathedral with the intent of being a tribute to Christianity and a place of worship. These attributes are irrefutable by modern Christians. *Dante's Inferno* is, in essence, an anagogical book which

seems to almost use a scare-tactic to illustrate to Medieval Christians what will happen to them if they fail to live as they *should*. Contrarily, modern Christians hold relationships with Christ above acts, and separation from Christ as being worst than physical torment. Overall, it seems Medieval proponents of Christianity were trying to describe our lives and afterlives as being black-and-white – modern Christians' hold hazier views of their faith.

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