

Essentials of Medieval Philosophy:
the prevalence of sin and salvation theology

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This study will look at how the middle age philosophy impacted its world. While the Christian Church is significantly addressed in in middle ages study, the central theme of what the Church taught is often understated as to its impact. Pieces of evidence reflect that medieval philosophy was dictated by theological teachings of sin and salvation. It was St. Augustine of Hippo, who was a key influence in the development of this Christian world view. The concepts were prevalent in the way society thought, acted, as well as performed funeral customs. It was also evident in the many frescos of the period. This philosophy's importance is a key aspect to grasping the middle age successes and downfalls while continues as a part of modern history. It was of fundamental historical importance that Augustine laid a philosophical foundation of sin and salvation in the Medieval Period, that gave hope to a dark world and mission to carry out; that nevertheless, subsequently, history substantiated the hypothesis by revealing the corruption of the very institution that sought to absolve the concepts' reality. Sin and salvation theology is essentially the medieval philosophy that shaped how people thought, lived and died in the middle ages.

Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis (354-430 AD) is considered among the foremost Christian Fathers among the post-Nicene Latin Church that set the stage for Medieval philosophy. Also, known as St. Augustine, he was bishop of Hippo Regius (modern-day Annaba, Algeria). Augustine was a Latin philosopher and theologian from the Africa Province of the Roman Empire. His thoughts profoundly influenced the medieval worldview. Augustine believed that God's grace, through Jesus, was central to the freedom of humankind and shaped the doctrines of sin and salvation. Concerning these doctrines, Augustine's most significant writing was *The City of God*. Being among the Classical Roman era, he interpreted theology

considering the philosophies of the day such as Neoplatonism.¹ The Orthodox Church had questioned Augustine as to his teachings on grace (unmerited favor), predestination, and the Holy Spirit.² However, a consensus developed among eastern, western, and Protestant churches that Augustine laid a Christian foundation for the theological doctrines of sin and salvation. These were key ingredients to Middle Age philosophy that also led to the predominantly patristic society. What defines Christianity? Doctrines of the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, His crucifixion, and resurrection, trinity, and the apostolic mission had been mostly established. Doctrines concerning ecclesia, Papacy, traditions of icons, and relics were also forming. But, it was the doctrines of sin and salvation that shaped Medieval Christianity and continued throughout. It was these doctrines that relate the impact of what Jesus accomplished spiritually for all of humanity. Furthermore, the medieval period was also muddled with doctrinal discovery of biblical vs. traditional, imperial vs. papal, and recognition of heresies like Arianism.

The most prominent theological idea that provided a basis or definition of Christianity was the doctrines of sin and salvation that gave hope and purpose. These theological doctrines make up the philosophy of the Middle Ages that was changing the ideology of the known world. Respectively, the dilemma in existence was the relationship between faith and reason. To this ideal, Augustine prescribed,

If thou hast not understood, said I, believe. For understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore, do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that thou mayest understand; since, “except ye believe, ye shall not understand.”³

¹ Paul Vincent Spade, "Medieval Philosophy," *The Metaphysics Research Lab Summer 2017 Edition* (2017), retrieved from Stanford.edu, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/medieval-philosophy/>

² Kevin Uhalde, "Original Sin," *Ohio University*, <http://www.ohio.edu/people/uhalde/uhalde-04-sin.pdf>

³ Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, Volume 7, (Edinburgh, SCT: T&T Clark now Bloomsbury Publishing, republished by WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. of Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1821), retrieved from Christian Classics Ethereal library- Calvin College, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf107.iii.xxx.html>

But to believe, he emphasized the nature of man was fallen in sin and required salvation.

Addressing this topic will relate the importance this had in Medieval era and society.

Augustine's premise on original sin is reflected in the Book of Genesis and Romans, translated in the King James Bible (1611) as follows:⁴

- “for the imagination of mans heart is euil [evil] from his youth (Gen. 8:21)”⁵
- "For all haue [have] sinned, and come short of the glory of God (Rom.3:23)”⁶
- “Wherefore, as by one man sinne entred into the world, and death by sin: and so death passed vpon [upon] all men, for that all haue sinned (Rom. 5:12)”⁷

It means that all humans are law breakers because Sin is the violation of God's law; furthermore, this sin was inherited.⁸ Couenhoven, an expert on Augustinianism, emphasizes this aspect of Augustin's doctrine of original sin.⁹ He explains, this historical or Adamical primal sin was transmitted genealogically and genetically in solidarity to all humans.^{10,11,12,&13} It was the biblical essence for which the Gospel was preached for if there was no sin a Savior is not needed. Recognizing the essentiality of the sin and salvation philosophy provides a portrait of how people thought, lived and died. A reflection of how sin influenced the medieval period is

⁴ Kevin Uhalde, “Original Sin,” *Ohio University*, <http://www.ohio.edu/people/uhalde/uhalde-04-sin.pdf>

⁵ “King James Bible Online 1611,” *King James Bible Online*, <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1611-Bible/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jesse Couenhoven, “St. Augustine's Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Augustinian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2005): 367-69, Villanova University, http://www.academia.edu/1958072/St._Augustines_Doctrine_of_Original_Sin

⁹ Note, as an expert on Augustinianism, Jesse Couenhoven has written extensively on the topic and whose articles can be found at: <https://villanova.academia.edu/JesseCouenhoven>

¹⁰ Jesse Couenhoven, “St. Augustine's Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Augustinian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2005): 369-72, 383-86, Villanova University, http://www.academia.edu/1958072/St._Augustines_Doctrine_of_Original_Sin

¹¹ “Genes and ‘Sin’,” *pbs.org*, <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/intro/genetsin-frame.html>

¹² Note, a distinction should be made with the regards to genetic sin versus *specific* kinds of sins such as many regard homosexuality; it has often been misinterpreted as justification for homosexuality. Neither is this a license to sin as the Holy Spirit empowers the believer to resist and overcome.

¹³ N. K. Gaur, et al., “The Bacillus subtilis sin gene, a regulator of alternate developmental processes, codes for a DNA-binding protein.” *Journal of Bacteriology* 173, no. 2 (Jan. 1991): 678, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC207059/>

observed in the many fresco paintings known as doom paintings. These are often in darker colors, depicting judgment scenes for people's sin. One example is *The Last Judgment* by Michelangelo (c. 1536-1541). Sin or evil was also revealed in architecture by way of gargoyles and chimeras. These are elongated statues of animal like demon creatures. One such example is depicted throughout the Notre-Dame de Paris. These, however also performed a functional purpose for drawing rain away from the building to prevent damage to the mortar.

There were varying points of view on sin, such as that by Thomas Aquinas; although, he did agree with much of Augustinian's doctrine on the topic.¹⁴ Weithman explains in his journal article that with Aquinas, there emerged an effort toward Aristotelian moral thought in the 13th century.¹⁵ A British ascetic monk named Pelagian attempted to dispel Augustine's doctrine of sin by asserting that original sin did not taint human nature. Augustine would counter Pelagian in his "works such as *On Grace and Free Will* (426), *On Rebuke and Grace* (426), *On Predestination of the Saints* (428-429), and *On the Gift of Perseverance* (428-429); and other famous works such as *The City of God* (413-426), and *Confessions* (398-399)."¹⁶ Pelagian's views on sin contradicted scripture and was an attempt at removing propitiation. Denial of Augustine's doctrine of sin was viewed as an attack on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and ultimately Pelagian was branded as a heretic by the Church. In 418 the Council of Carthage fully approved the doctrine of Original Sin and denounced the Pelagian heresy.

The influence of the Church in the Middle Ages warrants a historical understanding of its people and their teachings. Significant to that is their interpretation of Christianity. In its day,

¹⁴ Chris Siefert, "Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas on Original Sin," *College of William and Mary*, http://www.memoryhole.net/~chris/research/original_sin.html

¹⁵ Paul J. Weithman, "Augustine and Aquinas on Original Sin and the Function of Political Authority," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30, no. 3 (1992): 353, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/210619177?accountid=8289>

¹⁶ Graham Hill, "Augustine's Influence on Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli," *The Global Church Project*, <https://theglobalchurchproject.com/augustines-influence-calvin-luther-zwingli/>

the ecclesiastical Church had to consider what has happened and what is happening in their world because of Christianity, and how did it grow in power and influence? Along with the Constantinian political connections, there was something different about the Gospel message that grew the Church (Acts 2:46-47). A Man named Jesus comes on the scene, claims to be Messiah to the Jews, preaches love, forgiveness, while his disciples claim he did miracles. Surviving centuries of persecution and hostility, the ecclesiastical Church in its infancy weighed the question, who was Jesus? Moreover, as the Apostle Paul and others evangelized the message of the Gospel, that Jesus died on the Cross for the sins of human kind, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven, resulting in transformations of people's lives. St. Peter writes, as recorded in 1 Peter 3:18 of the King James Version Bible (1611), "Christ also hath once suffered for sinnes, the iust [just] for the vniust [unjust], that he might bring vs [us] to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit."¹⁷ In answer to the first question, with debate and councils over the course of two hundred years, the Church determined that Jesus was Deity and formulates the Trinity doctrine. Christianity seemed to turn the world upside down or more appropriately, right side up. Something was happening that changed the people and societies, what was it? Transformations of the hearts, minds, will, soul, spirit was occurring with the simple message of God's Love for humanity. It provided peace, joy, and hope, in a violent, chaotic, hopeless world. So again, Church Fathers were compelled to consider the transformations taking place and why it was so, leading to the doctrines of sin and salvation. It was this sin issue that Augustine attempted to answer. Furthermore, it was this issue that would define Christianity's mission and thought for the Church as it entered the Middle Ages.

¹⁷ "King James Bible Online 1611," *King James Bible Online*, <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1611-Bible/>

Christian theology unveiled or revealed a Medieval philosophy of Salvation and Eternity for society's human kind (John 3:16).

What was this Original Sin that required salvation? It was considered the original depravity of man that was passed down from Adam and Eve and became encoded in human nature. Sin could include an offense to self, fellow man, and God. Whether one calls it sins, wrong or crime, they are all- that of an offense. It is reasonable to state that sin is a reality to human nature. Logically, it is unreasonable to purport that sin does not exist. One only must look at murder to realize its existence, codified or not. The dark or medieval ages reflected this brutal killing and thus demanded answers to its remedy, and in regards to the question concerning war. Depravity was a prevalent reality in the medieval ages. But it was Jesus that bore the sins of all people on the cross to make atonement. Augustine reasoned that this original sin required the grace or forgiveness of God. Christianity provided a solution to sin— salvation, love, and forgiveness.

Because of this sin, per Augustine, God's grace abounded much more unto salvation as reflected in the writings of the Apostle Paul in Romans 5:19-21. Furthermore, it is this *sin and salvation* that is the essence of Medieval Philosophy as reflected in the book of St. John 3:15-17 of the King James Bible (1611),

That whosoever [whosoever] beleueth [believes] in him, should not perish, but haue eternall life. ¶ For God so loued [loved] þ^e world, that he gaue [gave] his only begotten Sonne [Son, Jesus]: that whosoever beleueth in him, should not perish, but haue euerlasting life. For God sent not his Sonne into the world to condemne the world: but that the world through him might be saued [saved] (John 3:15-17).¹⁸

Essentially, by believing in God's son, Jesus, one is granted eternal life. This philosophy of salvation was available to all but must be embraced to receive. It was this Christian philosophy,

¹⁸ "King James Bible Online 1611," *King James Bible Online*, <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1611-Bible/>

derived from theology, that makes up the ideology of Christendom (or Christian world view) during the Middle Ages. It also gave a mission to spread the good news of salvation by way of the Church. Salvation gave the notions of forgiveness of sin, a place in heaven, and eternity opposed to death simply being life's end.¹⁹ Abundant frescos depicting triumphant heavenly scenes, often in lighter colors, with people and or angels in the clouds or sky, the resurrection of the dead, all reminded believers of the *heavenly city*. These paintings often depict Christ in the center reflecting his presence and ascension. One example of such paintings is inside the dome of Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence Italy. Salvation is also reflected in architecture by way of the Gothic arch and spires. The elongated arch enabled for tall buildings, reaching to the heavens, as spires would touch the clouds of heaven. One such example of the tallest spire is that of Ulm Minster Cathedral at the height of 530 feet. Likewise, stained-glass reflected enlightenment to the heavenly realm. Furthermore, the concept of salvation appears to be evident in Medieval cemeteries. There are many grave stones in the shape of a cross with a circle, known as the Celtic cross. While the meaning of the circle may be difficult to prove historically, a St. Patrick legend says that it symbolizes eternity or everlasting life.²⁰ The cross is symbolic of death, and *death to sin* through the imputed righteousness of Jesus's death on the cross (see 1 Peter 2:24).^{21&22} Regardless of the circle, scripturally, the cross is also a metaphor or idiom for life, living, and resurrection as seen in 1 Peter 2:24, thus conceivably would have

¹⁹ Nicolaus Cusanus, "Nicholas of Cusa's Where is he that is born king of the Jews? (1456)," *SUNY, Stony Brook Department of Philosophy*, translated by Clyde Lee Miller, <http://web.archive.org/web/20021215233521/www.sunysb.edu/philosophy/faculty/lmiller/UBI.htm>

²⁰ Note, for St. Patrick Celtic cross legend see: 1) <http://ireland-calling.com/celtic-cross/> and 2) <http://www.thecemeteryclub.com/symbols.html>

²¹ Note, see reference link for biblical *dead to sin* search results on topic: <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/Dead-To-Sin>

²² Note, references for *imputed righteousness*: Rom. 3:21, 22; 10:3; Philippians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Corinthians 1:30

been viewed as such by one who bore the cross.²³ Mr. Halsall, author and medieval archeologist, writes, “An elaborate fifth-century sarcophagus contained an adolescent woman buried dressed, with several bunches of herbs and a garland about her head. From this headband was suspended a small *cross*.”^{24&25} Why was this philosophy of salvation important to their world? It goes back the absolving of sin. Christianity emerged at a time when Greek philosophy was prevalent. Their world was violent and chaotic. Weaponry and execution had been perfected. Trial by ordeal was the mode of justice with the glowing iron.²⁶ Life was regarded at best as paltry, as seen in the Colosseum barbarities and they lived short lives, on average of 30 years. Furthermore, the doctrine of original sin prescribes a collective guilt punishment, and that of a death penalty, thus warranting inquiry.²⁷ All of this demanded an answer to the philosophical question of, what happens to people when they die? Christian philosophy answered that question and filled the inner void that such a concern bears. To this day, and while requiring faith, it is only this philosophy that logically, reasonably, and rationally, answers said inquiry.

Temptation of worldly power and extravagant wealth was evident within the Church.

The power of heaven would lead to corruption as prayer gained monetary value.²⁸ The Monastic institutions became the avenue for getting to heaven as they replaced the intercession of Christ

²³ Note, see reference link for biblical “dead to sin” search results on topic: <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/Dead-To-Sin>

²⁴ Guy Halsall, *Early Medieval Cemeteries. An Introduction to Burial Archaeology in the Post-Roman West*, (Cruithne Press: Glasgow, 1995), 16, ISBN 1-873448-07-4

²⁵ Note, apparently, it was with ignorance that Mr. Halsall asserted that the cross in cemeteries had no real meaning. He provides a disclaimer at the top of his contents page that he may have changed his views on some details as new information became available since the date of publication.

²⁶ “Medieval Sourcebook: Ordeal Formuals,” *Fordham University*, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/ordeals1.asp>

²⁷ Jesse Couenhoven, “St. Augustine's Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Augustinian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2005): 363, 382-83, Villanova University, http://www.academia.edu/1958072/St._Augustines_Doctrine_of_Original_Sin

²⁸ Terry Jones, *Medieval Lives Episode 2/8: The Monk*, directed by Paul Bradshaw, (Oxford Film and Television Production), film, retrieved from YouTube user: AncientHistory, https://youtu.be/93zp8vaw8CY?list=PLcMNaTUIX_mbUTs2IIqXSgmhJd-SfXWME

with the intercession of the monk through the selling of prayers.²⁹ Meanwhile, the Priesthood gained wealth through forgiveness of sin, relics, and indulgences. As such, they became tremendous money making schemes for the wealth of the Church, making it a vast commercial enterprise.³⁰ As a result of the corruptions, the Church substantiated Augustine's hypothesis, which all men sinned and needed salvation, including the piety. Furthermore, concern for sin was evident in the fear for salvation by the royalties who found themselves in situations of war and killing; so much so, that they demanded being buried in Cathedrals with the hopes of salvation.³¹ A prime example for these burials is the Basilique cathédrale de Saint-Denis.

For Romans, it was their city that was to be *eternal*, yet it fell. For Jews, it was Jerusalem that was the eternal city. Christians were blamed for Rome's fall, so it was to refute this accusation that Augustine wrote *The City of God*. Augustine argued that Rome existed by God's will, sovereignty, and providence. Drawing upon a theological hystorography by way of the formation of the worlds, he explains that there exist two cities, one earthly and one heavenly. Concerning the earthly, Augustine focuses on Abraham, while on the heavenly he allegorizes heaven as Christ and the Church. He explains that corruption and vices (sin) led to Rome's downfall. Finally, Augustine reflects that the heavenly peace and happiness can be experienced on earth. Past philosophers like Plato emphasized that humans are not obligated to entire allegiance with earthly societies, and Augustine correlates this to Christian doctrine by asserting that Scripture, as divine revelation, alone can instruct humans as to the most noble good and evil. He describes of eternal punishment for sinners and ultimately that the saved will be given eternal

²⁹ Terry Jones, *Medieval Lives Episode 2/8: The Monk*, directed by Paul Bradshaw, (Oxford Film and Television Production), film, retrieved from YouTube user: AncientHistory, https://youtu.be/93zp8vaw8CY?list=PLcMNaTUIX_mbUTs2IIqXSgmhJd-SfXWME

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ "History of the Monument," *Basilique cathédrale de Saint-Denis*, <http://www.saint-denis-basilique.fr/en/Explore/History-of-the-monument>

peace, joy, and immortality.³² Augustine writes, “while the families which live by faith look for those *eternal* blessings which are promised,” and “this mortal life shall give place to one that is *eternal*.”³³ Finally, it is this one thought or philosophy that leaves humans with hope and a heartfelt comfort that no other philosophy seems to answer as freely and thoroughly.

When comparing, what is being preached today to what was preached during the Middle Ages one can identify a distinctive that was relevant to the period. During the Middle Ages, life itself was the issue, and thus sin, salvation, and eternity was of concern. Whereas, a different aspect is realized today. In America we live fairly, and thus God’s grace, favor and blessings are emphasized. The middle ages were a revelation of the unseen and spiritual life of humans that became known as sin and salvation. This philosophy of the middle ages continues into modern history as it is still significant to modern Christian theology, and like then, crosses are yet seen on grave stones today. Augustine realized it; the Church embraced it; and, their world revealed it. It is the doctrines of sin and salvation that remains a key aspect to all Christian faiths in the present day and is embedded in western thought. Has humanity fully ever left the dark ages, or are we simply seeing it in new light? If one must visualize the immaterial, Christian art still depicts scenes that reflect sin and salvation. It is said these concepts never existed, yet today glimpses of those demons are realized in the threat of nuclear war, the angels in that of peace keepers, maybe our heavenly city- America, and perhaps the Sovereign, our Constitution.

³² Kevin Knight, “The City of God,” *New Advent*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm>

³³ Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis, “Medieval Sourcebook: Augustine (354-430): The City of God: excerpts on the Two Cities,” *Fordham University*, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/aug-city2.asp>

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