

Astrology and the Narration of Religious History – Abū Maʿshar’s Theory of the Great Conjunctions in the Late Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, one important tool to explain past and predict future world events was astrology. In my paper, I am going to analyse how two late medieval scholars, Roger Bacon and Pierre d’Ailly, interpreted, adapted, and employed the so-called ‘theory of the great conjunctions’. This theory, famously advocated by the Persian astrologer Abū Maʿshar, was based on the idea that specific recurring planetary constellations influenced major developments on earth such as the emergence or the demise of religions.

The focus of my paper is how Bacon and d’Ailly placed this Islamic theory into a Christian framework and used it to explain the existence of different religions by evaluating them ‘scientifically’, i.e. astrologically. An analysis of their texts throws light on various aspects of medieval thinking and understanding of time by asking questions about the predictability of religions, their definitions and assigned time frames, the practical consequences that could be drawn from that and the role of God in the narration of religious world history. Among the scholars’ assumed six major religions was the religion of the Antichrist, signifying the end of all religions or rather the final victory of Christianity. Their texts are therefore also interesting sources in regard to circulating prophetic-apocalyptic notions. In sum, Bacon and d’Ailly show how late medieval scholars tried to make sense of major religious world developments. The problematic relation between theology and astrology makes their historical-astrological classification of religions a rewarding and fascinating field of research.

Friederike Pfister (University of Heidelberg)