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Duo sunt: The Historical and Intellectual Foundations of the Medieval ‘Two Powers’ Principle of Government

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ABSTRACT

***Duo sunt*: The Historical and Intellectual Foundations of the Medieval ‘Two Powers’ Principle of Government**

In the statements of the early Middle Ages, the most perennial question was how ought, *regnum* and *Sacerdotium*, the temporal power of kings and the spiritual power of priests be related. This work traces the development of an early formulation of the proper roles of ecclesiastical and temporal powers – the Gelasian dualism. When Christianity first appeared in the Roman empire, it was a persecuted sect and had no distinctive social or political philosophy. The maelstrom of the third century, however, stimulated the growth of Christianity, and the conversion of Constantine the Great, opened the possibility that Christianity could form a state-religion. The Church began to consolidate some form of central government, and its prelates began to emerge into a position of esteem and prominence. As a consequence, the Church faced a new danger – that a Christianised state would acquire a controlling influence over the Church’s governance (caesaropapism). The dissolution of imperial power in the West, however, led to the development of a quite different religious and political tradition. The western Church sought to assert itself in matters of faith and claimed a degree of autonomy in its own affairs. The Church found its first great spokesman in St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan. The seed sown by Ambrose was borne out in the writings of his great pupil, St. Augustine of Hippo, who was hailed as an advocate of dualism. Towards the end of the fifth century, the bishops of Rome, the *de facto* heirs of the emperor’s power in the West, attempted a theoretical delimitation of the respective functions of the spiritual and secular authority within the Christian commonwealth. This separation owes a great deal to the thought of St. Augustine, but it was Pope Gelasius I who delivered this dualistic notion in its most influential formulation.

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INTRODUCTION

Regnum and Sacerdotium

In the statements of the early Middle Ages, we see appearing in their earliest indistinct form, the development of seemingly intractable questions concerning the relationship between the temporal and spiritual authorities in society, around which so much of medieval political theory was to take shape, and which have divided Church and state ever since. The most perennial of these questions was how, or rather how ought, *regnum* and *Sacerdotium*, the temporal power of kings and the spiritual power of priests be related. This was not simply about defining the relationship between ‘Church’ and ‘state’, because at this time, these were not strictly speaking autonomous and independent bodies; this concept only came about in the thirteenth century as a product of the recovery of Aristotle. Rather, these were different branches of the same society, a unified Christian civilisation, a *societas* or *respublica Christiana*, containing both clerics and laymen, priests and princes. The question therefore, that confronted medieval political disputants at least down to the end of the thirteenth century, was not that of how ‘Church’ and ‘state’ considered as discrete corporations or entities should be related, but of how two kinds of power within a single body should function in relation to one another.¹ Such a delimitation was never going to be an easy task, because the possibility of a tension between these two kinds of power was inherent from the very beginning of the Christian religion. The rise of medieval Islam complemented the development of society from ‘primitive tribalism into an ordered civilisation’, and helped to form its characteristic institutions, permeating all its activities with a common religion. In contradistinction, Christianity irrupted into an ancient civilisation that already had its own established hierarchy of government and its own sophisticated tradition of political thought based on non-Christian concepts. This was an incongruous marriage, in which the Church

¹ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, (Lewiston, 2003), p. 70

developed its own structure of governance, sometimes parallel to, but always apart from those of the secular hierarchy.² Indeed, before the time of Constantine and his Christianisation of the empire, there was little cause to question the relationship between the spiritual and the temporal; historical circumstance, however, was to compel men to form some sort of theory of the relationship between these two powers.

These ruminations were occasioned by a growing consciousness of the Church's distinctive character and peculiar rights. Indeed, according to Carlyle, nothing contributed so much to emancipate the judgement of theologians from the tendency to recognise an absolute authority in the monarch, as the clearly felt necessity of defending the independence of the Church; it was this, probably more than any other single cause, which compelled the ecclesiastical thinkers to analyse again, and more completely, the source and character of civil authority.³ It is truly remarkable that in a relatively short time, Christianity developed from a sect ranged against Roman civilisation into a religion prepared to absorb a whole society, and as such challenged popular conceptions of the character, the purpose and the ruling principles of human society. The difficulty proved to be that both churchman and layman recognised that they owed obedience and allegiance to the Church as the institute of Christ, but also to the civil ruler who was professedly Christian. The history of the relations of Church and state was essentially the harmonising of those two allegiances within the human mind.⁴ Such an undertaking was formulated within an intellectual structure based on principles furnished by the Bible and Christian theology. As a consequence political treatises such as were known in classical antiquity are entirely lacking, and political thought has to be disentangled from theological treatises, biblical commentaries and sermons.⁵

This work will trace the development of an early formulation of the proper roles of ecclesiastical and temporal powers – the Gelasian dualism. In so doing, it will attempt

² B. Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State 1050-1300*, (London, 1996), p. 7

³ R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Medieval Political Theory in the West*, vol. 1, (London, 1921), p. 193

⁴ W. E. Brown, "Relations of Church and State from Constantine to Charlemagne", in *Church and State: Papers Read at Summer School for Catholic Studies, held Cambridge July 27th to Aug. 6th, 1935*, (1936), pp. 29-30

⁵ J. H. Burns, (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c. 350-c.1450*, (Cambridge, 1988), p. 98

to answer a number of important questions: how did the beliefs of a largely world effacing sect come to establish themselves as the state-religion, and how did a distinctively Christian political theory emerge from the moral and political culture of antiquity? (Chapters 1–3). How and why did the intellectual histories of the western and eastern Churches diverge, and how did historical circumstance compel the western Church to free itself from the intellectual bounds of state control, and most importantly, how did a growing consciousness of its independence inform the politico-religious output of the western Church? (Chapters 4-5). And finally, how did the spokesmen of the western Church appropriate the political and ideological language of the Roman empire at a time when the Church was first seeking to free itself from imperial control or interference? (Chapter 6). Such questions, by their very nature, must consider the trajectory of political thought in its proper historical context, and must place actors within the circumstance that first elicited comment and controversy. Such a treatment necessitates a contextualised study of primary sources and a clear examination of some of the greatest disputes that beset the early Church.

CHAPTER ONE

Heaven and Earth

The Christianisation of Rome might not have happened, or would have taken a very different form, if it had not been preceded by the conversion of Christianity to the culture and ideals of the Roman world. When Christianity first appeared in the Roman empire, it had no distinctive social or political philosophy. This is not to say that some of the tenets of later Christian political-theology were not prefigured in the form of pregnant scriptural passages, or in a general tendency to despise the affairs of this world and to regard human inequalities as unnatural and irrelevant to the believer. The overtly political implications of these motifs, however, had not yet emerged.¹ The early Christians did denounce the Graeco-Roman notion that the state was somehow the supreme instrument of human emancipation, perfectibility and security, but there is no direct evidence in the New Testament of an explicit repudiation of the principle of civil government in the early Church. Indeed, the general attitude of Christians towards the pagan state was one of respectful submission, provided that its commands did not contravene those of God. The classical expression of which is given by St. Paul in the thirteenth chapter of his epistle to the Romans:

“Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers (ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις): for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power withstandeth the ordinance of God: and they that withstand shall receive to themselves judgement. For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. And wouldest thou have no fear of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise from the same: for he is a minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is a minister of God, an avenger for wrath to him that doeth evil wherefore ye must needs be in subjection, not only because of the wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For for

¹ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 76



this cause ye pay tribute also; for they are the ministers of God's service, attending continually upon this very thing. Render to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour."²

This passage was of the greatest import throughout the whole course of the Middle Ages. Together with other New Testament passages, it was frequently quoted from the second century onwards.³ According to St. Paul, the order of civil government is of divine institution; a thing deriving its authority and sanction from God Himself; to refuse to submit to it is to refuse to submit to God. In short, obedience to the state is not merely a political necessity, but a religious obligation.⁴ We must obey the civil order, as having a divine authority, because it exists for the maintenance of justice, and it is the just end of the civil state, which gives it a sacred character.⁵ Civil government is one of God's remedies for man's corruption: the Fall of man as described in Genesis, necessitated the imposition of coercive institutions and the sanctioning of human laws to curb the evils arising from avarice, violence and other forms of vice. For the early Christians, sin occasioned, though it did not necessarily cause, all forms of inequality, subjection and subordination of one man to another. Civil obedience, therefore, even to wicked rulers, is essential since they are God's penalty for human sin, and it is God's ordinance that they must be endured and even revered because their authority comes from Him.⁶ The portrait of a corrupted primitive state of innocence that the early Christians painted has parallels in Stoic philosophy, which was popular in Rome at the beginning of the Christian era. One of its most famous exponents, Seneca (d. 65), made the distinction between a golden age of humanity when all men were free of all external compulsion and government and the present imperfect age resulting from man's corruption. The difference being that Seneca assigned to civilisation the role which Christianity assigned to the devil.⁷ Both the Christian and Stoic accounts, however, held the origins of political life to be conventional, originating in human action though not necessarily in any definite or

² Romans, 13:1ff

³ I Samuel, 10:1; 15:10ff; Psalm 2:10f; John 18:36; 19:11; I Timothy, 2:1f; II Timothy, 2:4

⁴ R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Medieval Political Theory in the West*, vol. 1, p. 90

⁵ Romans, 13:1-7

⁶ C. H. McIlwain, *The Growth of Political Thought in the West: from the Greeks to the End of the Middle Ages*, (New York, 1963), p. 151

⁷ J. B. Morrall, *Political Thought in Medieval Times*, (New York, 1962), p. 19

formal compact. Although for Christians, of course, such human convention was ordained by God.

The remarks of St. Paul in his epistle to the Romans are complemented by the first letter of St. Peter, in which he states:

“Be subject to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as sent by him for vengeance on evil-doers and for praise to them that do well. For so is the will of God, that by well-doing ye should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: as free, and not using your freedom for a cloak of wickedness, but as bond-servants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.”⁸

It is clear that St. Peter shared the same conviction as St. Paul, and such assertions taken in consonance with other passages, furnish us with evidence of the condition of the Christian societies of the apostolic period. According to Carlyle, it is probable that St. Paul’s vindication of the authority of the civil ruler, with the parallel expressions of St. Peter’s epistle, were intended to counteract worrying tendencies in the early Christian societies.⁹ Firstly, when St. Paul wrote, the Roman Church was composed partly of Jewish and partly of Gentile Christians. These passages may have been intended to prevent the acceptance of the national Jewish attitude towards the Roman state. Secondly, a corollary of the Christian doctrine of freedom was a dangerous tendency to anarchism (especially among the Gentile converts). This anarchical tendency threatened the unity of human life, and manifested itself in a disposition to slight one’s ordinary duties and to refuse to submit to the discipline of the common life. The doctrine led some in the Thessalonian and Corinthian churches to believe that the liberty of the Christian man meant a complete emancipation from all discipline and order in life.

It is also salutatory to mention a passage of St. Matthew’s Gospel in which he discusses a Christian’s competing allegiances, on the one hand to the state, and on the other hand to God (whose representation would in time come to be represented by the institutional Church on earth). According to St. Matthew, Caesar has a certain authority over men, but not total authority:

⁸ 1 Peter, 2:13-17

⁹ R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Medieval Political Theory in the West*, vol. 1, p. 98

“Then went the Pharisees and took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk. And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men. Tell us therefore, what thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar of not? But Jesus perceived their wickedness and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? Show me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar’s. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s. When they had heard these words, they marvelled and left him and went their way.”¹⁰

Whilst the Christian has two types of obligation, they are of unequal value. The obedience that the Christian owes to the secular powers is not an end in itself, and should be regarded as a means by which the Christian accepts his suffering servitude to God. Moreover, when faced with a conflict of duties to these powers, the Christian is to follow the duty that he owes to God. It is important to emphasise the fact that these first century messages proclaim a duty of submission to the secular powers rather than any sort of resistance to their authority.

To surmise then, it is clearly evident that Christian teachers were compelled at an early date to deal with this question of the relation of the Church to the Roman government. The theory that they propounded was essentially Stoic: that man is by nature a social creature, that government is an institution necessary for the proper development of human life. Nevertheless, the New Testament only contains a theory of sorts concerning human nature and relations, the absence of political literature and political myths means that we can only claim that it contained the precursors of a Christian theory of politics. It is only with the advent of St. Augustine that we see the appearance of a largely autonomous Christian tradition of political analysis and prescription.¹¹ The early Christians were largely world effacing and for the most part had no interest in contemporary affairs. Tertullian wrote that: ‘I owe no obligation to forum, campus or senate. I stay awake for no public function, I make no effort to monopolise the platform, I pay no heed to any administrative duty, I shun the voter’s

¹⁰ Matthew, 22:15-22

¹¹ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 72

booth, the juryman's bench... I serve neither a magistrate nor soldier; I have withdrawn from the life of secular society.¹² The early Christians genuinely did consider themselves the inhabitants of a dying world, and these eschatological beliefs, coupled with a faith in the coming of a new King, whose kingdom was not of this world, and who would do away with the present order and inaugurate His own sway, did little to endear the Christians to members of the current establishment.¹³ According to Toynbee, the early Christians were 'a private association in a proletarian underworld' who remained out of touch with the political institutions of 'the Hellenic dominant minority'.¹⁴ The Church accepted the providence of God, and based on Old Testament precedent, dwelt as strangers and aliens in a foreign *polis*, selfdom-effecting reform in the public square. According to the *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*: 'Christians reside in their own nations, but as resident aliens. They participate in all things as citizens and endure all things as foreigners... They obey the established laws and their way of life surpasses the laws... So noble is the position to which God has assigned them that they are not allowed to desert it.'¹⁵

The early post-canonical epistles contained little teaching about the state, with primary emphasis placed on piety and perseverance. The early Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr (ca. 150) and Origen (ca. 184-ca. 253) did not formulate in great detail a distinctive Christian view of the state although they did leave behind a clear tradition of praying for political leaders. For the most part, the early Christian apologists devoted their energies to the task of commending Christ's teaching to the pagan world. Although Tertullian (ca. 160–220) in his *Apologeticus* and Lactantius (ca. 260–330) in his *Divinae institutiones* and *De mortibus persecutorum*, touch upon certain social and political matters, they do so only tangentially, in pursuit of religious objectives and principally repeat commonplaces associated with Cicero and Seneca about natural equality and common ownership of property.¹⁶ Irenaeus (ca. 125-ca. 202) in his *Adversus Haeresies*, was one of the first Christian theologians to attempt to assemble many of the Biblical texts to form an organised, albeit pristine, theology of the state. He aimed to demonstrate that the sovereign of the universe was God not Satan. He believed that the state exists as God's creation for the purpose of ordering

¹² Tertullian, *De Pallio*, 5

¹³ John, 18:36

¹⁴ A. J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vol. 4, (London, 1939), p. 349

¹⁵ *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, 5:5, 10; 6:10

¹⁶ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 72

justice and penalising injustice. He attempted to remove the idea that if wicked rulers exist, the devil must have established them. Rather, wicked rulers bring about a certain kind of justice through their insolent treatment of those deserving insolence.¹⁷ The primary concern of the early Christian apologists, however, was to defend the integrity of the Church from attacks by pagan philosophers (e.g. Celsus, Autolytus, Marcus Aurelius, the satirist Lucian, and the neo-Platonist Porphyry), and to preserve the internal unity of the Church from the heresies and schisms that threatened it even from earliest times. Such authors tended towards political quietism and indifference with regard to worldly affairs; some gravitated towards the positive relativism of St. Paul, whilst others professed an almost anarchic antinomianism for which the prescriptions of the secular world counted for nothing.¹⁸ They all, however, regarded conflicts in this life about power, wealth, honour and comfort, as not merely ephemeral but trivial tinsel. They tended to content themselves with protests at the wickedness and injustice of the current order, sometimes coupled with gleeful and gruesome predictions of its impending collapse. As far as they were concerned, this life is but a passing preparation for the next. These authors had a political theory of a sort, but it consisted mainly in the belief that secular power is a scourge to be borne with patience until the end comes and all is swept away and replaced by the kingdom of God.¹⁹

* * * *

Prior to the Christianisation of Rome, the Church advanced little beyond the work of St. Paul or St. Peter in its teaching about the state. One of the primary reasons why the earliest Christians failed to formulate such a doctrine was that they had hardly enough leisure or protection to do so. For the first three centuries of its existence, the Church was a marginal and vulnerable religious minority amidst a hostile civil state. At first, Christianity attracted predominantly persons of lower socio-economic status. It is only towards the end of the second century, that it started to ascend the social ladder and present its appeals in a more sophisticated ways. In its formative years, however, Christianity was an inconsiderable and ill-understood sect. In some quarters, the

¹⁷ D. J. Bingham, "Irenaeus and the Kingdoms of the World", in M. Bauman and D. Hall, (eds.), *God and Caesar*, (Pennsylvania, 1994), p. 30

¹⁸ J. H. Burns, (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c. 350-c.1450*, p. 13

¹⁹ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 76

Christians were perceived merely as being only a new and heretical sort of Jew.²⁰ Indeed, both Jewish and Christian religions required an exclusiveness of principle that was foreign to both Greek and Roman habits of thought. They both proclaimed a universal theology for a divinely chosen people, emphasising citizenship in an unworldly state that transcended the temporally and geographically more limited boundaries of the Roman empire.²¹ Judaism was also often characterised as a 'superstition' rather than an officially sanctioned religion, and as an offshoot of Judaism, Christianity shared the opprobrium heaped on the parent religion.²² There were, however, also broad differences between the Jewish and Christian religions. The most important being that 'the Jews were a nation [and] the Christians were a sect.'²³ The God of Israel and of the Christians was not a national god, but as long as the Jews had a national existence their colonies would be considered as connected with the Palestinian centre, and their national worship as a foreign rite, legal, and binding on all of Jewish birth, wherever they might be domiciled.²⁴ The Maccabean resistance of the Jews to assimilation made them respected but little loved in Graeco-Roman society, but their cultic practices, 'though very peculiar, were at least ancestral' (Celsus).²⁵ Christians, on the other hand, generated alarm by dividing families and recruiting from all races and classes.²⁶ According to McIlwain, the exclusivity of the Jewish religion led them to despise and withdraw from other peoples and their beliefs, whereas the exclusivity of the Christian religion, which uniquely was not tied to any race or nation, urged them to make proselytes from other religions and to wage an aggressive war against the false gods.²⁷ There was, however, by no means a uniform Christian attitude toward Roman society and their Jewish ancestry. At the one end of the spectrum stood those who clung tightly to Christianity's Jewish roots and repudiated all things Greek and Roman (e.g. Tatian); and at the opposite end, those who usually wore the label 'Gnostics', and who undertook to detach Christianity completely from its Jewish moorings and radically

²⁰ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 73

²¹ J. Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, (Oxford, 2000), p. 296

²² S. Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*, (London, 1985), p. 22

²³ E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 4 (London, 1993), p. 74

²⁴ L. Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church: from its Foundation to the End of the Third Century*, (London, 1910), p. 76

²⁵ Comment found within Origen, *Contra Celsus* 5.25

²⁶ J. H. Burns, (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c. 350-c.1450*, p. 11

²⁷ C. H. McIlwain, *The Growth of Political Thought in the West: from the Greeks to the End of the Middle Ages*, p. 145

Hellenise it (e.g. Marcion).²⁸ Christianity became a proscribed religion (*religio illicita*) as soon as Christians had become sufficiently strong to attract governmental attention, and as soon as the Romans recognised how it differed from Judaism. The Jews for their part were quick to open the eyes of the authorities. They were unwilling to allow themselves to be compromised by the imprudence of Christian evangelists, or to allow such an abhorred sect to profit by their privileges. As a result, Christians were obliged to conceal not only their personal beliefs, but also their corporate existence. On the other hand, the threat posed by these monotheistic religions, gave paganism a certain self-conscious existence. It was now not only aware of a common foe, but of its common guardian and ally, the state.

The disapproval of Christianity was sometimes expressed in terms of outright persecution by the Roman empire. Any discussion of the persecution of Christians by the state, however, should be read in conjunction with a number of caveats. Most of what we know about the persecutions comes to us through Christian sources. These sources are frequently impassioned and seldom objective. There is a danger that they may have exaggerated the scale and horror of what occurred. With advances in the field of hagiography, it is possible to gain a clearer picture of the reliability of these sources and ascertain those that were written long after the events that they describe. It is also important to distinguish between the rare cases of general persecution organised by the ruling powers throughout the empire, the localised persecutions fomented and often carried out directly by the mob, and the long periods of toleration.²⁹ We must avoid the danger of portraying a picture of continuous persecution by the state, or an indomitable Christian opposition to the state, because this may skew the way in which we see the relationship between Christianity and the Roman empire. The typical attitude of the ruling powers is summed up by the emperor Trajan's instructions to Pliny the Younger, governor of the province of Bithynia-and-Pontus in Asia Minor (ca. 111-113), which while discountenancing Christianity did not allow anti-Christian activities to assume exaggerated proportions. The rescript of Trajan gives valuable evidence of the difficulties with which the government found itself in the face of the spread of Christianity. The province was in a state of disorder and Trajan endowed Pliny with considerable freedom to do

²⁸ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, (Nashville, 1996), p. 69

²⁹ M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, (London, 1983), p. 3

whatever was needed to restore law and order.³⁰ Even so, Pliny knew the limits of his authority and frequently consulted the emperor Trajan on matters of importance:

“It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offences it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent... In the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed.”³¹

Roman officials were intensely circumspect regarding new religions. They sought to guard against the kind of immorality that occurred in the Bacchanalian rites of the second century, and the pagan authorities, therefore, scrutinised Christian moral behaviour closely. Pliny reported a morally favourable impression based on direct investigation. He may have faulted Christians’ inflexible obstinacy, but he found nothing socially harmful in their meetings. The emperor Trajan responded to Pliny’s letter in kind:

“You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian...shall obtain pardon through repentance.”³²

The suppression of Christianity was inspired both by traditional principles and by the necessities of the state. The wording of Trajan’s reply, though ambiguous, attempted to balance public opinion (by not attempting to veto the right to take Christians to trial), with an imperial conviction that Christianity does not pose any kind of political threat (and therefore not to allow an indiscriminate application of anti-Christian legislation to go unchecked). With this purpose in mind, Christianity was defined as a strictly personal and individual religious transgression and official investigation of its

³⁰ S. Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*, p. 5

³¹ Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96

³² Pliny, *Letters*, 10.97

adherents was forbidden. Interpretations of his regulation on this matter, however, were to oscillate between the widest and most favourable (that of Hadrian) and the narrowest and most rigorous (that of Antoninus Pius).³³ For the most part, the law was slackly administered, inquiries were not pushed home and apostates were pardoned. Other emperors showed themselves equally inclined to restrain the execution of the law. According to Duchesne, this betrays a predisposition, indeed not to good will, but to moderation.³⁴ However, we must not suppose that in consequence the Christians enjoyed an enviable tranquillity. There were occasions of major and concerted persecutions of Christianity. These occurred under Nero in the year 65; under Domitian between 81–96; under Decius in 249–251 (who described Christianity as ‘an empire within an empire’), and finally under Diocletian between 303–305. Persecution that once remained local, spasmodic and unofficial became universal, systematic and official.³⁵ During these times, though public opinion may have charged them with all sorts of horrors, such as cannibalism and incest, they were denounced, hunted out, judged and condemned, simply as Christians. Tertullian, the Carthaginian lawyer and Christian, who like all the apologists writes at length on these calumnies and their absurdity,³⁶ states that the sentences passed ‘aimed at nothing but the avowal of Christianity; no crime is even mentioned; the only crime is the name of Christian.’³⁷ Christians continued to profess their loyalty to the Roman state and to call themselves good Roman citizens, and the government itself rarely thought of the Christians in terms of a security threat to the state, and often found itself the victim of the religious fanaticism of the crowd in periods of social and cultural intolerance.³⁸

The imperial authorities did, however, regard the refusal of Christians to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor as politically disloyal – for in the pagan state of antiquity, religion and politics were intimately related. The cult of emperor-worship was considered by Rome to be necessary in order to cement its hold over the Mediterranean world. A religion that demanded not only a separation from the worship but also from the public life of Rome, and that demanded an allegiance to a

³³ M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, p. 38

³⁴ L. Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church: from its Foundation to the End of the Third Century*, p. 83

³⁵ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, p. 107

³⁶ Similar comments can be found in Tertullian’s *Apologeticum*, Justin’s *Apol.* 1.3-4, Tatian’s *Oratio* 27.1, and Athenagoras’ *A Plea for the Christians*

³⁷ Tertullian, *Ad nationes*, i. 3

³⁸ M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, p. 4

law and throne other than that of the empire, must have had sinister and subversive implications. Broadly speaking, the Christian religion was contrary to the spirit of Roman civilisation. For their part, Christian martyrs were prepared to sacrifice their lives rather than lend themselves to a formality that signified recognition of *Dea Roma* and *Divus Augustus* as legitimate objects of religious worship. Christian martyrs ‘inherited from Judaism the idea of martyrdom as personal witness to the truth of their faith over against heathendom, the hope of personal resurrection and vengeance on apostates and persecutors in the hereafter, and the view that the true oppressors were not earthly powers but cosmic and demonic ones.’³⁹ From the resistance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, up to Polycarp, Justin Martyr and others, Christians were perfectly willing to obey the emperor in secular matters, but they would not bow down to him or treat the magistrate as saviour. Christians were charged with a refusal to discharge a subject’s duties toward the state, with obstinate opposition to law, and with organisation in outlawed and seditious societies.⁴⁰ Under the rule of Domitian, Christians were charged with Atheism because of their apparent disinterest and disdain for the belief in the immortality of the Roman state. Sordi claims, however, that it was only during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (*imp.* 161-180) that Christianity was considered a *true* political threat to the structure of society. The pagan philosopher Celsus wrote with remarkable prescience, that the continued growth of Christianity threatened the security of the empire and the bonds of society.⁴¹ ‘What to Pliny the Younger had been only a tiresome administrative nuisance, what to Lucian and even to Galen was no more than a psychological curiosity’ appeared to Celsus as an actual menace to the stability of the empire.⁴² During this period, Montanism – which encouraged many Christians to acts of open and hostile rejection of the state – was confused with Christianity. This confusion was short-lived, thanks to the Christians themselves who, between 175 and 177, produced the four *Apologiae* (those of Melito, Athenagoras, Apollinaris and Miltiades), which cleared up the misunderstanding.⁴³ In the second century, emperors held back from extermination, yet they were far from ensuring any security to the Christians. They

³⁹ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, p. 73

⁴⁰ P. R. Coleman-Norton, *Roman State and Christian Church: a Collection of Legal Documents to AD. 535*, vol. 1, (London, 1966), p. x

⁴¹ Origen, *Contra Celsus* 3.55; 8.35; 8.68-75

⁴² E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine*, (New York, 1965), p. 105

⁴³ M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, p. 6

refrained from employing the severe measures imposed in the later persecutions of Decius and Diocletian, because of their contemptuously indifferent attitude towards sectarian and doctrinal squabbles. They also relied implicitly on the resisting power of other sects and the philosophical spirit. In the third century, the inadequacy of these socio-religious bulwarks was proven, and the danger from the contumacious nature of Christianity was more apparent. The persecutions undertaken by Valerian and Diocletian, together with the many demands for persecution made by the public and some sectors of the pagan establishment, were prompted by religious necessity. Christians were considered dangerous because their impiety would undermine the *pax deorum* and cause the gods to withdraw their protection precisely in the empire's hour of greatest need. The pagan panoply of gods, of vivid personalities that frequently intervened in the lives of people and the fulfilment of the divine *fatum*, was thought to maintain a harmonious relationship between the divine and human spheres. New and unproven or alien religious practices, however, could only endanger this harmony and thus endanger the security of the state. Although the emperors acted with renewed vigour in response to this threat, their attempts to curb the spread of Christianity were spasmodic and intermittent.⁴⁴ The Church escaped the persecutions and its influence began to disseminate throughout the empire.

⁴⁴ L. Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church: from its Foundation to the End of the Third Century*, p. 84

CHAPTER TWO

Pagan and Christian

The third century was a period of considerable instability – militarily, economically and politically – for the Roman world. In 235 AD, following the peace and prosperity of the Antonine emperors (96-180 AD), the stewardship of the empire was usurped by the ferocious and brutal peasant-soldier Maximian (ca. 250-310). Hereafter, the empire was beset by civil war, half-mad or ephemeral princes and military revolutions. The condition of the empire at this time was wrought not only by a period of continuous internal struggle, but also by the emergence of new enemies on its frontier. The resources of the empire were stretched by the gradual migration of northern Europeans into Roman territory, who constantly pressed south in search of warmer and more fertile climates (e.g. the Alamanni; the Franks (236 AD); the Goths (247-251 AD), and the Sassanids (260-268 AD)). The empire was struck by acute economic distress, manifest in the flight of currency, profiteering and rampant particularism, which reflected incipient nationalist sentiment and the natural economic divisions of the Roman world. Roman society was rent at its heart, and with every lull in the storm, the decadence, the loss of strength and the general dislocation of the empire were apparent.¹

The national and military disasters that rained down upon the empire in those terrible years, served to feed the fears and superstitions that had been re-awoken in the masses. Pagans and Christians were wed to the idea that these calamities were portents of disaster. Christians subscribed to the Millenarian belief in the apocalypse and an imminent end to the world. Cyprian the bishop of Carthage (ca. 200-258), echoing Lucretius in his *Ad Demetrianum*, attributed the troubles to the age of a world that was now close to death.² On the other hand, pagans succumbed to a belief in ancient prophecies that had predicted the triumph of East over West. They cried out

¹ L. Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church: from its Foundation to the End of the Third Century*, p. 392

² M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, p. 108

against the Christians, who by renouncing the old gods had brought all these calamities down on the empire.³ The secession of the gods was not a fact that the 'Hellenic dominant minority' with its back to the wall was able to face with equanimity. They believed that the empire could not stand if it was bereft of its indwelling divinity: 'A godless empire would be a savourless and sapless as an Athens without her Athena.'⁴ In this climate of recrimination, reason gave way to panic and the authorities attempted to banish this mysterious malediction by eliminating whatever seemed alien. Such a formula found its apotheosis under Diocletian, who concluded his second *decennium* by initiating the most thoroughgoing and ruthless persecution of the century. Nonetheless, the emperor lived to see the inefficacy of his methods conclusively demonstrated. Six years after his abdication the edicts of persecution were revoked and the more fanatical persecutors now had to search for support and consent from a public opinion, which had become tired of the bloodletting of the past. Following his abdication in 305, the Sacred College, which was the crown and apex of his administrative system, dissolved into discordant and warring factions. Personal ambition reinforced by dynastic associations and hereditary claims had intervened to bring about a series of civil wars.⁵ With the dissolution of the Sacred College, his scheme to ensure political stability by means of an automatically self-recruiting tetrarchy collapsed. Amidst this political maelstrom, the masses yearned for reassurance and salvation, not for the formulised and ritualised cult of Rome. Consequently, they embraced the wave of oriental cults that swept westwards such as Mithra, Isis and Osiris, Cybele, Judaism and Christianity.⁶ These oriental religions prospered all the more, because, from the middle of the third century onwards, Rome was looking to the East for many things; from it came the deftest artisans and mechanics who gave to life most of its material comforts; it largely contributed to feed Rome with its grain, and its philosophy gave the substructure to Roman Law: Ulpian came from Tyre and Papinian from Syria. The greatest non-Christian thinkers of these centuries were neither Greeks nor Romans but

³ Pagan historians such as Eunapius and Zosimus went so far as to accuse Christianity of causing plagues, droughts and wars. Arnobius of Sicca in his *Seven Books against the Nations* later attempted to answer these accusations by pointing out that before the appearance of Christianity, the world had been the scene of as great or rather of greater calamities.

⁴ A. J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vol. 4, p. 349

⁵ C. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*, (Oxford, 1940), p. 181

⁶ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, p. 107

Oriental. Plotinus was an Egyptian; Iamblichus, Porphyry and Libanius were Syrians, and Galen was an Asiatic. According to Lindsay, the city of 'Rome, by the discipline of its legions, by the mingled severity and generosity of its rule, by the justice of its legislation, had conquered the East. Eastern thought, wedded to Hellenism, was in turn subjugating the empire.'⁷

* * * *

The pervasiveness of Christianity in the third century remains an area of academic controversy. Some scholars regard this as a period of rapid growth for the Church, while others argue that Christians still constituted only a small minority of the empire's population by the end of the century. The source of this dispute stems from the fact that the only extant statistical evidence concerning the number of Christians is an incidental detail contained in a letter written by Cornelius, Bishop of Rome to Fabius Bishop of Antioch in 251 and reproduced in Eusebius's *Church History*.⁸ This lack of evidence prohibits one from tallying precisely the number of Christians or the places in which they founded churches. Attempts to extrapolate with any certainty the size of the Christian Church in Rome, and the overall number of Christians across the empire are fraught with difficulties. However, the fact that persecution remained local, spasmodic and unofficial until the third century suggests that they had exerted a greater impact in some areas rather than others, and that they had a limited effect on the empire as a whole. On the other hand, the desperate measures set afoot at the beginning of the fourth century by Diocletian, suggest that during the latter part of the third century, Christianity increasingly gained succour from the failings and shortcomings of pagan society. The Christian religion's rejection of fate and belief in providence and its doctrine of an afterlife were desirable attributes. It preached certainty in a time of instability and love in a world of widespread brutality, and offered unearthly equality in cities of growing social divisions.⁹ The austere morals of the Christians were undoubtedly superior to those of the average pagan and their steadfastness in the face of persecution must have won them some admiration. They

⁷ T. M. Lindsay, "The Triumph of Christianity" in *Cambridge Medieval History*, Vol. 1, (Cambridge, 1911), p. 89

⁸ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.43.11-12

⁹ L. Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church: from its Foundation to the End of the Third Century*, p. 281

also offered charity without expectation of return or consideration of merit; Romans, it should be noted, were renowned for their largess, but they gave expecting return in kind, at least in honour and friendship.

The Romans were, broadly speaking, very tolerant in religious matters. They made room in their pantheon for the gods of all nations that they had conquered, and would no doubt, have offered the same terms to the Christian god had they not been faced with such indomitable opposition. The hotchpotch of religions within the Roman pantheon symbolised the amazing congeries of races, customs and traditions, not to speak of the profound economic and social distinctions that subsisted within the body politic.¹⁰ By the end of the third century, the religions of the ancient world were in decay, and only a few august deities retained their power of attraction. Nevertheless, this was not a period of spiritual paucity, and far from fading with the old gods, the religious sense actually increased. It filled the 'lowest practices of superstition and the refined conceptions of monotheism with a new and unheard of potency.'¹¹ According to Bate, the third century was a time in which Rome's panoply of religions proved more ready to compete with the Church than to oppress it.¹² There is evidence of a widespread desire for monotheistic worship during this period. It was directed towards a supreme deity, who, whether worshipped as Osiris, Mithra, or Elagabalus of Emesa, represented the fatherly, fostering masculine side of the divine, and its obverse, Isis, or the Great Mother, or the Syrian Goddess, all representing universal nature, the maternal, feminine aspect of God. Furthermore, Henotheism transmuted all the local deities into some aspect of the supreme object of worship, and so satisfied a growing demand for unity.¹³ According to Alföldi, within Rome's melting pot of religions, monotheism began to crystallize around two resistant nuclei: worship of the sun god and Christianity. The deification of the sun blended 'the astrological speculations of the Chaldeans, the wild mysticism of the half-Christian Gnostics [and the] religion of the sun that pervaded the whole East [with the] primitive ideas of the Indo-Germans and their like about the magical power and omnipotence of god.'¹⁴ The sun cult of Mithraism was the first to capture the interest

¹⁰ C. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*, p. 161

¹¹ A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, (Oxford, 1948), p. 5

¹² H. N. Bate, *History of the Church to A.D. 325*, (London, 1901), p. 109

¹³ B. J. Kidd, *A History of the Church to A.D. 461*, Vol. 1, (Oxford, 1922), p. 350

¹⁴ A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, p. 5

of the emperors. The emperor Commodus (*imp.* 182-192) inaugurated the first great period of growth for the sun cult. His successor Septimius Severus (*imp.* 193-211) had an image of the sun god wearing the emperor's beard and carrying the imperial title *invictus* (unconquerable) emblazoned on coins. Caracalla (*imp.* 211-218) boasted that when driving his chariot he was imitating the sun, and Elagabalus (*imp.* 218-222), whose name is a variant of *heliogabalus* (devotee of the sun), adopted it when he entered the hereditary priesthood of the sun god at Emesa. He made an elaborate point of installing this deity in Rome when he ascended the imperial throne. His successors, Severus Alexander (*imp.* 222-235) and Aurelian (*imp.* 270-275) also embraced the sun god, and the latter was to establish the sun as the supreme god of Rome.¹⁵

Mithraism and Christianity clearly had many things in common: they were monotheistic, moralistic, promised an afterlife and had rites of initiation and passage that brought tangible assurance. According to Hinson, however, Christianity differed from Mithraism in terms of inclusiveness and exclusiveness: Mithraism restricted its membership to men, (although it may have sponsored some affiliate societies for women), whereas Christianity was open to both sexes. Christians opened fellowship to all social levels and unlike other cults such as those of Mithra and Cybele, did not attach its assurances of eternal rebirth to expensive rites such as *taurobolium*. The offer of Baptism and Eucharist were tangible assurances of salvation that were available to all.¹⁶ Mithraism also tolerated crossing lines to join other cults, whereas Christianity did not.¹⁷ Mithraism could not match the Christian Church in its structural cohesiveness; this cohesiveness would have been a boon to the emperors given the state of the empire. Furthermore, the uncompromising monotheism of Christianity and its view of God's personal nature and his relation to his creation, gave the idea of definiteness, and a practical effectiveness hitherto unknown.¹⁸ Indeed, for a time, Christians appeared to be a victim of their own success as they struggled to retain their identity as a monotheistic missionary people as they incorporated the syncretistic peoples of the Roman empire who sought infallible revelation and assurance of salvation.¹⁹

¹⁵ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, pp. 108-109

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109

¹⁸ C. H. McIlwain, *The Growth of Political Thought in the West: from the Greeks to the End of the Middle Ages*, p. 150

¹⁹ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, p. 59

The growth of monotheism was also complemented by the emergence of a new type of emperor that was not zealously married to the traditional cults of Rome. Before 235 AD, emperors had usually been drawn from the senatorial aristocracy. However, the pressures of the time demanded leaders who were first and foremost militarily competent. This opened the way for the advancement of men from lower social rank, particularly from the Balkans, that had spent their lives in the army.²⁰ This was a necessary precondition for the emergence of that most imponderable of figures, Constantine the Great (*imp.* 306-337). In one short decade, he succeeded in shedding the last vestiges of polytheism and shifted his old sympathies from the worship of the sun god to Christianity (although, he did work diligently, thereafter, to translate images of the sun into Christian symbols).

The emperor Constantine is unique as the one human being in history to have enjoyed the distinction of being deified as a pagan god, while, at the same time, being popularly venerated as a Christian saint.²¹ As a young man, he had known of Christianity as a demonic force and a detestable atheism. He had accompanied the court on its journey from Rome to the Eastern frontier (ca. 293-305), and he had lived at Nicomedia in the company of the intellectual enemies of Christianity. In the summer of 305 AD, he left for Britain as a disappointed party in the dynastic rearrangements of the emperors' co-rule. In July 306 AD, following the premature death of his father, the emperor Constantius Chlorus, he was hailed Augustus by the troops at York, and was reluctantly accepted as Caesar by Galerius, the then senior member of the second tetrarchy. Constantine was a warrior-statesman typical of his age, and was by far the shrewdest and ablest of the *epigoni* who were struggling for the mantle of Diocletian. Constantine entered into a dynastic connection by marrying the daughter of Diocletian's original colleague Maximian, who had perforce abdicated in conjunction with his partner in 305 AD. Maximian continued to describe himself as Augustus, even though Galerius had meanwhile invested Licinius with the *diadem* in the West. In 310 AD, when Maximian ventured upon his ill-starred attempt to regain the Purple, Constantine had him arrested and put to death. The death of Galerius at Nicomedia in the following year provoked a dynastic crisis. This led to an uneasy *entente* between the former rivals Constantine and Licinius. In 312 AD, while Licinius undertook to suppress Maximinus

²⁰ A. D. Lee, *Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity*, (London, 2000), p. 1

²¹ C. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*, p. 212

Daia, (another nominee of Galerius who had as senior Augustus, occupied the East), Constantine crossed the Alps and overthrew the usurper Maxentius (son of Maximian) at the famous engagement of the Milvian Bridge.²² Constantine and Licinius thus emerged as joint masters of the Roman world.

The miracle of the emperor's vision or dream of a cross of light in the sky before the decisive battle of Milvian Bridge is well known; though the truths and motives that underlie this story are not clear, and have been much debated.²³ There are two different accounts written by Eusebius in his *Vita Constantini* and Lactantius in his *De mortibus persecutorum*.²⁴ It should be kept in mind that these are the reports of subsequent beneficiaries of the emperor's patronage, writing at varying distances in time and place from the event. The differences between the two versions are of scholarly interest, but are not relevant to our immediate purposes. The important point to make is that Constantine's vision at Milvian Bridge was an experience real to him, which had historical effects of worldwide importance.²⁵ His vision informed his subsequent conversion to Christianity, and this conversion became one of the most powerful myths of medieval Christendom.

The discussion of Constantine's engagement at Milvian Bridge forms but one part of a wider debate that has raged for more than two centuries concerning Constantine's motives for converting to Christianity. Not all historians are convinced that his actions were prompted by some sort of the religious fervour. There are those that would paint Constantine as a divided and cynical personality, or as a shrewd statesman and religious sceptic, who only after long vacillation placed himself on the Christian side. The fact that he only received baptism on his deathbed may seem to support this hypothesis, were it not customary in the fourth century, to ask for baptism at adult age: performed *in extremis*, it was considered a sure means to eternal salvation.²⁶ Some claim that he only defended Christianity to lay claim to a religious force, which he did not wish to leave outside the grasp of government. There are those who claim that he only integrated the Christian god into the Roman pantheon in support of his claims to a universal monarchy. According to Williams, he saw in 'the Christian

²² *Ibid.*, p. 180

²³ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 77

²⁴ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 1:26ff; Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 44.

²⁵ A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, p. 2

²⁶ F. Lot, *The End of the Ancient World: and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages*, (London, 1931), p. 34

God a surety for victory, a new and proven heavenly sanction for the renewed monarchy, and in the Christian religion itself the cultic mortar and the theological scaffolding by means of which he might succeed in rehabilitating the imperial structure.²⁷ According to Ferdinand Lot, however, such analyses stem from ‘a mania for crediting great men of the past with deep laid political schemes, the idea of which perhaps never occurred to them.’²⁸ They deny that Constantine may have been truly visionary or that he yielded to a sudden pathological or supernatural impulse. It should be remembered that we are dealing with questions of intellectual causation that are notoriously difficult to answer.

We can with some certainty rule out the notion that Constantine converted to Christianity for the purposes of political expediency. This is not to say that the religious question of the choice of a deity – the need for an alliance with the strongest god – was not a political question of the utmost importance. It is essential, however, to note that Constantine’s actions were politically dangerous, especially when we consider that the army, the only real force of the state, was wholly pagan and addicted above all to the worship of the sun. Moreover, the spread of Christianity, despite its expansion during the first three centuries of its existence was far from having conquered the majority of the inhabitants of the Roman world. Constantine had little chance, therefore, of imposing some sort of unity of belief on his people.²⁹ His actions did not disarm the hostility of a section of the subjects of the empire because this section taken as a whole formed only a minority and a submissive minority at that. It is not surprising therefore, that Constantine merely prepared the way for the conversion of the empire, rather than attempt to force the pace of change. According to Bury, ‘Constantine’s revolution was perhaps the most audacious act ever committed by an autocrat in disregard and defiance of the vast majority of his subjects.’³⁰ When we consider that the senatorial aristocracy and higher grades of the civil service were predominantly pagan, the goodwill of the Christians seems hardly worth gaining. It is paradoxical that the emperors that would have benefited most

²⁷ G. H. Williams, “Christology and Church-State Relations in the Fourth Century”, in *Church History*, Vol. 20, (1951), p. 5

²⁸ F. Lot, *The End of the Ancient World: and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages*, p. 30

²⁹ This is contrary to the opinion of Hinson, Toynbee and Ehler. Toynbee claimed that it was a bold diplomatic counterstroke to preserve the ancient unity of religious and political life in the Hellenic universal state by taking the Christian Church bodily to the empire’s bosom, A. J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vol. 4, p. 349

³⁰ J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire: From the Death of Theodosius I. to the Death of Justinian (A.D. 395 to A.D. 565)*, Vol. 1, (London, 1923), p. 366

from embracing Christianity, Galerius and Maximinus Daia, were on the contrary its worst enemies. It seems absurd that Constantine, a westerner, should have imposed a religion that was widespread only in the *pars orientis* of the empire.³¹

There is certainly some currency in the proposition that his conversion was an act of superstition. The minds of men may have been troubled by the fate of all those that had persecuted Christians. Their fiercest adversary, Galerius, had just done public penance and was asking his victims to pray for his salvation, and at Rome, Maxentius, had invoked by incantations all the powers of the pagan world, infernal and supernal – oracles, aruspicy, sacrifices, Sibylline prophecies, divination – and his magic practices disturbed men’s imaginations.³² Indeed, it is probable that Constantine was in some ways predisposed to be sympathetic to Christianity. He inherited his understanding for the religion from his father. Constantius had been reluctant to carry out the bloody persecutions of Christians, which had been set afoot and pursued for years with relentless rigour by his colleagues. On the occasion that he instigated persecutions in his own western section of the empire, he had been lukewarm in carrying them out.³³

Constantine’s sympathy for the oppressed Christians may also have stemmed from the antipathy he felt towards Diocletian and Galerius, the authors of the persecutions. They had excluded him from the succession to the Sacred College of Four and had thus offended his boundless passion for recognition. Such was his bitterness that he later reviled them in an edict for their bloody persecutions of the Church.³⁴ This public derision of the conduct of emperors of high renown, that were not long dead, was a revolutionary utterance to come from the occupant of the throne.³⁵

* * * *

In March 313 AD, Constantine promulgated what has come to be known as the Edict of Milan. It marks a decisive turning point in the history of relations between Christianity and the Roman authorities. It ended official persecution of the Church by the Roman state, and although it did not stretch so far as to give preference over other

³¹ F. Lot, *The End of the Ancient World: and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages*, p. 31

³² *Ibid.*, p. 33

³³ A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, p. 6

³⁴ Eusebius, *Vita Con.* 2. 51; 43. 53.

³⁵ A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, p. 7

religious bodies, it did decree that the Christian faith should henceforth take its place unmolested alongside the other religions of the empire:

“Having come to Milan under happy auspices and seeking with care all that can be useful to be public good and peace, amongst other things that can serve the majority of men, we have thought that it was necessary above all to regulate all that concerns the worship due to Deity, in order to give both to Christians and to all the free power to follow the religion of their choice. May, therefore, the Deity, in his celestial habitation, show his satisfaction, and his favours both to us and to the peoples who live under our authority.”³⁶

The edict asserted that no man should be prevented from discharging the obligations of his religion. It established the Christian claim to the perfect freedom of assembly and worship, and it recognised the Church as a corporation by authorizing it to hold property. It also made ‘effective provision for the restitution of lands and buildings confiscated during the persecutions, including those which had been disposed of by sale or grant to private parties, at the same time undertaking to indemnify those who were prepared to resign them without objection.’³⁷

The edict was not the first of its kind, and therefore did not mark some radical departure; earlier versions had been issued two years previously by Constantine and Licinius and some of its provisions were anticipated in part by a decree of Constantine’s predecessor Galerius, the bitter enemy of Christianity.³⁸ A similar edict was also produced in due course by another persecutor Maximinus Daia in the East at Nicomedia when he felt himself threatened by fate in 313 AD. The edict may therefore, be presented as the conclusion of a series of manifestos, each of which offered better terms to the Christians.³⁹ The edict was also prefigured by the legislation of the emperor Valerian (*imp.* 253-260), which can be seen as an important turning point in the relationship between the Roman state and the Christian religion. According to the epistles of his contemporaries, Dionysius of Alexandria and Cyprian of Carthage, Valerian set about penalising Christianity as a Church, as a hierarchy and as an organisational structure. This recognition of the Church by the Roman state

³⁶ Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, 48

³⁷ C. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*, p. 178

³⁸ See Lactantius, *De mort. Pers.*, 34:2ff.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 34; Euseb., *Church History*, viii. 17

actually served to untie the knots in the legal situation and prepare the way for Gallienus to make the first positive act of recognition of Christianity, and thus lay the foundations to the Church's future right to exist.⁴⁰ Before his tenure, even if Christianity was punishable on an individual basis, the organisation, the Church itself, in merit of the existing laws on the right to associate, had been allowed to exist.

The importance of the Edict of Milan is marked by the fact that it was the first to be effective, promulgated by an emperor who claimed to be a believer. According to Cochrane, this proclamation of spiritual freedom represents a genuine departure from anything to be found within the experience of antiquity. It went far beyond the terms required for the licensing of a new cult, and enunciated certain principles of broad and far-reaching significance. Henceforth, the liberty guaranteed to the faithful was extended to adherents of all religions, and this 'represented on the part of the state, a formal and explicit abandonment of any attempt to control the spiritual life'. Although he overplays the matter by describing it as 'a curious anticipation of nineteenth century liberalism [which] laid down in principle the absolute religious neutrality of the state', he does make the important point that the edict abjured, in its very essence, the classical idea of the commonwealth.⁴¹ By reducing political control from a whole arena of human life, the edict reduced the *res publica* to relative insignificance. At the same time, it appeared to make possible an accord with the faithful and offered a challenge to develop and apply the elements of a specifically Christian social philosophy. Moreover, it pointed to the future possibility of a Christian commonwealth under the aegis of the Church.⁴²

Constantine's proclamation was then, a 'unique moment in history, when that state religion... which had become a useless and hateful tool seems finally to expire. But it was only a lightening flash of good sense which shot across the political sky. From the year 325 state religion [reappeared] and with it its inevitable accompaniment intolerance.'⁴³ It was inevitable that Constantine, an emperor of autocratic disposition, with unlimited power at his disposal would wish forthwith to impose his faith on all. The champion of spiritual liberty was transformed from protector to proselyte of the Church. According to Bury, although the pagan gods were liberal and tolerant lords

⁴⁰ M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, p. 108

⁴¹ C. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*, pp. 176-179

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 179

⁴³ V. Duruy, *Histoire des Romains*, Vol. 7, (London, 1883-6), p.61

who raised no objection to other forms of worship, the Christian God was a jealous master. Intolerance was a duty, and the first business of a patriotic ruler was to take measures to extirpate the errors of paganism.⁴⁴ Even during his official impartiality (313-323 AD), Christians were constantly favoured: Jews were forbidden under pain of burning, to stone co-religionists who passed over to Christianity, pagan municipalities were forbidden to force Christians to perform sacrifices, manumission in church was permitted, and penalties directed against celibacy were abolished.⁴⁵ Constantine was especially zealous after his final victory over Licinius in 324 AD. The toleration for non-Christians quickly became precarious, and paganism, a heterogeneous aggregate of cults of every kind of origin, without any holy books, sometimes without even a regular clergy, had no unity of doctrine and could offer no concerted resistance. From 330 AD, his policy changed to one of intolerance. He rewarded pagans for converting to Christianity and undertook to suppress paganism, stopping short only at the uprooting of the imperial cult that might erode popular loyalty. So many religious practices intersected with devotion to the state that even Constantine could not abolish all of them and had to be content with stripping them of their most objectionable features.⁴⁶ Constantine's honours for the Christian God were profuse; though many of them – such as the building of lavish places of worship – grew out of the traditional patterns of imperial favours for a cult or a privileged group. In the twenty-five years that spanned his victory and death, Constantine ordered the construction of a sequence of huge church buildings from Rome to the Holy Land.⁴⁷ Grand new edifices dotted a landscape once graced by pagan temples, statues and other reminders of Rome's religious heritage.

Although Constantine promoted Christianity as his personal religion, not as the official religion of the Roman state, his patronage amounted to a widespread policy which was publicised throughout the provinces with rescripts, laws and letters, and which was encouraged by legal privileges; these were weapons that no other emperor had used.⁴⁸ His distaste for paganism and the amity that he gifted to Christianity were imitated by his successors. Constantius (*imp.* 337-361) renewed the

⁴⁴ J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire: From the Death of Theodosius I. to the Death of Justinian (A.D. 395 to A.D. 565)*, Vol. 1, p. 366

⁴⁵ F. Lot, *The End of the Ancient World: and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages*, p. 34

⁴⁶ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, p. 203

⁴⁷ R. Lane-Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, (Middlesex, 1986), p. 623

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 610

interdict against sacrifices and spared only those temples that were situated outside towns. The pagan reaction of Julian (*imp.* 361-363), who upon his accession immediately ordered the re-opening of the temples, offering of sacrifices to the gods, and restoration of the pagan *cultus*, was only a flash-in-the-pan and the brevity of his reign diminished his efforts to supplant Christianity with a revived paganism. Theodosius I (*imp.* 378–395) and Gratian (*imp.* 367–383), issued a series of imperial decrees in 381, 383, 384, 385, 391 and, most decisively of all, in 392 that finally abolished the traditional cults of Rome (*Cunctos populos* (*Codex Theodosianus* 16:1:2); also see Theodosius’s edict *Nullus haereticus* of 381 (*Codex Theodosianus* 16:5:6)). Gratian abandoned the title and functions of the *pontifex maximus*, withdrew public support from pagan sacrifices, and confiscated the property and revoked the privileges of the priestly colleges and of the Vestal Virgins; Theodosius continued and extended this work, abolishing the Olympic Games and desecrating the shrines at Olympia, renewing the old prohibitions against pagan sacrifices, and closing the pagan temples for the purposes of worship.⁴⁹ The Catholic Church was defined legally in terms of communion with Damasus the Bishop of Rome, and Peter the Bishop of Alexandria, and orthodox Christianity was established as the official religion of the Roman empire; they also made the profession of heresy and paganism offences subject to criminal penalties. The political rationale that underlie these decrees were no doubt as mixed as human motives usually are, and we are certainly not entitled to assume that personal piety was not one of them.⁵⁰ The consequences of the decrees, however, were clear for all to see: the revenues of temples and of priests were confiscated; bishops and monks roused the people to pull down temples, and pagan places of worship traditionally dedicated to the gods of Rome were turned into places of Christian worship.⁵¹

By far the greatest insult to the gods of the state occurred in 383, when the Altar of Victory was finally removed from its place of honour in the Senate chamber by order of the emperor. The altar was brought to Rome from Tarentum in the days of Augustus and symbolised Rome’s honourable expansion and the extension of Roman

⁴⁹ K. F. Morrison, “Rome and the City of God: an Essay on the Constitutional Relationships of Empire and Church in the Fourth Century”, in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 54, Part 1, (1964), p. 40

⁵⁰ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 78

⁵¹ The last temples were eventually closed by Justinian (*imp.* 527-565).

law to all her territories.⁵² It was accompanied by considerable resentment and remonstrance on the part of those who saw it as a desecration.⁵³ This event exasperated and threw into consternation every class of the population. Ferdinand Lot invites us to ‘imagine a king of France anxious to be converted to Protestantism, the religion of a small section of his subjects, and animated by a pious zeal against ‘idolatry’, destroying or letting fall into ruin the most venerated sanctuaries of his kingdom, the abbey of Saint-Denis, the cathedral of Rheims in which the most august acts of his reign take place... and we shall have but a slight idea of the madness which seized the Roman emperors in the fourth century.’⁵⁴ The removal of the Altar was an event of overwhelming significance, for it stood as a decisive symbol of the triumph of Christianity over the traditional pagan culture of antiquity. Indeed, we only have to pay scant regard to the polemics between pagans and Christians at the end of the fourth and fifth centuries to see how these measures had shattered the confidence of a considerable part of the population in the stability and future of the Roman state. The old religions of Rome were exterminated one by one, while the panic stricken populations were unable to offer any effective resistance to the vandalism of the Christians.⁵⁵ In the course of the fourth century, the whole of the Mediterranean sphere covered by the Roman empire became Christian – in name if not in fact – and in the course of the fifth century, the pagans who had been in a majority became a minority. By the sixth century, their influence had disappeared completely.

⁵² The altar was removed once before by Constantius in 357, but reinstated in 361 by Julian.

Subsequent attempts were made to replace it by Eugenius and possibly by Stilicho.

⁵³ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 79

⁵⁴ F. Lot, *The End of the Ancient World: and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages*, p. 41

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42

CHAPTER THREE

King and Priest

The conversion of Constantine and his successors, and their subsequent attempts to convert the empire, opened the possibility that this new religion could form a universal and official institution or state-religion. According to Duchesne, by allowing the Church to live, the emperors of 311 AD recognised implicitly that its existence could be reconciled with the workings of the state. Had they wished to confine their dealings with the Church to a simple toleration of a little regarded power, its relations would have remained very simple, analogous, for example, to those that it maintained with the Jewish communities.¹ By embracing the Church, the Roman state, thus ‘merged and brought face to face two societies that up to that time had been separate, each with its own traditions, laws and institutions.’² The Christian religion, which was maintained by an association or society hitherto not only separate in origin and development from the state, but in some ways hostile to it, was forced to find a balance between the two poles of loyalty and resistance that can be found throughout the history of the early Church. The peculiar laws and institutions of this seemingly incongruous religious society were made coextensive with the state, and every member of the empire from the highest to the lowest was brought within the constituted authorities of the Christian Church.

This development brought with it two logical corollaries. Firstly, the Church, itself began to consolidate some form of central government, and its prelates began to emerge into a position of esteem and prominence. Christianity was no longer an isolated and persecuted sect embedded in a largely inimical classical culture.³ Bishops were reconciled to the earthly life, and were given judicial and administrative functions by

¹ L. Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church: from its Foundation to the End of the Third Century*, p. 518

² C. H. McIlwain, *The Growth of Political Thought in the West: from the Greeks to the End of the Middle Ages*, p. 146

³ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 79

the state. They became attached to the goods of this world, and their disputes and theological quarrels took the tenor of quarrels for worldly advantage. Secondly, the Church, having been brought within the ambit of the imperial state and incorporated into the fabric of the Roman body politic, was faced with an increasingly insidious peril. The state, in its Christian form, gradually acquired a controlling influence over the Church's governance and thereby robbed it of its essential independence. According to Toynbee, the Church, in the first flush of astonishment and relief at being transformed from an outlaw into a favourite, was induced to accept a converted empire's terms under the delusion that it was imposing its own.⁴ Under these terms, the emperor assumed the position of practical head of the Church and state. This assumption, which has been called caesaropapism, established itself naturally in the minds of the first Christian emperors.⁵ It was taken for granted by Constantine and his immediate Christian successors, that the government of the Church's affairs lay within their remit as sovereign rulers. Over time, their interfering appetites increased with eating, so that matters of religion whether pagan or Christian, were managed as part and parcel of imperial legislation.

Although the emperorship had lost some of the characteristics it had acquired in heathen times, it retained others in a more or less modified form; the *jus sacrum* remained part of the *jus publicum* and under the control of the emperor as head of the state. The title of *pontifex maximus* (a title inherited from the magistracies of the Republic) was not relinquished until the emperor Gratian declined it in the late fourth century; in pagan times, the title had gifted the emperor control of secular government and law, and of the law relating to sacred and religious matters.⁶ Nonetheless, even after they had ceased to be pontiffs, the emperors retained much of their ancient authority in matters of religion; churchmen were allowed to exercise the *potestas*

⁴ A. J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vol. 4, p. 349

⁵ According to Morrison, caesaropapism cannot be averred before Christianity was the state cult, because it involved not only the affirmation that the emperor possessed certain powers in sacred affairs, but also the formal acknowledgement of that tenure by the church. As long as the emperor was not a Christian, the church could not grant that acknowledgement to him as an individual; as long as a non-Christian might come to the throne, it could not grant it to the imperial office. K. F. Morrison, "Rome and the City of God: an Essay on the Constitutional Relationships of Empire and Church in the Fourth Century", in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 54, Part 1, pp. 4-5

⁶ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 80

ordinis while they themselves kept the whole of the *potestas jurisdictionis* in their own hands.⁷

The Church then was made subject to the absolute authority of the emperor as the single sovereign head of the whole politico-ecclesiastical structure; save the sacramental, pneumatic or charismatic functions of ordination and consecration, the emperors acknowledged no practical distinction between secular and ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Consequently, they saw fit to dictate and control the worldly affairs of the Church. Emperors removed and appointed senior ecclesiastics, just as they might appoint any other imperial civil servant, and ecclesiastical councils and their decrees were devoid of standing and authority without the sanction of the emperor, who even went so far as to enact laws relating to matters of a purely doctrinal nature. In his hagiographical *Vita Constantini*, Eusebius of Caesarea conveys the story of how, while addressing a number of bishops assembled at Nicaea, whom he was entertaining as guests, Constantine announced to them that he was just as much a bishop as they. Constantine designated himself ‘overseer of the outside’ (ἐπίσκοπος τῶν ἐκτός); it was his belief that he was divinely charged with the oversight of the external – that is, the legal, organisational, financial and administrative – business of the Church, whilst the assembled bishops were responsible only for internal matters. However, despite his own readiness to confess himself subject to the bishops in spiritual matters, the emperor did not, in practice, confine himself to externalities.⁸

To emphasise their quasi-divine position and lordship over the Christian community, the emperors adopted the practice of enacting the rôle of Christ in the Easter liturgy: leading the Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem and washing the feet of twelve poor men on Maundy Thursday.⁹ All the actions of the emperor bore the stamp of divine actions; ceremonial imperial feasts appeared as divine services; all processions were introduced and accompanied with strictly regulated liturgical ceremonial acclamations, hymns, and genuflections; pictorial representations of Christ were adapted to the pictures of the emperor himself, and imperial decrees were issued as though they were the decrees of God Himself.¹⁰ Indeed, even the buildings that comprised the imperial palace were regarded as sacred. The symbolic currency of

⁷ C. H. McIlwain, *The Growth of Political Thought in the West: from the Greeks to the End of the Middle Ages*, p. 144

⁸ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 4:24.

⁹ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 81

¹⁰ W. Ullmann, *Medieval Political Thought*, (Middlesex, 1975), p. 34

these manifestations made clear that ‘the emperor was the vicar of the *Pantokrator* – the omnipotent ruler – and that he himself was the *Autokrator* on earth, the autonomous Ruler, unhampered by any human agency.’¹¹ By the middle of the fifth century, the emperor came to be installed at ‘an elaborate ceremony of coronation presided over by the Patriarch of Constantinople and symbolising – while carefully avoiding any suggestion that it conveyed – God’s concession of authority to him.’¹²

The imposition of Christian monotheism did little to weaken the notion that the emperor was both king and priest. Indeed, the priestly functions of the emperor were greatly stimulated by Christian monotheism, because it strengthened the idea that, just as there was one God in heaven, so there was only one monarch on Earth. This correspondence, between religion and politics, was drawn chiefly by Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260-340) in the fourth century. Eusebius did much to create the imperial ideology that linked monotheism and emperorship. He beheld with wonder the simultaneous emergence of the unity of Christian faith and the unity of imperial government.¹³ He declared that:

“Before Augustus, there was polytheism and therefore a multiplicity of rulers, but, since Christ’s advent, which was contemporaneous with Augustus’s rule, there was only one God and so there should only be one emperor who was alone in a position to guarantee peace, piety and true religion.”¹⁴

It is quite remarkable when we consider that less than a century before, Tertullian asserted that the notion of a Christian emperor was a contradiction in terms.¹⁵ He stated that, ‘the fact that Christ rejected an earthly kingdom should be enough to convince you that all secular powers and dignities are not merely alien from, but hostile to, God... there can be no reconciliation between the oath of allegiance taken to God and that taken to man, between the standard of Christ and that of the devil, between the camp of light and that of darkness. It is impossible to serve two masters, God and Caesar’¹⁶ Eusebius, however, saw no such contradiction. The roots of his imperial doctrine lie in Hellenistic ideas of kingship, according to which the ruler was

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35

¹² R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 82

¹³ Euseb., *Preparation for the Gospel* 1424A

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20, 1376A

¹⁵ Tertullian, *Apol.*, 21

¹⁶ Tertullian, *De idol.*, 18; 19

the image of God and his vicegerent on earth, ruling a kingdom that was an imitation (*mimesis*) of that of heaven. Through a neo-platonic lens, the kingdom could thus be seen as a microcosm reflecting the order of the macrocosm of the universe itself: just as there was one God in the universe there was one emperor (*Basileus*) in the world. 'As Christ, the Word of God, the *Logos*, is the archetypal image of the Father, so on earth Constantine is the image of the *Logos*. The *Logos*, present and active in all men, is pre-eminently so in Constantine. [He is] like an interpreter of the *Logos*, and governs men below in accordance with the archetypal idea.'¹⁷ According to Canning, Eusebius was able to Christianise these Hellenistic ideas not by claiming a form of divinity for the emperor, but by emphasising his divine appointment, which was confirmed by Constantine's closeness to God as shown by the special revelations to him and his military success.¹⁸ Eusebius believed that the whole course of Roman history was determined by divine providence: the Christianisation of the empire was a process that began with the birth of Christ and reached its apotheosis in the conversion of Constantine. His victories over Maxentius and Licinius were acts of God.

The emperor then, in consonance with his monarchic function, is God's representative in all that concerns the governance and welfare of mankind. As far as the Church is concerned, though its prelates may assist the emperor in his interpretation of the divine *Logos*, the ultimate source of authority, however, lies with him, and to disobey him is to disobey God. For all his optimism, however, Eusebius did not foresee the dangers immanent in this imperial doctrine. His writings are pervaded by a sense of gratitude for the life and actions of Constantine. Indeed, he is oft-portrayed by historians as having been a servile flatterer of the emperor. According to Setton, this characterisation is misleading. Both his *Panegyric* and *the Life of Constantine* were written when Eusebius was in his middle seventies. By then, he had reached an eminence in this world beyond which he could hope to advance. Furthermore, he would have gained little by flattering Constantine, since *the Life of Constantine* was written after his death.¹⁹ Whilst these are valid comments, they ignore the fact that Eusebius regarded Constantine as a pseudo-messianic figure. We should look less upon his comments as flattery and more as a form of acclamation.

¹⁷ S. L. Greenslade, *Church and State from Constantine to Theodosius*, (London, 1954), p. 10

¹⁸ J. Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought 300-1450*, (London, 1996), p. 4

¹⁹ K. M. Setton, *Christian Attitude Towards the Emperor in the Fourth Century*, (New York, 1967), p. 53

His writings are absent of any sort of apprehension about imperial control of the Church and its logical corollaries. He seems oblivious to the obvious danger that the emperor would use the Church for political purposes, to impose his own views, and to appoint ecclesiastics as he sees fit. Equally, the Church may court imperial favour and attempt to avert imperial wrath by granting wrongful concessions or compromises that would only increase party strife; the Church may then be drawn into using secular power to enforce uniformity and to coerce opinion.²⁰ Eusebius genuinely did believe that Constantine was an instrument of God through which peace and prosperity would be brought to the world. Christian writers such as Eusebius – and for that matter St. Ambrose, Orosius, Prudentius, Lactantius – became intoxicated with the vision of the Christian empire having been realised in their own times. According to Coleman, Eusebius set about writing the history of the first three centuries of the Christian church in the belief that Rome itself had been revitalised, redivinised and resacralised as a political order; a Christianised Rome was seen as the next step in the divine history of humankind.²¹ He believed that the transmission of Christianity to the empire was a responsibility from which Constantine could not absolve himself, and in which he would be divinely helped. It was his prerogative to hold together the *ekumene*, the totality of all cultured peoples, by means of the Christian faith. A division between Church and state would have been antithetical to his purposes and for the most part foreign to his mind. The direction of the empire necessitated not a separation between Church and state, but their fullest mutual involvement. Indeed, no separation of emperor and God was possible, because the former was the later on earth.²² Churchmen, for their part, acquiesced in the emperor's control of the Church and rarely questioned his sovereignty or the binding character of his decrees.

The Church, for its part, also failed to pre-visualise and prepare for the so-called 'Constantinian peace'. The Church, the state's principal internal rival, was promoted from the position of social pariah to that of the state's patronised favourite, and as a result, the Church accepted the state and the Roman law regnant in the state. The Church was never destined to succeed in dominating the state; it was not constituted for the life of this world, and at this time, it brought no new body of legal or social ideas to the fore. Consequently, it accepted without any opposition and

²⁰ S. L. Greenslade, *Church and State from Constantine to Theodosius*, p. 32

²¹ J. Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, p. 307

²² W. Ullmann, *Medieval Political Thought*, p. 38

without any real distaste the institutions of the empire. The state, on the other hand, was able to preserve its framework and gained an enormous measure of control in religious matters, especially in enforcing spiritual concord among its Christian subjects.²³ It is a pertinent question to ask whether the conversion of the Roman empire in which the Church rejoiced as a deliverance from persecution, did not perpetuate the worst disaster to descend upon it, for it fastened more firmly the chains of the state's control over the Church.

* * * *

The conversion of the empire occurred at the least auspicious moment for Christian unity. Whilst the exclusiveness of the Christian religion led to an intolerance for pagan religions, the vital importance that it assigned to dogma, led to an intolerance for heresies. The old state religion of Rome offered no all-encompassing theory of the universe, no body of dogma to divide the minds of men and engender disputes. Christianity, on the contrary, wrestled with the abstruse and metaphysical in its attempt to impose the right belief in theological dogmas. Such a task, however, proved intractable, considering that it was impossible to define a uniform doctrine that all minds would accept. The government, therefore, had to deal with a new problem, such as had not confronted it in the days before Constantine. Doctrine had to be defined and heretics had to be suppressed.

The period from the ascension of Constantine to the Council of Chalcedon (ca. 451 AD) is curious because of the elevated importance it gave to very subtle and complex theological questions. Indeed, in the fourth century were sown the sinister seeds of the fifth century's fierce doctrinal disputes and great theological controversies. These great schisms were to plague Christian history in the next generation. The establishment of a state-religion meant that the emperor was predisposed to intervene in these ecclesiastical affairs to offset the emergence of divisions of opinion that would be capable of dislocating the Church. This predisposition was encouraged by a tendency of the Christians themselves to appeal to the secular authorities for help in adjudicating internal disputes and settling quarrels. Constantine was at pains to stress that he, as a servant of God, was answerable for the

²³ P. R. Coleman-Norton, *Roman State and Christian Church: a Collection of Legal Documents to AD. 535*, vol. 1, p. xliii

concord of his Christian subjects. This transgressed the traditional pagan notion of a *pax deorum*, which never attempted to impose a unity of belief among pagan subjects. Constantine's language owed less to the traditional rôle of an emperor and more to the Christian view of the heads of their communities, the bishops whom God held accountable for their flock.²⁴

In the fourth century then, the Church was rent at its heart and it dragged the state into its internal quarrels. The bright hopes that had been attached to Christianity were foundering. Rigorist followers of Meletius had begun to organise a church of their own in Egypt, and in Africa, a 'true' church of uncompromised Donatist Christians had broken away from their treacherous brethren. According to Willis, the 'failure of the Church to realise perfect holiness on earth gave rise to the opposite attitudes of liberalism and rigorism in Church discipline.' In other words, the holiness or purity of the Church, which as the body of Christ it shares with God, is obfuscated in this present world by those, within its own ranks, who would seek to pervert its doctrine and threaten the discipline among its members. Where one draws the line that separates those whom, in spite of imperfections, we may call true Christians, and those whom we consider to have fallen below the minimum standard of holiness which we think allowable in a Christian, depends upon one's immediate environment and the position which one considers the Church to have in relation to the world. In general terms, two main views have held sway throughout the history of the Church. The 'rigorist' view tends to refuse absolution and restoration to all those whom they consider guilty of grave sins, and the 'liberal' view (which eventually prevailed) allows restoration even after grave sins when the sinner displays a proper penitence and desire for restoration.²⁵ On the whole, the Roman mind was more liberal, whereas the tenor of the African mind, which was set by its ascetical and unforgiving environment, preferred the rigorist view of Church discipline.

The origins of the Donatist controversy lay back in 303–305 during which the Church had suffered persecution under the emperor Diocletian. It was the practice of the Roman authorities at that time to coerce Christians into some gesture of renunciation or betrayal of their faith. They may have evaded death by offering incense to Jupiter, publicly forswearing their faith, or surrendering their copies of the sacred Scriptures to the authorities. The Christians who made such a concession to the

²⁴ R. Lane-Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 625

²⁵ G. G. Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy*, (London, 1950), p. 1

authorities were regarded with revulsion by those who were fortunate enough to escape such a fate. They reserved their greatest odium for those who had saved themselves by handing over the Scriptures. These people were known as *traditores*.²⁶ A number of Christians attempted to circumvent such an ultimatum by handing over falsified versions of the Scriptures or the writings of heretics. Unfortunately for them, rigorists thought that such an expedient was just as bad as handing over the real thing. These rigorists found a vociferous spokesman in Donatus, Bishop of Casae Nigrae, a small and isolated rural community on the edge of the Sahara. Very little is known about Donatus; his writings have perished and we know of him only from the statements of his opponents, who depicted him as having been an unlettered and fanatical peasant. Donatus, however, was a far more onerous foe than his enemies would let us believe. He was a great orator and demagogue, who combined a prophetic gift with episcopal power.²⁷ He certainly held uncompromising views about who is and who is not entitled to be a member of the Church; the impure are unworthy to remain members of the body of Christ. The pure would not have made any concessions to the authorities and would have embraced martyrdom, since it is the goal of all true believers. Those that have evaded martyrdom or compromised their faith are the lapsed (*lapsi*), and as such cannot be readmitted to the Church. Moreover, priests who are *traditores* cannot administer valid sacraments, and bishops who are *traditores* cannot confer valid ordination or consecration.²⁸ He rallied Christians to rise up and seize the lands and wealth of the rich in order to prepare for the coming of Jesus. These opinions were enforced by violent bands of Communist-anarchist-millennialist fanatics known as *circumcelliones* who attacked the persons and property of Catholics. These bands were sometimes led by senior members of the Donatist clergy. Clearly, Donatism was much more than a religious movement and appeared to also have a social and economic rationale.

Strictly speaking, the controversy was not a heresy, but rather a schism, because the burning question at issue between the Catholics and Donatists was one of Church discipline and ecclesiastical organisation rather than doctrine. According to Dyson, however, the Donatists, by merit of their antisocial claims, were rapidly led into

²⁶ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 276

²⁷ W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church: From Beginnings to 461*, (London, 1982), p. 129

²⁸ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 276

heresy by the logic of their own position. Firstly, when they retorted that the emperor and his cronies could not be saved, they asserted, in effect, that there are members of the human race whom Christ cannot redeem. Secondly, when they insisted upon the rebaptism of Catholics migrating into the Donatist church, they succumbed to the erroneous view that the sacrament of baptism can be administered more than once.²⁹ Indeed, the Donatists were guilty of resurrecting two ancient errors: that of the Rebaptisers (who held sacramental validity was dependent upon the faith and even the moral integrity of the minister) and that of the Novatians (who barred sinners from the Church).³⁰

The spark that ignited the Donatist schism occurred in 312, the year of Constantine's conversion to Christianity. The previous year, Mensurius, Bishop of Carthage, died whilst returning from Rome, and Mensurius' archdeacon Caecilianus was elected by the presbyters of the diocese to the vacant see. On the face of it, this was a routine piece of ecclesiastical administration, however, their choice of candidate could hardly have been any worse. Exception was taken to his consecration because Caecilianus and one of his consecrators, bishop Felix of Apthungi, were alleged to be *traditores*. Donatus appeared at the head of an armed band before the residence of the bishop of Numidia, the senior African bishop. Donatus managed to extract from the bishop a document declaring Caecilianus deposed and replaced by a protégé of Donatus called Majorinus. The Donatists then foisted this arrangement on the local clergy by force and threats.³¹ The deposition of Caecilianus was then confirmed by a synod of seventy bishops in Carthage at the behest of the discontented presbyters. The bishops were a violent mob and slaughtered on the spot a bishop who objected to the election of Majorinus. Thus, by the middle of 312, there were two bishops of Carthage, Caecilianus and Majorinus, who each represented rival forces in the African Church.

The Roman authorities were embroiled in this dispute from its inception. Petitions besought the emperor Constantine to arbitrate in the dispute from both parties. In 313, despite their reluctance to believe in the genuineness of his conversion, the Donatists themselves appealed for the adjudication of the emperor. The Catholics in Africa, for

²⁹ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 278

³⁰ E. Portalié, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, (London, 1960), p. 24

³¹ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 277

their part, clamoured for the suppression of Donatism by the state. The Donatist controversy was then, an early and significant instance of the secular powers becoming involved in religious disputes between Christians. When Donatus asked what the emperor had to do with the Church, the Catholic Bishop Optatus of Milevis answered that ‘the state is not in the Church, but the Church is in the state, that is, in the Roman empire.’ (*Non enim respublica est in ecclesia, sed ecclesia in respublica, id est, in imperio Romano*). Optatus seemed to take umbrage at Donatus’s pretension in setting himself above the emperor, and reiterates the idea that no one is above the emperor except God, and goes some way towards admitting the supremacy of the imperial jurisdiction even in Church matters.³² Doubtless a dualistic relation of Church and state can be argued from the supremacy of God, but Optatus plainly meant that all men, including bishops, are subordinate to the emperor even in ecclesiastical affairs.³³

Initially, Constantine attempted to assign this dispute to picked groups of bishops for settlement among themselves; he was invited into a church quarrel and he looked to Christians to get him out of it. In fact, they tried to drag him even further in, and after two years, and persistent lobbying by Donatist Christians he chose to investigate the case himself. The Donatists, perhaps naïve in invoking any kind of imperial help to promote their cause lost, and Constantine declared the Catholic party innocent.³⁴ The Catholic party had the support of Christians outside of Africa – an important factor considering Constantine’s desire to bring about a unity of the faith. It would not have served him well to have supported the extremists who wanted to force their views of the majority. Another important factor relating to his support of Caecilianus was the influence of Hosius, bishop of Cordova, and the Donatists later came to blame this man for their difficulties. In the spring of 313, Constantine addressed a letter to the Proconsul of Africa, Anulinus, in which he voiced not only his recognition of Caecilian as bishop of Carthage, but also that he was prepared to exempt all clergy in communion with him from the burden of municipal levies. This put a financial premium on orthodoxy and led to the confrontation of the Proconsul by a crowd of Caecilian’s opponents. They appealed to the emperor to appoint judges from Gaul, where there had been no persecution, to arbitrate in the dispute. The emperor granted their request in part, and ordered the Proconsul to send Caecilian

³² Optatus, *Against the Donatists* 3.3

³³ S. L. Greenslade, *Church and State from Constantine to Theodosius*, p. 31

³⁴ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, p. 230

with ten bishops together with an equal number of his opponents to Rome, where the dispute was to be judged by Bishop Miltiades and three Gallic bishops. In the meantime, Majorinus had died and Donatus was elected by his supporters as his successor. This was an unfortunate development for Caecilianus; whilst he might win legal battles against Donatus, he would find it hard to assert his right to the primacy of Africa. Accordingly, Miltiades' vindication of Caecilian, and condemnation of Donatus for disturbing discipline, rebaptising clergy, and causing a schism, was received with little enthusiasm in Africa. The Donatists protested that the charges against Felix of Apthungi had not been heard, and that the judgement of the seventy bishops who had condemned Caecilian in the previous year should not have been discounted. Further to their displeasure Miltiades himself was not free from the taint of *traditio* having been associated with Bishop Marcellinus' sacrifice to the gods in 304.³⁵ Constantine reluctantly agreed to a new Council at Arles. It was attended by far the most impressive body of clergy that had ever met in the western provinces of the empire. Once again, the Catholic party won and the Council went on to condemn Donatist practices, and once again the decision was met with consternation by the Donatists. After the Council, Donatus, his colleagues and Caecilianus remained in North Italy. In 315, Constantine returned to Rome, whereupon he decided to give the Donatists yet another hearing. For some unknown reason, Caecilianus did not attend in Rome on the day of the hearing, and some of the Donatists claiming that they had won their case by default, tried to return to Africa. Constantine had them arrested and sent to Milan; meanwhile Caecilianus was held at Brescia. He sent a commission of bishops to Africa to investigate and report on the situation. They returned professing the legitimacy of Caecilianus' position. Donatus managed to escape and make his way back to Carthage, and was soon followed by Caecilianus. As soon as the firebrands were back in Africa, the situation deteriorated and there were civil disorders. In 317, Constantine resolved to reign in the Donatist faction. He ordered the confiscation of Donatist church property and the exile of Donatist leaders. Nothing, however, could make Caecilianus acceptable to the people, and the Donatist position in Africa remained secure. Indeed, Constantine's actions, motivated by a kind of political expedience, aggravated and embittered the protagonists and did little to defuse the dispute within the African Church. In 317, riots broke out in which Christians in the

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130

African cities killed one another. In 321, Constantine's letters changed course and he gave up the idea of coercion, grudgingly gave the Donatists liberty of conscience, and again urged toleration and concord, proposing that the Catholics should leave their sufferings to the vengeance of God.³⁶ Constantine had his fingers burnt and never sought to take active measures against a Christian movement of dissent, though troublesome individuals would still feel the weight of his anger. The Donatists went from strength to strength and Caecilianus faded into obscurity. Catholic churches were seized and the Catholic clergy were forced to undertake the onerous municipal duties from which Constantine had specifically freed them.³⁷

The closing years of the fourth century witnessed further attempts to lay the dispute to rest. Constantine and his successors, with the notable exception of Julian, forcefully sought to herd the Donatists back into the Catholic fold. In 347 and 348, the emperor Constans instituted severe measures against them evoking from Donatus the query, 'What has the emperor to do with the Church?' (*Quid imperatori cum ecclesia?*). These measures were instigated not so much on religious grounds as in response to the criminality and violence of the *circumcelliones*. In the years that followed, numerous edicts were levied against the Donatists, and in 404, Catholic bishops beseeched the emperor Honorius for further state action. His response was to promulgate two Edicts of Unity (405 and 412) that imposed stringent penalties on the Donatists, and confirmed all previously existing anti-Donatist legislation. Nevertheless, Donatism continued to prosper in Africa; it had already survived condemnation by the pope, the emperor and two councils of bishops, and continued to exist for three centuries (although it split into two sects, the Maximianists and the Primianists, who at once fell to persecuting one another), and Donatist enclaves were even known to be in existence as late as the seventh century.³⁸

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On the heels of the Donatist controversy, a second dispute spread like wildfire from Egypt to other parts of the empire. When Constantine first proclaimed his Christian faith and started proselytising, the most passionate controversy that ever troubled the

³⁶ R. Lane-Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 625

³⁷ W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church: From Beginnings to 461*, p. 133

³⁸ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, pp. 277-278

Christian world began to rage. The Arian controversy, more than any other, brought about an unprecedented ferment in men's minds, troubled their conscience and embittered their feelings.³⁹ The subject of the Arian controversy was not a defence of the orthodox against heresy, because, like many of the other matters under discussion, there was not as yet an orthodox doctrine. Indeed, all parties involved appealed confidently to tradition and scripture in support of their claims.

The Arian movement began in Alexandria, where a deacon named Arius began to pose the insoluble question of Christ's nature in terms that appeared to debase his relation to God. Arius was not the first to dispute this matter – the dispute stretched back to the 250s and 260s, when lapsing during persecution had first provoked schism, and when the status of Christ had caused heresy in Syria and a theological rebuke to Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria.⁴⁰ Arius was a presbyter and pastor of the church of Baucalis in Alexandria; he was cultivated and ascetic, and was famed for his popularity as a preacher. Although he was an important figure in the opening pages of the dispute, its magnitude quickly outgrew him in its following chapters. According to Hanson, he was not a great heresiarch in the same sense as Marcion or Mani or Pelagius, and he virtually disappeared from the controversy at an early stage.⁴¹

The Arian controversy erupted in 318, shortly after a new bishop called Alexander was appointed to Arius' diocese. Alexander was immediately met with resistance from an ultra-ascetic group of clerics led by Hieracas of Leontopolis who blithely rejected the bishop's authority. They sought to question the doctrine of resurrection and denied that baptised children who died in infancy could enter heaven, because they had not yet completed any righteous works.⁴² Alexander was understandably concerned and had considerable misgivings about his presbyters; he demanded to see specimen sermons to adjudge their orthodoxy. It was at this point that he locked horns with Arius, who had sought to rebut the contention recently put forward by Sabellius that there were no substantial distinctions within the Godhead (modalist monarchianism) i.e. the three so-called persons of the Trinity were simply three different modes of divine action, the Son, therefore, being a mere function of the

³⁹ F. Lot, *The End of the Ancient World: and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages*, p. 42

⁴⁰ *Ibid*

⁴¹ R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: the Arian Controversy 318-381*, (Edinburgh, 1988), p. xvii

⁴² Epiphanius, *Against Heresies*, 67

Father.⁴³ The chief concern of Arius was to avoid Ditheism without however falling into Sabellianism.⁴⁴ Arius held an intense concern about the unity of God and believed that in order to safeguard the single rule (*monarchie*) of God, the Son must be subordinated not merely in role but also in nature to the Father who alone exists for eternity. It was his contention, therefore, that the *Logos* was created. On the other hand, Alexander was an Origenist; he held that God was composed of two distinct hypostases or persons, but that the Father and Son share the same nature.

Although the controversy initially concerned the relationship between Christ as the divine *Logos* and God the Creator and Father, it gradually shifted to a debate regarding the relationship between human and divine in the person of the Son, the incarnate *Logos*.⁴⁵ Regional rivalries also played a major role in the controversy; the ‘schools’ in Alexandria and in Antioch approached the doctrine of Christ quite differently, with Alexandria emphasising the divine, and Antioch accentuating the human. Arius believed that the *Logos* united with the flesh (*sarx*) of Christ, so that he did not have a human soul, and the *Logos* took over the function of the rational soul, which would explain why Christ did not sin whereas all other humans do.⁴⁶

Both Alexander and Arius moved quickly to publicly repudiate the other’s theology. Arius evidently had strong support from his colleagues and further undermined the bishop’s authority. The renegade presbyter was denounced by Alexander and was condemned by an Alexandrian synod ca. 321. He was forced to leave Egypt and sought the counsel of Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia. The two rallied support for the Arian cause in synods held in Bithynia and Palestine. Alexander responded with a series of letters setting forth not only the charges against him but also those of his followers, and then convened yet another synod in Alexandria in 323 to condemn him.⁴⁷

It was at this point that the emperor began to take an interest in the dispute. Constantine worked feverishly to impose a settlement that would preserve unity in both Church and state. His first action was to send Hosius, bishop of Cordova (ca. 297-357), to Alexandria in ca. 324. He was received with open arms by Alexander,

⁴³ C. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*, p. 233

⁴⁴ F. Lot, *The End of the Ancient World: and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages*, p. 43

⁴⁵ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, p. 230

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231

who welcomed any help he could get in restoring some semblance of unity to the Alexandrian church. In 325, alarmed by the disruption of the 'peace' of the Church, Constantine resolved to put an end to the Arian controversy and convoked a Council at Nicaea. Since this was a matter of purely theological import, one would have thought that this would have been a matter that the emperor *qua* emperor would not have taken an interest in. Constantine, however, presided over the Council as though it were a session of the Senate.⁴⁸ Arius enjoyed a measure of support at the Council, with the backing of Bithynian bishops, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Theognis and Marius as well as Syro-Palestinian and Cilician bishops. The majority of bishops, however, were not sympathetic to their cause.

Constantine decided to settle the matter by sanctioning the formulation of the famous Nicene Creed.⁴⁹ He interpreted the creed in a way that even Eusebius of Nicomedia could accept, and personally proposed the term *homoousios* (consubstantial) as a solution to the problem of Christ's divinity. This term implied that the Father and Son were equal and of the same substance, but they were, however, distinct persons. Those who did not subscribe to this term and the Council's decisions were treated not merely as dissenters but as criminals: Arius was condemned and excommunicated, and two bishops (Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nicaea) were exiled, and *homoousia* was enforced rather than accepted. The combination of civil and religious penalties held ominous implications and sowed the seed for years of bitter wrangling as emperors changed their minds on such matters.⁵⁰

Constantine the Great died in 337, and there followed a three-month *interregnum* during which potential claimants to the throne were disposed of. The rule of the empire was eventually divided between Constantine's three surviving sons: the eldest Constantine II (*imp.* 337-340) ruled Britain, Gaul and Spain and held a certain precedence, Constans (*imp.* 337-350) took charge of the rest of the West as far as Thrace, and Constantius II (*imp.* 337-361) controlled the East.⁵¹ During their rule, all three of Constantine's sons followed faithfully in the footsteps of their father; they continued to intervene at will in ecclesiastical affairs, favour the Christian Churches

⁴⁸ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 81

⁴⁹ The original creed of Nicaea is not extant. The Nicene Creed as we know it is the one adopted at Constantinople in 381.

⁵⁰ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, p. 233

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 208

and to persecute the pagan populace. They diverged, however, on their response to the on-going Arian controversy. Although the person and doctrines of Arius had been condemned by the Council of Nicaea, certain modifications were suggested a number of theologians, which were given varying receptions by the three emperors. It is curious that, in the course of theological controversy, national, or at least regional feeling, which had seemed extinct since the Roman conquest, revived.⁵² The East, Constantinople and Asia inclined to Arianism, and the West steadfastly adhered to the decrees of the Council of Nicaea. Indeed, throughout this long controversy Egypt remained fanatically loyal to the views of Athanasius. He was the Bishop of Alexandria (ca. 297-373), and was the most intrepid champion of Nicene orthodoxy. His zeal for the Nicene Creed was so great that he spent much of his long life in constant exile.

In ca. 343, the emperors Constans and Constantius jointly convened the Council of Sardica to settle the issue of Athanasius's orthodoxy. As ruler in the West, where Nicene orthodoxy had strong support, Constans, campaigned on behalf of Nicaeans. Eastern bishops, however, pointedly refused to attend the Council on the ground that westerners regarded Athanasius as a member of the assembly. Nevertheless, westerners met under leadership of Hosius of Cordova and cleared Athanasius, as well as Marcellus of Ancyra, and Paul of Constantinople. They penned a letter to the emperor Constantius in which they subtly questioned the use of secular force against orthodox bishops, and sought to buttress their position by constituting the bishop of Rome as a court of appeal for bishops in certain cases. Constans brought temporary relief for Nicene supporters in the East and prevailed upon Constantius to reinstate Athanasius after the latter's second exile.⁵³

In 340, Constantine II was killed at Aquileia when he attempted to invade Italy after charging Constans with flouting his authority. Although he now controlled two-thirds of the empire, Constans was soon overthrown in 350 by an officer of German descent named Magnentius. In 351, after obtaining support of Vetranio, another claimant crowned by his troops, Constantius defeated Magnentius at Mursa. Following Magnentius' second defeat two years later, Constantius reunited the empire under a single Augustus. Constantius displayed little of the restraint and forbearance of his

⁵² B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy: and its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, (London, 1962), p. 333

⁵³ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, p. 300

father in his dealings with the Church. He boldly thrust himself into theological controversy, and claimed the power of determining the doctrine of the Church and of punishing as a heretic anyone who dared disagree. The West for the most part acquiesced in his right to convene councils and receive reports from them, and most western bishops yielded to Constantius' demands at Arles in 353, at Milan in 355, and at Ariminum in 359.⁵⁴

Constantius desired to impose upon the ecclesiastical authorities a modification of the Nicene formula. He argued that as the divine beneficiary of imperial power his authority was paramount in Church as well as in the state.⁵⁵ He resumed his repression of Nicene bishops, and sought council of Eusebius, from Nicomedia and Constantinople and later of Eudoxius, bishop of Constantinople as his court bishops. Although Constantius did not favour the overtly Arian bishops who said the Son was 'unlike' (*anomoios*) the Father, he sided with those who advocated abandonment of unbiblical terms like *homoousios* (of the same essence) or *homoiousios* (of like essence) and instead the use of the simple and biblical *homoios* (like). The thorn in his side was the intransigent Athanasius, who would not go along with a neutral, conciliatory formula such as *homoios*.⁵⁶ Constantius was a pragmatist and as far as he was concerned peace and harmony must take precedence over theological considerations. Accordingly, he saw no reason not browbeat bishops into conformity and to intervene in the appointment or deposition of others. He even banished Pope Liberius (*pont.* 352-366) from Rome until he obeyed the emperor's command to break with Athanasius and sign the Arian formula. By the same token, the aged Hosius of Cordova, in refusing to sign a statement against Athanasius, was banished to Sirmium. Thereupon he wrote a courageous letter to the emperor propounding a two-kingdoms theory: God has entrusted the earthly kingdom to the emperor and the Church to the bishops. If the emperor presumed to draw Church affairs under his control he would be guilty of great fault. In spite of his close connection with the imperial court, Hosius repudiated in the most resolute of terms the notion that the emperor had any right to interfere in church affairs. According to Carlyle, the emphatic tone of Hosius, which is qualitatively different from the somewhat servile attitude of Churchmen like Eusebius of Caesarea, seems to indicate

⁵⁴ S. L. Greenslade, *Church and State from Constantine to Theodosius*, p. 31

⁵⁵ C. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*, p. 187

⁵⁶ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, p. 209

the presence of a more general appreciation at that time, of the independence of the Church relatively to the state than has been always recognised.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, at the Council of Sirmium in 357, the emperor extracted from Hosius an agreement to communicate with the Arians.⁵⁸ In 355, the Council of Milan was transferred by Constantius to his palace. Bishops were then faced with a stark choice between condemnation of Athanasius and their own exile. In response to the protests of western bishops that his actions violated the canon of the Church, Constantius simply responded, 'my will is the canon.'⁵⁹ Such was Constantius' manner that Hilary of Poitiers went so far as to denounce Constantius for enslaving the Church, and to yearn for the time of the ancient persecutors, Nero and Decius, when torture and death led to freedom.⁶⁰

After the end of the fourth century, Arianism ceased to be a danger to ecclesiastical unity. The controversy was finally closed through the energy and determination of Theodosius the Great (*imp.* 379-395); like Constantius, he decided to use government coercion to harry deviationists into line, but was the first to do so successfully and consistently for so long. Theodosius was capable of ruthless, consistent and resolute action and for a short time restored unity to the Church. He, more than anyone, deserves credit for turning the empire into a fully Christian state. In 380, he issued an edict called *Cunctos populos* that commanded all those under his rule to accept the orthodox faith of the Council of Nicaea, which he described as the form of religion followed by Damasus, bishop of Rome, and Peter, bishop of Alexandria. Those who adhered to such a faith could call themselves Catholic Christians, and those that did not, must be stricken first by divine vengeance and then by imperial action in accordance with the will of heaven.⁶¹ He proceeded to purge the city of Constantinople of Arian bishops and Arian churches, and to prohibit heretics from holding public worship in the city. In 381, a rescript was produced by Theodosius that specifically condemned Photinians, Eunomians, and Arians. Heretics and schismatics were driven from the city so that the Catholic churches could again

⁵⁷ R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Medieval Political Theory in the West*, vol. 1, p. 177

⁵⁸ He retracted his signing of this agreement before he died.

⁵⁹ Athanasius, *History of the Arians* 4.

⁶⁰ Hilary of Poitiers, *Contra Constantium*, 4 (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 10: 580 f).

⁶¹ Theodosius, *Cod. Theod.*, XVI. 1. 2.

achieve unity of faith.⁶² According to Cochrane, the pronouncements of Theodosius mark the net result of fourth century efforts to discover a fresh basis for the Roman order; deprived by Constantine of its traditional sanctions, its only hope of survival was to establish itself firmly upon new ones. The Edict of Thessalonica marks a stage not less significant than that recorded by the Edict of Milan; if the former served to inaugurate the New Republic, the latter heralded the process by which the New Republic was to be transformed into the Orthodox empire. This new order not only explicitly accepted Orthodox or Trinitarian Christianity as embodying the substance of Catholic faith, but also the deliberate adoption of that faith as a principle of social cohesion.⁶³ Not least in this matter then, orthodoxy was imposed through a long series of acts of force, and it was many years, from the first ecumenical council of Nicaea to the sixth century ecumenical council of Constantinople for the establishment of Christology (325-680).

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The relationship between Church and state after the Christianisation of Rome, and the latter's role in enforcing orthodoxy raised a number of fundamental questions in the minds of Church leaders, and their attending problems would resonate for centuries. The embrace of Christianity by the state rendered it imperative that some attempt at defining the Church's share in political life, and the state's share in religious affairs, should be made. But what exactly should happen when Church and state intersect, and how, and by whom, should jurisdictional conflicts be resolved? There were no real precedents for deciding where the respective spheres of authority of bishops and the emperor began, and where they ended. Indeed, such questions were complicated by the fact that the Christian Church now seemed to owe its position as the 'established' Church of the Roman empire, with all the privilege and importance attaching to that position, to the behest of the Roman state. But how can the Church of Christ, the mediatrix of God's grace on earth, acknowledge itself to be a mere institution of the secular state, subject to the governance of temporal princes? Conversely, how can Christian emperors of autocratic disposition, be expected to regard themselves as in

⁶² Theodosius, Cod. Theod., XVI 5. 6.

⁶³ C. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*, p. 328

some sense 'subjects' of the Church? These were the burning questions of medieval political controversy, and herein lay the late-classical roots of the medieval political contest between *regnum* or *imperium* and *Sacerdotium*. It cannot be denied that a great deal of such controversy was actuated by motives of an evidently venal kind; but it was conducted throughout in the language, and with appeals to the authority, of the Christian faith.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, pp. 79-80

CHAPTER FOUR

Rome and Byzantium

The most striking manifestation of Constantine's new religious sentiment was the foundation of Constantinople, which transplanted the capital of the empire, and, in so doing, displaced the axis of the Roman world.¹ The empire, which had formed the locus of social and political unity for the Mediterranean basin and their hinterlands, receded from the western world, and Constantinople rose as the new seat of power. Once again, in dealing with such an enigmatic figure as Constantine, we are faced with a mixed bag of possible reasons for this departure from the West. We can, however, speak of two broad motives, both of which concern defence: the defence of his chosen religion, and the defence of the empire against aggressors. Firstly, Constantine wanted to create a new city that was wholly Christian, which would not be redolent with the incurable paganism of Rome. According to Lot, Constantinople was 'born of the whim of a despot who was prey to intense religious exaltation. The new Rome was to be an instrument of the Faith's triumph and the capital of Christianity.'² Although residence at Rome, with its palaces, baths, gardens, circuses and theatres would have been far more agreeable, and although it would take Constantinople a long time to supplant Rome or even to equal it in its attractions, Constantine was contemptuous of its sustained pagan adherence to non-Christian traditions. Constantinople would be a fresh start; a New Rome designed to replace Old Rome (his western imperial residence had already been moved to Milan in 383).

The transplantation of the capital was also motivated by a desire for security. By the fourth century, Roman military control in the West was in the process of being lost; the removal of the capital took note of reality and represented Constantine's growing alarm at the condition of the western empire. The perilous condition of that

¹ Constantine had marked out the boundaries of his new city in 324, following his final victory over Licinius. His predecessor, Diocletian, had already begun to shift his administrative headquarters from Rome to Nicomedia.

² F. Lot, *The End of the Ancient World: and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages*, p. 38

part of the empire necessitated a withdrawal to the East. It was evident that the danger that faced the empire was focused on the Danube and above all the Rhine, and that Asia was relatively secure; it contained a healthy military reservoir, and the city of Constantinople itself, proved an impregnable fortress. Constantinople also offered a different type of security. The East was also safer because its people were less dissatisfied with the Roman administration; the concentration of wealth in a few hands did not go quite as far as in the West, and consequently the peasants were less hard pressed. The East – with the exception of Egypt – had no parallel to the endemic revolts of the *Bagaudae* and the *circumcelliones* of Gaul, Spain and Africa. Indeed, according to Augustine's disciple Orosius, there were people in the West wondering whether their lot would not be better under the barbarians.³ The people of the West lacked the eastern measure of psychological resistance to the Gothic tribes. This was not simply a display of creeping defeatism, but a qualitatively different mindset that produced some searching criticisms of the Roman state such as those of Augustine and Salvian.⁴

It is worth clarifying exactly what we mean by 'barbarian invasions', for they would have had little resemblance to what we would consider an invasion today. According to Hinson, they represented, rather, gradual migrations of barbarians south, until they finally controlled most of the territory that had belonged to the western part of the empire. The Roman authorities had managed to keep the barbarians at bay during the third century, and some were even invited to settle within the confines of the empire as *coloni* (farmers). Western leaders, however, could do little to stem the tide, as an ever-increasing number of barbarian tribes sought the advantages of living within the empire. The internal decay of the empire rendered Roman resistance increasingly ineffective.⁵ Towards the end of the fourth century, the Visigoths were permitted, by treaty, to occupy lands south of the Danube. They settled in large

³ Arnaldo Momigliano, (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, p. 13

⁴ This is in contradistinction to the eastern Church which was blighted by a near obsession with theological precision; the condition of the western empire meant that clerics could little afford the luxury of speculative thought in which easterners engaged so heartedly. Whilst the East was always more inclined to metaphysical and philosophical speculations, the West was more earth-bound and realistic and above all, more inclined to the legalistic point of view.

⁵ E. G. Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, p. 269

numbers within the empire and many adopted Christianity.⁶ Other tribes came to occupy land in both the East and West as federates and their leaders were granted imperial titles, while their sons were given a thoroughly Roman education at an imperial court.⁷ According to Barker, the ‘population of the German forests upon the Roman world was so ancient and inveterate, and so much of the population had in one way or another entered the empire for so long a period, that when the barrier finally broke, the flood came as no cataclysm, but as something which was almost in the natural order of things.’⁸ By the end of the fourth century, many Christianised Goths had long been exposed to Roman traditions and were integrated into Roman society; the emperors virtually abandoned the West, turning control of the army over to a succession of upwardly mobile barbarians. This, however, did not sate the Gothic desire for more fertile lands, notably in Italy. The Roman senate refused either to make compromises or to buy them off, and consequently, Alaric, the Arian Christian Visigothic leader, defeated the imperial army and sacked Rome in 410. After the fall of Rome oft-repeated charges that Christianity was responsible for the anguish of the empire were revived.⁹

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The withdrawal of the emperor to the East and the abandonment of the West dug an abyss between the two halves of the empire and created two very different political traditions. The emperor that was primarily responsible for giving the eastern sphere of imperial administration, and its centre in particular, the earliest impress of at least some of those peculiarly ‘Byzantine’ characteristics by which it came to be distinguished from the empire in the West, was Theodosius the Great. By the end of his reign, a rift that had been imperceptibly widening in the course of the fourth century had already become an impassable gulf; the descendents of the Romans in the

⁶ They had been drawn to the heretical form known as Arianism, which in some ways better suited their polytheism, for Arianism implicitly gave encouragement to the belief in multiple divine beings.

⁷ J. Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, p. 306

⁸ E. Barker, “Italy and the West, 410-476” in *Cambridge Medieval History*, Vol. 1, (Cambridge, 1911), p. 392

⁹ Augustine spent thirteen years writing his classic apology, the *City of God*, in response to these claims.

East, looked upon Italy and the West as half-barbarous lands.¹⁰ In the East, the Byzantine successors of Constantine followed his example with frank cooperation with the new spiritual force of Christianity. In return, the whole machinery of the Church came under the emperor's control, with the leaders of the Church often acquiescing in this control. Ultimately, the Church was viewed as being in effect a department of the state, controlled by the emperor as if it were the secular activities of the community. The pervasiveness of caesaropapism in the eastern Orthodox Church persisted throughout its history and was a powerful factor in its final schism with Rome in 1054. Hereafter, primitive ecclesiastical autonomy was gradually eliminated from the eastern Church, and the *imperator-sacerdos* became the sole fount of disciplinary and dogmatic authority alike.¹¹ Nevertheless, the result of this interaction in the East was a toughly durable politico-religious organism, because the Church supplied the empire with a cohesive ideological force. The Byzantine empire preserved the old classical ideal of a strong centralised political unit based on a commonly accepted law and government.¹² Despite the 'paramount role played by Christianity in Byzantine civilisation, it is not unfair to say that Christian Byzantium was in the same line of development as the monarchies and city states of pagan antiquity, where a religious tradition served as the apotheosis and sanctification of political society's norms of authority and power.'¹³ The emperor Justinian I (*imp.* 527–565) carried caesaropapism to the highest pitch of its development. He gave expression to the concept in the Prolegomena to his *Novella VI*: the priesthood and the empire, he wrote, were 'the greatest gifts of God among men.' He believed that the priesthood should minister divine affairs, and the secular power was to be the protector or guardian of human affairs. Although the Church was not always supinely acquiescent toward these imperial claims, it tended overall to assent to them. Justinian not only summoned councils, but he also took control of each step of the proceedings, and even legislated the theology, worship, and structure of the Church. The emperor's *Corpus iuris civilis* (the codification of Roman civil law), emphasised the divine derivation of the emperor's power, and the emperor's will came to be expressed as a 'living law'.

¹⁰ T. G. Jalland, *The Church and the Papacy: a Historical Study*, (London, 1944), p. 265

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 266

¹² John B. Morrall, *Political Thought in Medieval Times*, p. 10

¹³ *Ibid*

Virtually from the moment that the city of Constantinople was founded there was a perceptible divergence between the ecclesiastical tradition of this New Rome in the East and that of the Old Rome on the Tiber, where the gradual disintegration of all effective imperial authority made possible the development of a quite different tradition. The extinction of the imperial title in the West (476) and the barbarian conquest wiped out the conception of a centralised state as Rome had known it; the introduction of personal and tribal custom acted as a dissolving force on any remaining idea of a centralised governmental political framework. At this time, and before the advent of Charlemagne, the barbarians were too divided amongst themselves to establish any kind of hegemony, and these decentralised tribal collections were in no position to enforce their will on the Church, now the main repository of law, culture and learning.¹⁴ The western empire suffered from a gradual process of cultural deterioration; whilst the barbarians envied Roman culture, they lacked the means to conserve what they admired. Christianity alone was afforded the task of retarding this decline and providing some form of social unity across the new barbarian frontiers of the West, by appealing not to a primarily political sense of obligation, but to a divinely inspired and commonly shared spiritual fellowship. According to Morrall, 'Medieval Europe offers for the first time in history the somewhat paradoxical spectacle of a society trying to organise itself politically on the basis of a spiritual framework (which gives to political life merely a relative value)... [Religion] was now elevated essentially above the political sphere and from this position of transcendence it bestowed on political authority whatever limited justification the later possessed.'¹⁵

The western half of the empire was also shaped by the emergence of the papacy as a power in its own right. The decree of the emperors Valentinian II, Gratian and Theodosius I in 380, by which Catholicism became the religion of the empire, was not only a step of universal historical significance, but also important because it cited the Roman see as the yardstick of correct belief, and was the instrument by which it became focalised as a governmental institution. The Church of Rome, however, was not established or legitimised by this imperial decree. The authority of the bishop of Rome was derived from Christ's commission to St. Peter:

¹⁴ S. Z. Ehler and J. B. Morrall, (eds.), *Church and State through the Centuries*, (New York, 1967), p. 2

¹⁵ J. B. Morrall, *Political Thought in Medieval Times*, p. 10

“And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”¹⁶

It was taken for granted that these powers were transmitted to Peter’s successors in the see of Rome, even though the gospels nor the Pauline letters nor any other available facts indicated anything about the powers of a successor to Peter. The wanting historical evidence was supplied by a spurious document, written in Greek, made at the end of the second century, and translated at the very end of the fourth century or possibly the early fifth century by Rufinus of Aquileja. The letter purported to be written by Pope Clement I to St. James (the brother of Christ) in Jerusalem, in which the pope informed his addressee of the last dispositions which St. Peter had made when he felt his death approaching. The letter stated that Peter, in front of the Roman community, announced that Clement was to be his successor, and handed to him his powers, and also referred specifically to those who were to succeed Clement.¹⁷ According to common knowledge, however, it was Linus who followed St. Peter in Rome and of whom, indeed St. Paul spoke. Nevertheless, this letter was quoted *ad nauseam* throughout the medieval period, as the one historical and concrete fact supporting the doctrine of a papal monarchy.¹⁸

Throughout the history of the early Church, the Roman see received practical though not uncontested support for its position as the principal Church in the West. Excluding some isolated statements made by writers such as Cyprian, however, there existed no papal theory, doctrine or exposition to support this standing. The imperial decree of 380 was important, because it made necessary, and expedient, the doctrinal exposition of the Roman Church’s governmental authority. It was during the period, between the pontificates of Damasus (*pont.* 366-383) and Leo I (*pont.* 440-461) in the

¹⁶ Matthew, 16:18-19 – this passage coupled with Christ’s command to Peter (John, 21:15-17) to ‘feed my sheep,’ served as the scriptural foundations of papal legal claims to jurisdiction over European Christians throughout the Middle Ages. What was left open to interpretation, however, was the extent of these papal powers and especially their applicability to the sphere of temporal government.

¹⁷ W. Ullmann, *Medieval Political Thought*, p. 23

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24

middle of the fifth century, that certain crucial characteristics of the papacy were formed; this was a period of gestation for the ideas relating to the papacy's function as a governmental institution and which contained the seeds that would grow into the concept of a papal monarchy i.e. the monarchic position of the pope. In 445, the emperors Valentinian III and Theodosius II, putting the whole force of Roman public law behind the papal position, published an edict called *Certum est*, which recognised the pope as the head of the Western Church.

The Roman see had always enjoyed much more independence *vis-à-vis* the imperial authority than had the eastern patriarchs, and by the middle of the fifth century until the middle of the eighth century, the papacy managed to step into the political and cultural vacuum created by the barbarian invasions, and found itself the *de facto* temporal governor of Rome and the surrounding region. Rome had achieved a momentous volte-face, but in so doing a conflict of religious authority arose between Old Rome and New Rome, which would eventually become acute and ultimately end in a radical rupture. These developments in the western Church became a bulwark against the caesaropapist tendencies of the eastern Church, and a quite different religious and political tradition was born. Nevertheless, with the exception of the brief Acacian schism (ca. 484-528) and the Photian schism (ca. 869-879), the eastern and western churches formally maintained their historic ties up to 1054.

* * * *

The emergence of the Church, as an organisation competing with the state, attracted educated and influential persons to its banner. The Church attracted some of the most creative minds to its banner – St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, Hilarius of Poitiers, St. Augustine in the West; Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil of Caesarea in the East, almost all of a type which, with the exception of the scholarly emperor Julian, it was hard to find on the imperial throne. The prosperity of the Church became a consequence and a cause of the decline of the state: whilst the state rigid, unimaginative, and unsuccessful, the Church was mobile, resilient and innovative. The Church attracted men who in the past would have become excellent

generals, governors of provinces and advisors to the emperors.¹⁹ The Church offered them a kind of power far greater than that of the secular state, and broad avenues to exercise their worldly political abilities and statesmanship. And upon the bridge that spans the ancient and medieval worlds, they managed to combine their Christian theology with pagan philosophy. For, after their life times, civilisation declined for centuries, and it was not until nearly one thousand years later that Christendom again produced men who were their equals in learning and culture. Throughout, the medieval period their authority was revered; it was they more than any other men that fixed the mould into which the Church was shaped

Towards the end of the fourth century, and with the gradual disintegration of all effective imperial control in the West, the church found its first great spokesperson in St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan (374-397). He was born in Treves, a frontier garrison town, where the Roman legions were stationed to keep the Germans at bay. Ambrose was the son of the prefect of the Gauls, and followed his father into the service of the state. He was appointed the governor of Liguria and Æmilia by the age of thirty.²⁰ Within four years, however, he decided to turn his back on secular government, and by popular acclaim became bishop of Milan (then the capital of the western empire), devoting the rest of his life to the service of the Church, sometimes at great personal risk. Ambrose rose to a position of eminence by virtue of his noble personal qualities, and his unique relations with various representatives of secular authority. He may thus be regarded as the leading contemporary exponent of ecclesiastical statesmanship.

Ambrose was at first on very friendly terms with the imperial court, but before long, a grave matter of controversy arose. During the early years of his episcopate, the emperor of the West was Gratian (*imp.* 375-383), who was Catholic, virtuous and careless. In 379, Gratian made a certain Theodosius, who had led a distinguished career in the army, his fellow-emperor in the East. Gratian was assassinated at Lyons in 383, and was succeeded throughout most of the western empire by the usurper named Maximus (*imp.* 383-388). Theodosius acknowledged the usurper on condition that he would allow Italy and its dependencies, to pass to Gratian's twelve-year-old younger brother Valentinian II; though, at first the imperial power was wielded by his Arian-leaning mother, Justina, widow of emperor Valentinian I. In 385, the dowager

¹⁹ Arnaldo Momigliano, (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, p. 9; reference made to work of E. Gibbon

²⁰ B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy: and its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, p. 336

empress having repudiated the Nicene Creed, and, at an earlier date, having given support to the Arians of Illyria, expressed a wish to be granted a certain church in his diocese for the use of the Arians, and asked that it should be entrusted to emissaries of the empress.²¹ Valentinian I had granted what seemed a reasonable request from his mother. Ambrose, on the other hand, flatly refused the appeal. The imperial authorities insisted that Ambrose relinquish the property, since the emperor was within his rights, for all things were in his power of disposal. Ambrose answered that this principle might be granted if the emperor were to demand his private property, and even of the lives of the emperor's subjects, but it was limited where it touched the possessions of the Church; it is neither lawful for him to surrender it nor for the emperor to accept it:

“The Counts and Tribunes, came and urged me to cause the basilica to be quickly surrendered, saying that the emperor was exercising his rights since everything was under his power. I answered that if he asked me what was mine, that is, my land, my money, or whatever of this kind was my own, I would not refuse it, although all that I have belonged to the poor, but that those things which are God's are not subject to the imperial power. ‘If my patrimony is required, enter upon it; if my body, I will go at once. Do you wish to cast me into chains, or to give me to death? It will be a pleasure to me. I will not defend myself with throngs of people, nor will I cling to the altars and entreat for my life, but will more gladly be slain myself for the altars.’”²²

Ambrose believed that the church has its own position and authority, which is independent of that of the state, and that the bishop, as the organ of the church, was the authority installed by God Himself, and the guardian of His property.²³ As such, he was soon tested. On Palm Sunday, in 385, while Ambrose was celebrating mass in the city, Gothic soldiers, who were Arians, were sent to take possession of the basilica. The Gothic soldiery soon had to contend with street riots and demonstrations.²⁴ Ambrose was understandably fretful about the reaction of the soldiers; after all, the Goths were liable to break out into savagery, as they did twenty-

²¹ Ambr. Ep. 20, 12 (letter to his sister Marcellina)

²² Ambr. Ep. 20, 8. 61

²³ H. Lietzmann, *The Era of the Church Fathers: A History of the Early Church*, Vol. IV, (London, 1960), p. 79

²⁴ Ambr. Sermo c. Auxent. 29

five years later in the sack of Rome.²⁵ The soldiers, however, fraternised with the great crowds that had thronged around the basilica. Ambrose's strength lay in the support of the people. The soldiers refused to use violence against them, and the emperor was compelled to give way. This was a development of some magnitude; a great battle had been won for ecclesiastical independence, and Ambrose had demonstrated that there were matters in which the state must yield to the Church.

Ambrose also had to deal with the question of the Altar of Victory in Rome. As has already been mentioned, the Altar had been removed and restored several times by various emperors. When the emperor Gratian ordered its removal, he was faced by a wave of protest from sympathetic senatorial families in Rome. The most famous, as well as the most refined member of the old aristocracy was Symmachus. He was a distinguished member of a distinguished family – rich, aristocratic, cultivated and pagan. Symmachus was banished from the city of Rome by Gratian in ca. 383 for his protest against the removal of the statue. This rebuttal was headed by the Christian senators, who were assisted by Ambrose and pope Damasus. In 384, following the death of Gratian, Symmachus (who had now been made prefect of the city) led a deputation of the senate to petition the new emperor Valentinian II, for grants in support of the ancient religious ceremonial of Rome, and the renewed restoration of the Altar as a corresponding practical symbol. He called men of goodwill to the aid of a glorious history, and to render all worthy honour to a world that was fading away.²⁶ His petition, however, was soon overruled by Ambrose, who possessed the ear of the emperor. Ambrose told the emperor:

“Let no one take advantage of your youth; if he be a heathen who demands this, it is not right that he should bind your mind with bonds of his own superstition; but by his zeal he ought to teach and admonish you how to be zealous for the true faith, since he defends vain things with all the passion of truth.”²⁷

Ambrose declared that the emperor was a soldier of God, duty bound to serve the faith, and in no circumstances must he agree to promote the worship of idols.²⁸

²⁵ B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy: and its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, p. 338

²⁶ H. Lietzmann, *The Era of the Church Fathers: A History of the Early Church*, Vol. IV, p. 77

²⁷ Ambr. Epistle xvii

²⁸ Ambr. De obitu Valent. 19, ep. 17

Ambrose ended with an unambiguous threat of excommunication should the emperor disobey: if anything else is decreed, we bishops cannot constantly suffer it and take no notice; you indeed may come to the Church, but will find either no priest there, or one who will resist you.²⁹ Ambrose composed a refutation of Symmachus's *relatio*, and had it read out to the consistory together with his letter to Valentinian. The youthful emperor had little choice but to bow to the will of his spiritual adviser.³⁰

In 387, the emperor Maximus broke his contract with Theodosius and expelled Valentinian from Italy. Valentinian sought the protection of Theodosius, who provided him with an army, and defeated and executed Maximus at Aquileia. Theodosius entered Milan as a victor and took over the government of the West, where Valentinian henceforth occupied only a subordinate position. Hence, Theodosius emerged as the *de facto* master of the Roman world. He was not characterised by the docility of Gratian, or so wholly wed to the insidious advice of his entourage as the young Valentinian. He was a sincere Catholic, but was not prepared to sacrifice what he regarded as the interests of the state; while he held the clergy in respect, he desired to be respected by them in return.³¹ The first quarrel between Theodosius and Ambrose occurred in 388, when Christians had burnt down a Jewish synagogue at Callinicum on the Euphrates at the instigation of the local bishop, and in a village to the east, orthodox monks had burnt down a village chapel, situated in the midst of a sacred grove, which belonged to the Gnostic sect of Valentinians, when they were provoked by an interruption to their procession as they were celebrating the Festival of the Maccabees.³² The Count of the East relayed the story back to the emperor, and Theodosius, mindful of the fact that such breaches of public order – particularly the destruction of synagogues – had recently become all too common, responded by ordering severe punishment and due compensation: he directed that the Bishop of Callinicum should rebuild the synagogue at his own expense, that the abstracted properties should be restored, and that the monks and other implicated in the disturbances should be punished. Word of the disturbance and of the emperor's judgement soon reached Ambrose at Aquileia. One would have

²⁹ Ambr. Epistle xvii

³⁰ Symmachus attempted for a third time to reverse the legislation of Gratian when Theodosius took power. Ambrose exhorted the emperor to dismiss the petition, and the request was once again rejected on religious grounds and the expense that it would have cost the treasury.

³¹ J. R. Palanque et al, *The Church in the Christian Roman Empire*, Vol. 2, (London, 1952), p. 697

³² F. H. Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. II, (Oxford, 1935), p. 372

thought that Ambrose, having himself been a magistrate, would have appreciated the importance of putting a stop to lawless outbreaks, and would have regarded the decision of the emperor as just.³³ Unfortunately for Theodosius, he thought otherwise. He regarded the action of the emperor as being contrary to religion: 'which is more important – the parade of discipline or the cause of religion? The maintenance of civil law is secondary to religious interests.'³⁴ Ambrose addressed an extraordinary letter to Theodosius (who was then at Milan), in which he vehemently insisted – in the politest of ways – that the orders should be rescinded and that the Christian rioters should be entirely pardoned as a tribute of respect to the Church. He rejected the emperor's order that the bishop of Callinicum should rebuild the synagogue, because the building of a place of worship for the enemies of Christ was equivalent to apostasy. Ambrose couldn't understand why there was so much commotion about the burning of a provincial synagogue; in the past, gross breaches of public order – such as the burning of mansions belonging to high officers of state in Rome, and the recent burning of the palace of bishop Nectarius in Constantinople during an Arian riot – had been left unpunished. Why shouldn't this present outrage be passed over? As for the restoration of the abstracted properties, it was inconceivable that a squalid synagogue in that far-distant town could have possessed any treasures. Charges of robbery against the Christians had been trumped up by the perfidious Jews, who had hoped to procure the appointment of a military Commission of Inquiry.³⁵ Ambrose saw fit to remind the emperor of the fate of Maximus; he had also impiously ordered that a synagogue burnt in Rome should be rebuilt.³⁶

The emperor had already come to the decision that his sentence had been too harsh, and he decided to make certain concessions: the bishop of Callinicum should not be required to rebuild the synagogue himself; this should be done at the expense of the state or of the city. Ambrose would not tolerate such a compromise; to make any form of reparation to the Jews, whether by individual Christians or by the Christian community, would be reprehensible. Theodosius ignored the bishop's posturing and refused even to grant him an audience when he had returned to Milan. Consequently, Ambrose felt duty bound to make his voice heard in the Church, and soon after his return, he preached in the Cathedral on this matter in the presence of the

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 372

³⁴ Ambr. Ep. 40.11

³⁵ F. H. Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. II, p. 375

³⁶ Ambr. Ep. 40.23

emperor. His discourse soon turned to the subject of Nathan's rebuke to David; a thinly disguised parallel was thereby drawn between Theodosius and the Hebrew monarch, reproved by the prophet for his sin. The congregation awoke to this astounding attack upon the emperor's character, and it was at this point that Ambrose addressed the emperor directly:

"In plain words, honour the least of Christ's disciples and pardon their faults, that the angels may rejoice, that the apostles may exult, that the prophets may be glad. Every member of Christ's body is necessary to the body. Do you, therefore, protect the whole body of the Lord Jesus, that He also of His Divine mercy may preserve your kingdom."³⁷

What followed was an unambiguous threat: he demanded an assurance that the emperor would withdraw the obnoxious order; if he refused, the emperor would be excluded from attendance at the celebration of the sacrament. Theodosius gave way before the importunity and obstinacy of the bishop. Ambrose had imposed his intransigent will upon an intimidated prince who cancelled even his second and amended order. Theodosius was not convinced for a minute by Ambrose's artificial pleadings. Nor did he buckle for religious reasons or a weakness of character, but rather because, in the person of Ambrose, there was a great and candid bishop who enjoyed widespread popular support, and having only recently arrived in Italy, Theodosius did not dare risk antagonising such a formidable prelate, who had the power of stirring up and setting in opposition to him the whole Catholic population. In short, the emperor yielded, grudgingly and resentfully, to avoid what would almost certainly have been a very dangerous political crisis.³⁸ By merit of his actions, however, the state was publicly humiliated before the Church, and an unfortunate precedent was set. Theodosius was understandably aggrieved and deeply offended, and ordered the strictest secrecy to be observed concerning the deliberations of the imperial consistory. Encroachments by churchmen were decidedly frowned upon by the court, and Ambrose found himself excluded from it by his imperious demands.³⁹ The emperor's next brush with the Ambrose occurred in 390; when Theodosius was in Milan, a mob in Thessalonica rioted in protest of the imprisonment of a favourite

³⁷ Ambr. *Epistle* 41.26

³⁸ F. H. Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. II, p. 378

³⁹ J. R. Palanque et al, *The Church in the Christian Roman Empire*, Vol. 2, p. 699

charioteer, and killed the Gothic officer named Butheric, whom the charioteer had tried to rape. There had been for some time, a considerable amount of discontent about a large body of barbarian troops residing in the city. On receiving the news of the murder, Theodosius was seized with ungovernable fury, and immediately ordered a massacre. Soon afterwards he repented his cruelty, and sent a second messenger to countermand the order, but the reprieve was too late. The people of Thessalonica were invited to attend a grand exhibition in the Circus. Once a great multitude had assembled, soldiers fell upon them, and massacred at least seven thousand of them in an indiscriminate slaughter. Riots were becoming an all too frequent occurrence and Theodosius was attempting to assert his authority, however, he had exceeded even that liberal allowance of violence that was deemed permissible for a Roman emperor. Hereupon, a horrified Ambrose, who had endeavoured in vain to restrain the emperor, courageously dispatched a private letter to Theodosius, in which he managed to blend deference and firmness. As far as Ambrose was concerned, this was a matter of purely moral import against one who had offended grievously both against God and against humanity. He demanded that the emperor do penance, just as David had done after the killing of Uriah the Hittite. Although initially recalcitrant, Theodosius repented, and divested the purple. The emperor suffered public penance in the cathedral of Milan, and for a whole year he put on sackcloth and ashes and went through the process to be restored. This incident marks a turning point in the history of Church and state. This was the first time that an ecclesiastic claimed the power to judge, condemn, punish, and finally pardon princes, and this is the first time that we find a monarch humbly submitting to a spiritual authority, which he recognised and publicly acknowledged to be higher than his own.⁴⁰ According to Frend, it is here that we find the foundations of the road to Canossa, and the germ of Gregory VII's claim to depose rulers for misgovernment.⁴¹ This was not a weak or craven concession to the power of an encroaching hierarchy, but a magnanimous recognition of a Christian moral order that existed above the will of the ruler. From this time until his death in 395, Theodosius had no friction with Ambrose, and came to understand the greatness of the man whom he had been disposed to regard as an impertinent meddler. Henceforth, Ambrose was taken fully into Theodosius's confidence, and his later ecclesiastical policy was almost certainly guided to a considerable extent by his advice; it is not unreasonable

⁴⁰ F. H. Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, Vol. II, p. 391

⁴¹ W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church: From Beginnings to 461*, p. 184

to regard Ambrose as the mastermind behind the programme of religious reform associated with the name of Theodosius.

Ambrose then, did much to determine the ecclesiastical conception of the relation of Church and state. His great moral claims, however, were claims of his own authority over particular rulers, though later generations considered them precedents expressive of general truths; any attempt to establish a firm principle relating the imperial office to the Church would perforce have seemed impracticable to him, for the accession of a pagan or apostate would void such a principle.⁴² He did believe that certain rights pertained to the Church that were inviolable; the Church had its own jurisdiction to which all Christians were subject, and the jurisdiction of the state did not extend over any strictly ecclesiastical matters. Therefore, in religious matters, the civil magistrate has no authority over ecclesiastics. Ambrose believed that the autonomy and self-determination of the Church should be protected, and that implied a corresponding limitation of the claims of secular society. Ambrose did not deny the divine character of the civil order of society, and insisted that a Christian must render obedience to the civil ruler in virtue of his religion. Political power, however, is derived from the ordinance of God, and is only justified when it is employed for the fulfilment of God's purposes. Should the ruler commit any grave offence, should he call for the subordination of economic or political motives to moral and spiritual ends, the Church was obliged to reprove him. We can recognise in Ambrose the existence of a divine law, which is altogether outside the sphere of the civil ruler. Ambrose is very clear in this assertion that the Church exercises jurisdiction over all Christian men, even the most exalted. The obligation to Christian service becomes binding upon the sovereign no less than on the subject. Even the emperor, like the humblest plebeian, is a 'son of the church', and therefore, subject to its authority. Ambrose argued that the emperor was a member of the *ecclesia* and not its head, subject, like every one else, to the Christian law, and in consequence, to the discipline of the Church divinely appointed to be its custodian.⁴³ In a letter to Valentinian II in 386, Ambrose reversed St. Optatus' *dictum*, and asserted that the souls of emperors like those of all believing Christians were subject to ecclesiastical discipline: 'the emperor

⁴² K. F. Morrison, "Rome and the City of God: an Essay on the Constitutional Relationships of Empire and Church in the Fourth Century", in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 54, Part 1, p. 42

⁴³ C. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*, p. 187

is within the church, not over the Church' (*Imperator enim intra ecclesiam, non supra ecclesiam est*).⁴⁴ Ambrose did not, however, argue that Church and state should occupy wholly separate realms; rather, he advocated a theory of church ascendancy over the state. Ambrose had thereby laid an important part of the foundations of the medieval papacy, which tried to place the Church in an ascendant position, and express a hierarchical view of clerical superiority over the laity.⁴⁵ We can also see in Ambrose's writings the beginnings of the rôle of the clergy in creating a spiritual elite that would influence the structure of Church institutions during the Middle Ages. His writings also contained the foundations of those questions regarding church property, round which so much of the controversies of later times turned. The ultimate significance of his work, however, would be borne out in the writings of his great pupil, St. Augustine of Hippo.

⁴⁴ Ambr. serm. Cont. Aux. 36

⁴⁵ This was not a conscious move on the part of Ambrose, since he did not personally accept the jurisdictional primacy of Rome, attributing to St. Peter only a 'primacy of confession not honour' (*primatus confessionis non honoris*).

CHAPTER FIVE

Civitas Dei and civitas terrena

The life of St. Augustine (354-430) spanned one of the most turbulent and decisive periods in the history of the Roman empire. Thanks largely to his autobiographical efforts it is also exceptionally well documented. We know for instance that he was born in the provincial town of Thagaste in Numidia, and that in his youth, he experienced a series of intellectual and spiritual conversions that are eloquently reflected upon in his work known as the *Confessions*. According to Coleman, this work is ‘one of the most extraordinary and moving tales of inner turbulence and self-revulsion and a quest for tranquillity.’¹ The false starts of his successive conversions and their attending tergiversations are testament to his lengthy search for some form of intellectual and spiritual certainty. To begin with, we know that his mother, Monica, was a Christian and tried to mould her son accordingly, but, that Augustine found ‘Christianity uncongenial in terms of both its intellectual basis and its moral demands’², and, ‘thought the ‘Christian scriptures unsophisticated.’³ As a young man, he became absorbed in an amalgam of ancient philosophies, many of which harked back to pre-Christian Stoicism and Hellenistic Judaism. These philosophies were informed by a kind of Neo-Platonism that developed more or less contemporaneously with the rise of Christianity; and hereafter, a strong Platonic thread was woven into the fabric of Augustine’s intellectual life. In 370, following his preliminary studies at Madaura, he studied rhetoric at Carthage. In a state of disaffection with Christianity, he became attracted to a dualistic sect known as Manichaeism, which combined Christian and Zoroastrian elements. Its complicated theology centred on a battle between two opposed cosmic principles, good and evil. It taught that evil is a positive principle, embodied in matter, and that good is embodied in spirit; flesh is divided

¹ J. Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, p. 310

² R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo*, (Suffolk, 2001), p. IX

³ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 2

from the spirit, the material darkness from the immaterial light. Many people found this doctrine attractive; it absolved them of any responsibility for their actions, for wickedness was not embodied by a person, but by an evil nature subsisting within their being. This belief in the evil nature of matter also rendered absurd the Catholic belief that God had taken on human flesh. Manichaeism posed a very real threat to Catholic Christianity in the East and in the West; its influence spread quickly, and their ascetic beliefs penetrated all classes, especially in Coptic regions and in North Africa. Augustine adhered to these doctrines for nine years, whereupon he was drawn to the study of the Scepticism of the New Academy as he found it largely in Cicero's writings.⁴ Neither, Manichaeism nor Scepticism, however, sated his longing for certainty. The Manichaean belief in the divisibility of God as a corporeal substance and the belief that evil has an independent reality did not sit well with Augustine's theology.

It is important to remember that Augustine, at this stage, was not without his secular ambitions. He struck up an early friendship with the proconsul of Africa and court-doctor Vindicianus, and in Rome he later gained the patronage of the pagan senatorial leader, Symmachus.⁵ In 384, he accepted a position at Milan as a teacher of rhetoric attached to the court of Valentinian II, and by 385, an imperial governorship was certainly within his reach. It was at this time, however, that Augustine began to fall under the influence of prominent Christians in that city e.g. Simplicianus and Pontitianus. It was also here that he first heard St. Ambrose preaching against the Manicheans, and urging his congregation to think of God and the soul as distinct from material reality. After considerable mental reflection, he converted to Catholicism and was baptised by St. Ambrose on Holy Sunday, 387. He was ordained a Catholic presbyter at Hippo in 391 and in 395 he became co-adjutor to Bishop Valerius. Shortly after the latter's death, he was consecrated as the Bishop of Hippo, where he remained for almost thirty-five years until his death in 430, living to see the irruption of the Vandals into Africa. He emerged as one of the most significant figures in the intellectual history of Latin Christendom. He straddled the divide between the ancient world of classical antiquity and that of the Christian Middle Ages; he digested and refuted the political and ethical presuppositions of the Graeco-Roman world, and lit

⁴ J. Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, p. 311

⁵ W. H. C. Frend, "Augustine and Orosius: on the End of the Ancient World", in *Augustinian Studies*, Vol. 20, (1989), p. 5

the touch paper to the development of a characteristically Christian tradition of political thought.

The breadth of his spiritual and intellectual journey is quite astounding, and it does not lend itself to a concise summary. He was not a systematic political theorist and did not present a clear enumeration of his political beliefs: his work lacks a ‘philosophy of politics of history. He does not on the whole share the standard concerns of classical political thinkers, and, when he does, they are not at the forefront of his mind [nor] do we find a sustained discussion of the merits or demerits of different forms of government [or] any attempt to recommend an ideal, or a best possible, constitution.’⁶ He was first and foremost a theologian, concerned for the pastoral well-being of his flock, and it was only inadvertently that he touched upon many of these other themes in his myriad of biblical exegesis, letters, sermons and treatises. Indeed, it was ‘from the local and parochial requirements of his pastoral administration of the rank and file of believers in North Africa that many of the great debates of his final years developed, notably his views on history, politics and moral agency.’⁷ Augustine shared the belief of many North African Christians that they were the guardians of the true faith, which often meant conflict with Christian emperors and popes. He wrote as a controversialist; his writings growing either from arguments with his earlier self, or from external stimuli, answers to provocations which came to him from without. Any attempt to construct a synergy of the various fragments of his work is like piecing together a mixed bag of jigsaw pieces. The product of such an undertaking, whilst valid, is nevertheless ‘complex, laborious and not seldom conjectural artificial and simplified.’⁸

Before Augustine’s political thought can be unpacked for our immediate purposes, we need to survey some of the most fundamental presuppositions of his work. One of the most important would be his consideration of human nature. When Augustine reflected upon the experiences of his youth, he was unsettled by the profound and disquieting sense of sin that they fermented in his mind. He convinced himself of his own wickedness and, sexual lapses aside, even the most insignificant peccadilloes and forgivable misdemeanours seemed to cause him endless

⁶ R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo*, p. XI

⁷ J. Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, p. 313

⁸ R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo*, p. XI

retrospective anguish. Indeed, seven chapters of the *Confessions* were devoted to castigating himself for the theft from a fruit tree in a neighbour's garden.⁹ What deeply troubled Augustine was the very pointlessness of the theft; it was not motivated by a desire to enjoy what he had stolen, but for the thrill of the theft itself.¹⁰ Augustine asked himself, why are humans so prone to sin and find themselves compelled to commit such transgressions? He was convinced that the whole body of humanity is morally destitute and is for all intensive purposes entirely incapable of curbing its propensity to sin. It is this conviction that informs much of the content of his political thought. He tells us that even babies in their mothers' arms share this sinful nature, and that they only abstain from wrongdoing because they are not strong enough to commit it: 'The infant's innocence lies in the weakness of his body, not in the infant mind.'¹¹

These beliefs and convictions about the moral condition of mankind are grounded in an understanding, mediated through St Paul, of the biblical narrative of the Fall of man. When Adam and Eve were created, they were without sin, but, importantly, they were not without the capacity to sin. How do we account for this latent capacity given that man was the creation of a good and benevolent God? The existence of this maligned nature seems to bring into question either the goodness or omnipotence of the creator.¹² This matter considerably vexed Augustine. It was something, however, that stirred the Neo-Platonist in him. He stated that evil, properly understood, has no existence and is rather a relative lack or privation of good:

"Everything which exists is either corporeal or incorporeal. The corporeal is embraced by sensible form, and the incorporeal by intelligible. Everything which exists, then, is not without some form. But where there is some form there is necessarily some mode of existence; and a mode of existence is a kind of good. Absolute evil therefore has no mode of existence, for it lacks all good. It therefore does not exist, for it is embraced by no form, and the whole meaning of evil is derived from the privation of form."¹³

⁹ Aug. *Confess.* 2:4-10

¹⁰ Aug. *Confess.* 2:4.

¹¹ Aug. *Confess.* 1:7.

¹² Aug. *Confess.* 7:5

¹³ Aug. *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 6

By this reckoning, anything which exists, by virtue of its existence, must to some extent be relative to a pre-existing good. Only a state of complete non-existence can be said to embody absolute evil, and correspondingly, absolute good or perfection of being can pertain only to God, the creator. Sin is, therefore, a degree of abstraction between man and God; the greater the sin, the greater the level of abstraction. Burdened by the weight of our own imperfection, this severance can soon become a gulf, and the gulf, an abyss. It is only by the grace of God that we are not allowed to pass out of existence completely.

What is most telling about the parable of Adam and Eve is that humanity was born with free will, a capacity not to sin. But, we are inevitably led to sin, and in the case of Adam and Eve, to commit such a heinous sin, so as to condemn every subsequent generation to share in their guilt:

“Hence the whole mass of the human race is condemned; for he who at first gave entrance to sin has been punished with all his posterity who were in him as in a root, so that no one is exempt from this just and due punishment, unless delivered by mercy and undeserved grace.”¹⁴

We should, however, not forget that God in his omniscience knew that Adam and Eve would sin. Why create humanity in the full knowledge of its foreseeable damnation? This, Augustine informs us, is not the case, for God, has decided from all eternity to save a small remnant of the human race.¹⁵ Without divine help, man is morally adrift, and it is only by the gift of God’s grace that his will can be repaired so as to renew his capacity to will rightly. But this restoration is not complete; the elect, for as long as they remain on earth, have to constantly fight against temptation, and it is only in heaven that they will at last be free from every sinful impulse.¹⁶ Men cannot vie for this gift of grace; they cannot earn it or deserve it by merit of their actions. It is an unmerited gift of salvation conferred upon a chosen predestined few, and by implication it consigns the greater mass of humanity to eternal damnation. Whether

¹⁴ Aug. *De civ. Dei* 21:12.

¹⁵ Aug. *De civ. Dei* 13:23; 21:12; *Epist.* 190:3:12.

¹⁶ R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo*, p. 7

you are delivered damnation or salvation, you find yourself in receipt of God's goodness. For damnation is a manifestation of his justice and salvation his mercy.¹⁷

As has already been mentioned, Augustine did not shy away from controversy, and intellectual challenges did much to spur him to frame and defend his literary output. Indeed, Augustine found himself in a near ceaseless battle with the heretics and schismatics in the Church. His beliefs on the subject of grace and predestination that have just been mentioned were uttered largely in response to the heretical challenge posed by Pelagianism. His engagement in this protracted controversy lasted from 411 until his death in 430. It propagated a view of the human condition that if followed to its logical conclusions would shake the foundations of the Christian religion: it claimed that man possessed the power to choose between good and evil – that he could act rightly unaided – and that there is no sin where there is not a voluntary choice of evil; that sin is not inherited and that some men can live sinless lives.¹⁸ All of this amounts to the fact that man is capable of securing his own salvation without divine help. Such a view could not be more different from the teachings of the Church and Augustine's reading of Scripture. If we could be saved without divine aid, why did God become man, and if the Fall of man was without consequence, exactly what did Christ's death atone for? Pelagianism seemed to ignore the fact that 'the meaning of the Incarnation is intimately linked with the necessity of redemption', and drew into question the desirability of an institutional Church as a community of grace on earth.¹⁹ It is understandable why Augustine regarded the defeat of Pelagianism as a duty of the utmost importance.

* * * *

The greatest exposition of his ideas and his political doctrines can be found in his masterpiece, *De Civitate Dei*. This long treatise was composed between 413 and 426. Many of its defects can be attributed to the fact that the work was published piecemeal, and could not, therefore, be revised as a whole when the work was complete. The motive and occasion of the work also seem to have outgrown its

¹⁷ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 16

¹⁸ J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire: From the Death of Theodosius I. to the Death of Justinian (A.D. 395 to A.D. 565)*, Vol. 1, p. 360

¹⁹ R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo*, p. 9

original scope, and the scheme of the work is often lost to sight as the author is lost in digression. One of the primary purposes of the work, however, was to act as a defence of the Christian religion; this is the last and the greatest of the Apologies for Christianity produced by the early Church, necessitated by an event which rocked the civilised world.²⁰ From the Republican period onwards, the growth of the Roman empire had been seen as a product of fidelity of its people to their national gods, and their scrupulous observance of the pagan cult. In 410, however, the Gothic King Alaric I sacked the city of Rome, and pagans attributed the disaster and the attending collapse of the Roman empire to the abandonment of the ancient gods.²¹ Conversely, Christians were asking themselves why a Christianised Rome should have suffered all these horrors at the hands of barbarians who believe in a blasphemous heresy, which placed them as much as the heathen outside the Christian pale.²² In response to these charges, Augustine attacked the moral and political claims of the Roman empire, and attempted to dissipate the long-nurtured vision of Rome, the eternal city, the centre of the civilised universe, whose justice and peace are the leaven of civilisation.²³ *De civitate Dei* grew into a comprehensive critique of the whole literary, religious, political and military heritage of pagan Rome.²⁴ Augustine pointed to the fact that similar calamities had occurred in pre-Christian times. He even went so far as to claim that the moral integrity of Christianity had actually supported the crumbling Roman state, which had been seriously threatened for generations by an inner corruption and a lust for domination. Christianity had but served to ease its death throes.²⁵ For Augustine, the Roman empire was not without its virtues, but it was incapable of being a *respublica* in its true sense, because the empire lacked *iustitia*, something which could only be understood in terms of the Christian way of life and operated within the context of a Christian society. According to Wilks, it is precisely for this reason that Augustine came to develop his doctrine of the two kingdoms; it was not

²⁰ N. H. Baynes, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays*, (London, 1955), p. 288

²¹ We should remember that the fall of Rome occurred during the reign of Honorius, a Christian emperor.

²² J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire: From the Death of Theodosius I. to the Death of Justinian (A.D. 395 to A.D. 565)*, Vol. 1, p. 302

²³ R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo*, p. X

²⁴ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 30

²⁵ G. J. Lavere, "The Political Realism of Saint Augustine", *Augustinian Studies*, Vol. 11, (1980), p. 135

his intention to juxtapose Church and state, but to draw attention to the comparison between Christian and non-Christian empires.²⁶

Augustine believed that the rise and fall of the Roman empire was merely an episode in the larger Christian history of mankind. Indeed, much of *De Civitate Dei* is reserved for an adumbration of this history from Genesis to Revelation. The destitute condition of the empire seemed to suggest that this linear development from creation to final judgement may be approaching its climax. It is important to understand that Augustine's concerns are not with history in a conventional sense. 'History is not working towards some end or culmination *in* this world. The true destination of mankind, whether it be damnation or salvation, does not lie within history, but beyond it.' This appreciation is grounded in an understanding of human history as the gradual unfolding, in accordance with God's inscrutable will, of the respective destinies of two cities from the beginning of the world to its demise.²⁷ The use of the term 'cities' is allegorical – they are not determinate places or temporal institutions in the conventional sense of the word. Rather, they are metaphysical moral communities or cosmic communities – the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena*²⁸ – into which man has been divided throughout whole history of the world from the creation down to the time of Christ's second coming.²⁹ These cities are radically opposed to each other in their natures, principles, and ends. They are united by two types of love: the *civitas terrena* by a love of self, and the *civitas Dei* by a love of God; the former glories in itself, the latter in God.³⁰ There might be a commingling of the two cities at the common gate of mortality, but that besides, they are two discrete spheres, human and divine.³¹ Although commonly misunderstood in the Middle Ages, the *civitas Dei* is not the institutional Church. The *civitas Dei* is composed of all those angels who remained loyal to God, the elect who have died and whose souls are in heaven and

²⁶ M. J. Wilks, "Roman Empire and Christian State in the *De civitate Dei*", in *Augustinus*, Vol. 12, (1967), p. 493

²⁷ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 22

²⁸ Augustine's conception of the two cities comes ultimately from the Bible: Jerusalem the Holy City is contrasted with Babylon. The conception can, however, also be shown to have been derived from his Donatist friend Tychonius, who in his work the *Apocalypse* had interpreted the Book of Revelation on similar lines. It also owes much to the Manichaean doctrine which contained a similar antithesis between a heavenly kingdom and earthly city.

²⁹ R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo*, p. 11

³⁰ Aug. *De civ. Dei* 14:28.

³¹ M. J. Wilks, "Roman Empire and Christian State in the *De civitate Dei*", in *Augustinus*, Vol. 12, p. 490

who await the resurrection of the body; and the *peregrine*, those of the elect who for the time being are temporarily stranded as foreigners or pilgrims on earth. Correspondingly, the *civitas terrena* is composed of the fallen angels who rebelled against God, those of the reprobate who have died and are in hell, and those of the reprobate who are for the time being alive on earth. The earthly contingents of these two cities coexist and are intertwined, and consequently they are indistinguishable. Augustine refers to the whole stretch of time in which the two cities are inextricably intertwined as the *saeculum*.³² During this time there is no way of ascertaining who belongs to which city, for status and outward appearances are no guides. Even the institutional Church is not free from the presence of timeservers, men whose faith was at best lukewarm and whose morals left much to be desired. Since the visible church was, and always would be a mixture of good and evil men, it was impossible and blasphemous to attempt to make a final separation of the good and the wicked before the end of the world and the Last Judgement.³³ Augustine believed the Donatist conception of a Church of the pure as folly. In his model of creation and salvation, it is only at the end of history when the two cities will only be visibly and finally divided, when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead.³⁴

When Augustine attempts to plant this metaphysical analysis in the substantive world he exposes an uneasy dualism that runs throughout his work on this subject. He developed no detailed, systematic theory of the proper relationship between Church and state or of the way in which their respective spheres of activity should be separated and marked off.³⁵ The central problem for Augustine was that these two spheres intersected in the person of the temporal ruler, who is at once a member of the Church and the head of government. This appearance of spiritual and temporal convergence in the person of the emperor was further strengthened by the Eusebian theology that Augustine subscribed to until around 400 AD. According to Markus, in his earliest pronouncements on this subject Augustine tended to by-pass the problem of relating these two spheres; with his reading of the empire as the instrument of divine purpose, and the emperor as a quasi-messianic figure with a transcendent mission, the Church and state were only provisionally distinct aspects of a single

³² R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, (Cambridge, 1970), p. 133

³³ H. A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, (London, 1963), p. 183

³⁴ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 21

³⁵ H. A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, p. 172

Christian 'polity'.³⁶ In his latter thought, Augustine came to reject both the idea of the political order as part of a universal, cosmic order, and the idea of a Christian Roman empire. Even at this point, however, Augustine seems little aware of the problem of relating the two spheres, and there is certainly no suggestion that the earthly rulers should restrict their activities to purely temporal matters. Why doesn't Augustine develop a more thoroughgoing theory of the relation between these two spheres? To understand this one must appreciate a conceit in Augustine's mind, whereby he does not regard Christian rulers as part of the state, but rather as members of the Church proper. It is only when one appreciates this that one can understand how the concept of the 'state' is conspicuous by its absence from all Augustine's discussions on this theme.

Although Augustine developed little in the way of a systematic analysis of Church and state, it is clear that he regarded the state as a divinely-ordained instrument of order and discipline, and as such, obedience even to bad political master is a religious duty. His ostensible position is the Church and state are separate orders. The boundaries between such orders, however, are blurred and his treatment of them is inconsistent. Again when Augustine moves his mind's eye from the metaphysical to the substantive the conclusions that he draws are not always complementary. He is aware, however, that the dualism that he postulates is not what we may call symmetrical; spiritual matters are inherently superior to temporal ones and they take precedence over them in the event of irreconcilable conflict. The state and its laws could never have the highest claim to the loyalty of a true Christian, because he is a pilgrim and wayfarer on this earth, and his only necessary permanent allegiance is to the heavenly city.³⁷ The grace of God, and hence the source of man's redemption, is mediated to us through the Church and her sacraments, whereas, the state has no direct reference to this ultimate good. Spiritual considerations, therefore, have a more authoritative claim to our allegiance than do temporal ones. Indeed, Augustine applauded the celebrated confrontation between St. Ambrose and the emperor Theodosius I in Thessalonica as reinforcing the principle that rulers can be reprovved for disobeying the considered commands of God.³⁸ Compared with its treatment in classical antiquity then, Augustine ascribed a much humbler position to the state.

³⁶ R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, 146

³⁷ B. Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State 1050-1300*, p. 10

³⁸ Ambr. *Epistle* 51

According to Dyson, the state is not, as it had been ‘for Plato and Aristotle, a natural part of human life or a natural forum for the development and expression of the human character and human potential. It is an unnatural supervention upon the created order. It has been called into being precisely by the fact that man’s naturally sociable and co-operative disposition has been denatured and made selfish by sin.’³⁹ Had the Fall not occurred, then the full array of coercive and oppressive instruments of the state would not have come into being. The state had originated in the aggressive desire of fallen man to dominate his fellows – what Augustine calls *libido dominandi* – and its role in the providential designs of God were to act as a curb to the excesses of a sinful humanity.⁴⁰ Political arrangements were, therefore, a regrettable necessity and represented a departure from an earlier ideal order of things; they were a corrective device for the restraint of self-centred human beings whose fall from grace has rendered the human condition precarious and, not infrequently, intolerable.⁴¹ The ignoble business of politics was introduced into the human sphere because of this estrangement of man from God.⁴² Political power can only achieve what is negative and external, and it has no positive moral good to contribute to our lives. Despite his distaste for the state, he did concede that the Christian state is the best kind of state there can be, and headed by a Christian ruler, it can come as close to the achievement of justice as is possible to come on earth. The Christian ruler will endeavour to set an example of righteousness, mercy and humility under him, and will strive to create and maintain conditions favourable to the Church’s work.⁴³

It should be emphasised that Augustine does not suggest that rulers are formally subject to the Church’s command in temporal affairs, or that any ruler owes his position to the Church or can be deprived of it at the Church’s behest. What he does say, however, is that Christian emperors, insofar as they are Christian, are as much subject to the Church’s spiritual guidance and correction as any other Christian, and have a responsibility to protect her.⁴⁴ Christian rulers, like all believers, have a duty to the Church, but this duty is informed by their rank and station in life:

³⁹ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 27

⁴⁰ J. B. Morrall, *Political Thought in Medieval Times*, p. 21

⁴¹ G. J. Lavere, “The Political Realism of Saint Augustine”, *Augustinian Studies*, Vol. 11, p. 141

⁴² B. Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State 1050-1300*, p. 9

⁴³ R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo*, p. 184

⁴⁴ *Ibid*

“For man serves God in one way insofar as he is a man, and in another was insofar as he is also a king. Insofar as he is a man, he serves Him by living faithfully; but insofar as he is also a king, he serves Him by enforcing with suitable rigour laws, which command what is righteous and punish the reverse.”⁴⁵

When we come to consider his latter thought, this duty is better understood as religious rather than political because it extends beyond that of defending the Church against her enemies and criminals, but to coercing and even persecuting heretics and schismatics.

Augustine’s views on the matter of coercion developed over time, and it is to the Donatist controversy – which occupied most of his attention from 391, when he was ordained a priest, until about 417 – that we must turn to understand more clearly his views about the rôle of the state and its rulers in relation to the Church. In Augustine’s Africa, coercion was one of the facts of life, and a provincial bishop was deeply involved in its exercise. In innumerable ways, an African bishop’s position in society, even his Episcopal functions, involved him in a repressive regime. According to Markus, coercion was simply a mode of the exercise of pastoral office.⁴⁶ Augustine was deeply concerned to re-establish the shattered unity of the Church in Africa, and when faced with a similar dilemma about the use of religious coercion associated with his earlier controversy with the Manicheans, he answered unequivocally in the negative: the state could not force the free will of man in matters of belief.⁴⁷ This was also his initial stance with regard to the Donatist controversy: he was resolute that no permanent good can result from using compulsion in matters of faith. He believed that reason and argument alone should be used to defuse religious strife. Indeed, it was by such a path that Augustine had himself been led back to Christianity. He moved from this point of view to a transitional position whereby he believed that the Church had the right to ask the political authorities for protection against the acts of violence committed by some of the members of the Donatist sect. When Donatists objected to the efforts of the Catholics to gain protection from the emperor and the state, and they insisted that the secular authorities had no right to interfere in matters of organisation

⁴⁵ Aug. *Epistle* 185:19; see also ‘Uprooting the idols from the face of the earth – promised so long ago – is not something any private citizen can command. Kings thus have their own status in human society in virtue of which they can serve the Lord in ways not open to those who are not kings.’ Aug. *C. litt. Pet. II*, 92.210

⁴⁶ R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, p. 140

⁴⁷ N. H. Baynes, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays*, p. 303

and discipline of the Church, he pointed to the fact that it was they that had first appealed to the state when they asked the emperor Constantine to judge their case, and it was only after he and his successors had ruled against them that they had adopted their anti-state and anti-imperial policy. He also reminded them that they had been quite willing to accept state aid and protection from the apostate emperor Julian, and that they had frequently appealed to the state and its legal machinery when they wanted to proceed against dissident groups, such as the Maximianists, which had splintered off from their sect.⁴⁸

Augustine finally moved to the position whereby he believed that the Church had a prerogative to ask the state to punish heretics and schismatics, while Christian kings had an obligation to use their power to protect and support the Church against heresy and schism as well as against paganism.⁴⁹ This latter position, that the Church may demand the services of the civil power in coercing those who threaten her doctrinal or organisational integrity, was partly motivated by a desire to protect Catholics and their property, and more significantly, to repair and maintain the unity and doctrinal integrity of the Church.⁵⁰ According to Deane, this is where the theocratic element of Augustine's teaching rears its head; the 'state and its officials become auxiliaries of the Church and its officers... The political authorities are reduced to the status of a 'secular arm', the coercive instrument by which ecclesiastical decisions are enforced upon dissident and recalcitrant members. Even when the officials of the state cooperate willingly with the Church authorities, they are obviously subordinate to the Church which sets the ends that they implement.'⁵¹

Augustine did not think for a moment that coercion *per se* could induce a genuine change of heart, but he did think that it could create the conditions in which an individual could be induced to re-examine their beliefs. This remained his settled response to the objection that 'the unwilling are not to be brought forcibly to the truth', urged frequently, especially by his Donatist opponents.⁵² It was his belief that people could be jolted out of erroneous views by mild persecution – more commonly a fine or compensation rather than any form of harsh physical punishment. He

⁴⁸ H. A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, p. 183

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 214

⁵⁰ R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo*, p. 188

⁵¹ H. A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, p. 216

⁵² R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, p. 143

believed that the purpose of such ‘persecution’ should be to admonish the wanderers to depart from evil and return to the Church of Christ, rather than to punish them for their crimes.⁵³ He even emphasised the willingness of the Church to receive penitent Donatists back into the Catholic fold.⁵⁴ In the parable of the great supper (Luke 14:23), Augustine saw the exact procedure which was to be used against the Donatists; first a loving invitation, and then compulsion of the unwilling guests. The *compelle intrare* of the parable thus becomes the classic text of Augustine at this time against the Donatists. So there are two methods for dealing with schismatics, the sermons of Catholic prelates, and the laws of Catholic princes. If the schismatics will not listen to the former, let them be compelled by the latter.⁵⁵ It is noteworthy to mention, however, that there is a tension in his work; it is clear that he was never entirely comfortable with the use of coercion. One might remark that he was as much at pains to convince his audience of the merits of coercion as he was himself. According to Markus, ‘his endorsement of official enforcement of Christian orthodoxy, whatever its theoretical foundations, is not well at home with the repudiation of the Theodosian ‘Christian times’, nor in the setting of his scepticism about a Christian Roman empire and about legal and institutional means of Christianisation.’⁵⁶

By way of conclusion then, it is true that the state had always been involved in some kind of coercive activity – there is nothing particularly revolutionary about this – but Augustine produced an important addendum to this development by setting forth, by argument and appeal to the scriptures, a thoroughgoing defence of these activities. What is striking is the fact that when Augustine comes to defend the exercise of coercive power by the secular authority in the religious sphere, he always does so in a vocabulary of ‘persons’ rather than of ‘institutions’. According to Markus, this is no accident or linguistic quirk; it is embedded in his habit of reducing or dissolving his conception of the state into a kind of ‘atomistic personalism’. Augustine commonly speaks of emperors rather than of empire, and of kings and magistrates rather than state or government, and can without inhibition speak of Christian emperors long after he had abandoned all talk about a Christian empire.⁵⁷ Terms such as ‘state’ disguised

⁵³ H. A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, p. 202

⁵⁴ G. G. Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy*, p. 129

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134

⁵⁶ R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, p. 146

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149

the fact that the entity under discussion was by nature a composite one, consisting of two cities that overlap, and because the eschatological categories into which God's creation fit are indivisible, the collective, institutional character of all human groupings are irrelevant. The Church proper, on the other hand, is far less susceptible to this kind of atomisation, because the state sits beneath her boughs.

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In the course of the early Middle Ages, Augustine's oft-misunderstood theology, exercised a pervasive influence on the climate of Christian political thought at least until the end of the thirteenth century. His influence proved to be all pervasive in the sense that, even where he is not cited directly, ideas and resonances in the controversial literature generated by subsequent debates show how fully St Augustine's views had shaped a particular kind of political and ecclesiological sensibility.⁵⁸ His idea of man's complete dependence upon divine grace made accessible to him through the Church, and the suggestion that the Church may and should call upon secular rulers to use coercive force on her behalf, are themes that were to make their frequent appearances alongside familiar motifs of medieval political debate.⁵⁹ The widespread acceptance of his association of political power with sin and with everything in human behaviour that is vitiated and inimical, rendered mute any attempt to develop any adequate theory of the relative dignity of the two spheres of Church and state.⁶⁰ Indeed, his legacy plagued any attempt to make use of the concept of the 'state', and for centuries it was easier to think of political realities in terms of rulers, officials, their duties and ideals. The political thought of the intervening millennium was shaped by 'political Augustinianism', a bastardisation of true Augustinian principles, which rendered a period of development completely out of line with his original theory.⁶¹ His doctrine of the two cities was much misrepresented by his medieval inheritors; for within his theory lay the germ of the later Papalist insistence that the prince is ultimately no more than the auxiliary or

⁵⁸ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 54

⁵⁹ R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo*, p. XI

⁶⁰ B. Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State 1050-1300*, p. 10

⁶¹ M. J. Wilks, "Roman Empire and Christian State in the *De civitate Dei*", in *Augustinus*, Vol. 12, p. 490

sword-bearer of the Church, though there is not the slightest reason to suppose that Augustine thought the secular power was subordinate or accountable to the Church or that it was in any sense derived from the Church.⁶² According to the later interpreters of his work, his separation of matters of faith from politics represents a clear recognition of Church and state as two separate societies. Augustine is not only hailed as the advocate of dualism, but as the progenitor of the Gelasian formula and the medieval concept of the two swords.⁶³ His teachings added more to a theocratic theory of the state than he perhaps appreciated at the time. The implications of this theory, however, were not to be fully developed until the advent of a series of great popes from Gregory VII to Boniface VIII and their supporters.

⁶² R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo*, p. 184

⁶³ M. J. Wilks, "Roman Empire and Christian State in the *De civitate Dei*", in *Augustinus*, Vol. 12, p. 490

CHAPTER SIX

Auctoritas and potestas

As the western Church developed, it sought to assert itself in matters of faith and claimed a degree of autonomy in its own affairs. As the *de facto* heirs of the emperor's power in the West, the bishops of Rome were best placed to make this stand. By the middle of the fifth century, the Church felt bold enough to attempt a theoretical delimitation of the respective functions of the spiritual and secular authority within the Christian commonwealth, and in so doing, it was hoped to establish a limitless autonomy in spiritual matters and to emancipate itself as far as possible from secular jurisdiction over its affairs and property. This separateness, between the secular and ecclesiastical spheres of activity, was presented as an aspect of religious truth. It was argued that God had ordained two kinds of power and that the governance of the world is rightly to be divided between them; the Church is ordained to rule spiritual things, and princes to rule temporal ones.¹ This separation owes a great deal to the thought of St. Augustine, but it was Pope Gelasius I (*pont.* 492–498), writing some seventy years after his death, who delivered this dualistic notion of power in its most influential formulation.

* * * *

It is clear from his writings that Gelasius was deeply concerned with heresy and schism. He was alarmed by a number of quasi-theological developments that had occurred in the East over a period of some forty years. Firstly, in 451, a Council had been convened in Chalcedon to counter the Monophysite tendency of the Alexandrian and the Nestorian tendency of the Antiochene schools with respect to the human and divine natures of Christ. The decisions of the Council served to free the Church from

¹ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 87

the influence of a number of extremists at each end, and to settle the terms of the faith of the Church with regard to the nature of Christ.² The rulings of the Council, however, also delivered in its seventeenth and twenty-eighth chapters certain remarks clearly intended to undermine the claims of the papacy to doctrinal supremacy in the Church. For instance, it embraced the principle that the ecclesiastical status of a city is determined by its civil status, and accorded Constantinople the same civil, and therefore, the same ecclesiastical rank as Rome; in so doing, it cast aside those canons of the Council of Nicaea in which the order of the primatial sees had been determined.³ This development profoundly unsettled Gelasius, and in time he would be the first to apply the term *summus pontifex* exclusively to the Roman pontiff, and would argue that the Roman see should enjoy a primacy not merely of honour but of jurisdiction.⁴

Secondly, in 482, acting on the advice of Acacius, Patriarch of Constantinople, the emperor Zeno (*imp.* 474–491) made his own contribution to the debate between orthodoxy, Monophysitism and Nestorianism.⁵ He promulgated an epistolary decree known as the *Henotikon*, which contained a formula of faith that he hoped would establish unity among the discordant religious groups in the East. The decree, however, went much further and stated the emperor's competence and intention to overrule even the decisions of Councils of the Church as he saw fit. His initiative was seen as a dangerous break with ecclesiastical and imperial precedent, and violated the compromise on the respective responsibilities of emperors and bishops in a matter of faith which had proved such a blessing to the orthodox at Chalcedon.⁶ The emperor, for his part, clearly wanted to see a theological wrangle having such troublesome political implications settled as decisively as possible; Zeno had already suffered two years of exile while his rival, Basilicus, was supported by the Monophysites.⁷ In its colourless form the decree pleased neither party; but his actions were not without consequence, and occasioned the first full-scale conflict between the churches of Rome and Constantinople. The papacy looked upon the decree with the greatest

² R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Medieval Political Theory in the West*, vol. 1, p. 185

³ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 83

⁴ A. K. Zeigler, "Pope Gelasius I: the Relation of Church and state", in *Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 27, (1942), p. 421

⁵ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 84

⁶ F. Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy: Origins and Background*, Vol. 2, (Washington, 1966), p. 111

⁷ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 84

disfavour, and Acacius, who, seen as the architect of the emperor's intervention, was anathematised by Felix III (*pont.* 483–492), and practically all communion with those who held to Acacius was broken off. As his head of chancery and successor, Gelasius shared the pope's conviction and denied the imperial claim to legislate in religious matters.⁸

These developments served to raise in Gelasius's mind questions about the rightful governance of the people of God. Who he asked, should be responsible for laying down the doctrines of faith and the translation of their abstract principles into legal terms? Who should have the final and authoritative decision in matters vitally affecting the fabric of Christian society? Gelasius was prompted to write at length by the political complexities of the Acacian Schism, and these writings furnish us with an interesting view of the circumstances which gave rise to a growing consciousness that the Church was an authority independent of, and in its own sphere superior to, that of the state.⁹ The pronouncedly regal-sacerdotal scheme of the imperial government in Constantinople, and the incessant eastern stress on the historical justification of the emperor's functions, was matched by a burgeoning mature papal ideology and incessant protestations of the papacy's biblically founded role.¹⁰ Indeed, even the kind of vocabulary employed by the papacy in its correspondence with the emperor is indicative of the Church's growing confidence. Gelasius's purpose was not only to assert the authority of the Church in all spiritual matters, but also to establish the principle that the civil power had no jurisdiction over ecclesiastical persons, at least in spiritual matters.¹¹ Whilst still the deacon of Pope Felix III, he wrote that the emperor is the son of the Church, and therefore:

“It is his business to learn what is the content of religion, not to teach it. He has received the privileges of his power in civil affairs from God, and so he should be thankful for benefits received, and not claim anything contrary to God's order. It is God's purpose that bishops should be responsible for the administration of the Church, not the secular powers; the latter, if they are Christian, according to His will ought to be subject to the Church and to the bishops.”¹²

⁸ J. Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought 300-1450*, p. 35

⁹ G. Barraclough, *The Medieval Papacy*, (London, 1968), pp. 9-10; 28-29)

¹⁰ W. Ullmann, *Medieval Political Thought*, p. 43

¹¹ R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Medieval Political Theory in the West*, vol. 1, p. 189

¹² Gel. *Epistle* 1

Above all, Gelasius's purpose was a concrete one: to discourage the Byzantine emperors from interfering in matters of ecclesiastical administration, and especially in disputes over questions of doctrine.¹³ It was with a view to reasserting the doctrinal primacy of Rome that Gelasius wrote his celebrated twelfth letter, known as *Famuli vestrae pietatis*. It was written in 494 to the Byzantine emperor Anastasius II and stated that:

“There are two orders, O August emperor, by which this world is principally ruled: the consecrated authority of the pontiffs, and royal power [*duo quippe sunt, imperator auguste, quibus principaliter mundus hic regitur, auctoritas sacrata pontificum et regalis potestas*]. But the burden laid upon the priests in this matter is the heavier, for it is they who are to render an account at the Divine judgment even for the kings of men. Know, O most clement Son, that although you take precedence over the human race in dignity, nonetheless you bend your neck in devout submission to those who preside over things Divine, and look to them for the means of your salvation. In partaking of the heavenly sacraments, when they are properly dispensed, you acknowledge that you ought to be subject to the order of religion rather than ruling it [*subti te debere cognoscis religionis ordine potius quam praeesse*]... For if the ministers of religion, acknowledging that your rule, insofar as it pertains to the keeping of public discipline, has been given to you by Divine disposition, obey your laws, lest they seem to obstruct the proper course of worldly affairs: with what good will, I pray, ought you to obey those who have been charged with the dispensation of the holy mysteries?”¹⁴

This passage was truly groundbreaking in the manner of its expression, without however, being anything less than a logical extension of existing papal governmental claims and being in harmony with the principles of previous Christian political writers. Gelasius believed that the Church and the civil powers have been entrusted with different orders; the governance of spiritual matters to the former and temporal matters to the latter. They each draw their authority from God, and are each divine and supreme within their own sphere and neither is permitted to claim authority over the other with respect to their specific function. Gelasius is conscious, however, that whilst the two spheres are distinct, they are nevertheless dependent upon each other,

¹³ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 86

¹⁴ Gel. *Epistles* 12:2.

and cannot avoid relations with each other. The bishop is subject to the king in temporal matters, and the king to the bishop in spiritual matters. Whilst the two powers exist in parallel and observe the limits assigned to them, they are not exclusive; the civil authority is not barred from any participation in ecclesiastical matters, assuming that this participation is conducted with the proviso that it takes place under the direction of the Church. What Gelasius propounds is a division of labour within what the emperor considered the Christian Roman empire, and the pope as the Roman Christian Church. Indeed, the papal and imperial standpoints proved irreconcilable because of the fundamentally different view that the pope and emperor took of the entity under their control.¹⁵

These definitions amount to a clear denial of Roman imperial priest-kingship and severely limit the Christian emperor's jurisdiction by claiming that bishops shared the rulership of the Roman world. Gelasius gave support to the pope's sovereignty in matters fundamentally touching the Christian complexion of society, and consequently the emperor's inferiority, his subjection to papal rulings in these matters.¹⁶ In his fourth Tractate (ca. 496), generally known as the 'Tome of Gelasius', he remonstrated against the imperial conflation of regal and sacerdotal power, maintaining that only Christ was both king and priest and that it was since Christ that the offices had been distinguished:

"They [i.e. the civil authorities] fear [*formidant*] to intervene [in religious matters], knowing that these matters do not belong to the measure of their power, which has been granted to them [*permissum est*] to judge human things and not to rule things Divine. How, then, can they presume [*praesumunt*] to judge those by whom Divine things are administered? Before the advent of Christ there actually existed – though in a prefigurative sense – men who were concurrently kings and priests; sacred history records that such a one was Saint Melchizedek; and the devil who always tyrannically arrogates to Himself what is proper to divine worship, has imitated, so that pagan emperors caused themselves to be called supreme pontiffs [*pontifex maximus*]. But when the One came who was truly King and Pontiff, then no emperor accepted the name of pontiff and no pontiff claimed the supreme dignity of King.... Christ, however, mindful of human frailty... separated the offices of the two powers [*officia utriusque potestatis*] according to the different functions and dignity proper

¹⁵ W. Ullmann, *Medieval Political Thought*, p. 41

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42

to each [*actionibus propriis dignitatibusque distinctis*], wishing that His people should be preserved by a healthy humility, and not again ensnared by human pride; so that Christian emperors should now have need of the pontiffs for their eternal life, and the pontiffs should make use of [*uterentur*] the resources of the imperial government for the direction of temporal things: to the end that spiritual activity might be removed from carnal distractions, and that the soldier of the Lord might not be at all entangled in secular business; and that one who is entangled in secular business might not be seen to preside over things Divine.”¹⁷

In order to furnish some kind of theological support for this separation, Gelasius had invented a myth; it is simply not true that the emperors, on becoming Christian, gave up the pagan title *pontifex maximus*, nor were ‘men who were concurrently kings and priests’ only tolerated before the coming of Christ. This passage is a more explicit representation and attempt at qualification of his schema of the two powers than he had previously written.

Although Gelasius regarded these two powers as distinct, they are not necessarily equal. It is often overlooked that the clergy, because they were in a position to define the content of religious matters, effectively had the power to determine the relative boundaries of both powers in a Christian society.¹⁸ The balance between the two powers is also undermined by the logic of his own argument in his twelfth letter. In affirming the separateness of the two powers, Gelasius lends himself to an affirmation of the superior status of the spiritual power. He believed that the burden of responsibility weighs more heavily upon the clergy than the temporal authorities, for they have to render account at the final judgment for the souls of men, and thus will have to say how the kings and emperors had discharged the trust which divinity had conferred on them. According to Dyson, ‘the notion of dualism is compromised as soon as it is spelt out [because] a genuine parity of division between the two powers is not consistent with the logic of the Christian faith as articulated by its most philosophically sophisticated exponents during the first five centuries. Within the terms of this logic, and the essentially Platonist metaphysic underlying it, spiritual power is not just distinct from secular or temporal power: it is in the nature of the case a higher *type* of power.’¹⁹ In this respect, Gelasius shows considerable indebtedness to

¹⁷ Gel. *Tractatus* 4:11.

¹⁸ J. Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought 300-1450*, p. 36

¹⁹ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 87

St. Augustine: it was he that had noted that the superiority of spiritual power is simply part of the natural order of things: while the temporal power dedicates itself to what is sordid and earthly and transient, the spiritual power dedicated itself to the eternal and necessary and sublime.²⁰ Augustine believed that Christians are bound to serve the Church according to their station; carnal matters are the proper province of kings, and the clergy alone are qualified by virtue of their vocation, to lay down the conditions for salvation. What is remarkable is that Gelasius goes further still and suggests that rulers as such are formally or juridically subordinate to the Church: 'In partaking of the heavenly sacraments, when they are properly dispensed, you acknowledge that you ought to be subject to the order of religion rather than ruling it.' Religious observance, he is suggesting, is an acknowledgement of subjection. As far as Gelasius is concerned it is no longer possible to do what Constantine and his successors had purported to do: to confess themselves subject to the Church spiritually, yet sovereign over it temporally.²¹

* * * *

Gelasius's dualism has for many years been the subject of much debate. The problem is that his words have readily lent themselves to different interpretation. Above all, it is significant that, in a letter to the emperor, he should have invoked the classical Roman distinction between *potestas* and *auctoritas*, 'the consecrated authority of the pontiffs, and royal power (*auctoritas sacrata pontificum, et regalis potestas*).' The exact meaning of the two words, and more importantly, the meaning that Gelasius invested in them, has been much disputed. In the 1930s, Erich Caspar, writing from the utterly secular viewpoint of *Machtgeschichte*, endeavoured at great length to distinguish between *auctoritas* and *potestas*. He regarded Gelasius as a political dualist who advocated the autonomy of two powers. Caspar based his argument on both pagan and Christian literary usage of the terms, and his philological approach held that *auctoritas* referred to the Church's particular province, and was merely a moral authority. On the other hand, *potestas* referred to the emperor's competence,

²⁰ *Ibid*

²¹ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 88

and implied a real sovereign power backed by effective force.²² The ethical prestige of the *auctoritas* was higher than that of *potestas*, but effective power lay with the *potestas*. Caspar's analysis was criticised by Stein, who argued that the two conceptions are not always strictly separated in Gelasius's writings.²³ He unconvincingly argued that the words were a stylistic device or synonyms and that his variation in terminology was simply a rhetorical device of no great significance, adopted to avoid an inelegant repetition.²⁴ It is important to note that Gelasius was not always consistent and, it has been claimed, showed no sign of intending a technically exact usage.²⁵ In his Tomus, he refers to both Church and state as *potestas utraque*.²⁶ According to Benson, he even went so far as to reverse the formulation referring to an imperial *auctoritas* and a pontifical *potestas*, and elsewhere referring to the neutrally to the 'two powers'. It would be wise to reason that he did not use the same terminology because he did not aim to create, and did not believe that he had created, a fixed constitutional language; his formulation had not yet become a formula.²⁷

In the 1950s, Walter Ullmann argued that the language of Roman law, *auctoritas* referred to legitimate sovereignty, an inherent right to rule, whereas *potestas* referred to a simple delegated executive power to carry out instructions on behalf of whoever enjoyed the sovereignty. On the basis of Ullmann's interpretation, the letter becomes an early statement of papal theocracy or hierocracy. Gelasius was implying the superior status of the papal *auctoritas*, for the emperor, who held mere royal *potestas* performed a purely auxiliary function.²⁸ Like his denial of priestly status to the emperor, his formulation reflected a tendency to secularise the concept of

²² E. Caspar, *Geschichte des Papsttums von den Anfängen bis zur Höhe der Weltherrschaft*, 2, (Tübingen, 1933), pp. 65 ff., 753 ff.

²³ E. Stein, "Review of Caspar", in *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 21, (1935)

²⁴ Ziegler and Markus have also pointed to inconsistencies in his use of the terms

²⁵ According to Dvornik, the interchange of the words shows that his conception had not yet matured sufficiently – this baton was taken on by his medieval followers. F. Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy: Origins and Background*, Vol. 2, p. 805

²⁶ Dvornik called this a dangerous attempt at equalising the two *potestates*; that the pope had claimed the *potestas* for the Church too. According to Jalland, Christian bishops had claimed at least since the days of Cyprian *potestas* (to bind and loose) as well as *auctoritas*, not only for the Church but also for themselves. T. G. Jalland, *The Church and the Papacy: a Historical Study*, p. 327

²⁷ R. L. Benson, "The Gelasian Doctrine: Uses and Transformations", in G. Makdisi et al (eds.), *La Notion d'Autorité au Moyen Age. Islam, Byzance, Occident*, (1982), pp. 15-16

²⁸ W. Ullmann, *Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages: a Study of the Ideological Relation of Clerical to Lay Power*, (London, 1955), pp. 20-8, and W. Ullmann, *Gelasius I. (492-496): das Papsttum an der Wende der Spätantike zum Mittelalter*, (Stuttgart, 1981), pp. 198-212

monarchy; it was an argument for a single monarchical seat of power to be held by the pope.²⁹ The connotations of the language that he used would have been familiar to both parties; he had invoked a distinction that was one of the central doctrines of the Republican constitution of Rome. In the days of the Republic, the concept of *auctoritas* was founded upon tradition; it was the highest kind of prestige which public life could confer, and was associated with seniority and with long and successful experience of public service. The individual who possessed *auctoritas* was able to achieve the good of the commonwealth and his own renown by initiating successful public policy: by being an *auctor publici consilii*. The major seat of *auctoritas*, its supreme institutionalisation, is the Roman Senate; though *auctoritas* was also embodied in the *collegia* of the Roman pagan clergy or later in the private capacity of the *Princeps*. The authority of these bodies came from the collective wisdom which they embodied; the function of the Senate in particular, was to deliberate on matters of public importance and to issue an authoritative decision, a *consilium*, for the magistrates to execute.³⁰ The magistrates, on the other hand, possessed *potestas* which sprang from the sovereignty of the Roman people who, during the Republican period, delegated it to the magistrates for the length of their tenure of their office. This *potestas* was the power to carry the decisions of the Senate into effect; to act rather than to deliberate. This power was later surrendered to the *Princeps* as to the first executor of the people's sovereignty and they held it as an *imperium*.³¹ This idea survived the transformation of the Republic into the empire, and making its appearance in Christian political discourse for the first time, it translated readily into the polite fiction that the emperor derived his executive power from the people. The emperor was seen as holding mere *potestas*, just as the republican magistrates had, and the pontiffs, the rulers or officials of the Church, were seen to hold the *auctoritas*. By the late fifth century then, we find the political language of Rome being skilfully appropriated by the Church and turned to her own purposes.³²

²⁹ R. L. Benson, "The Gelasian Doctrine: Uses and Transformations", in G. Makdisi et al (eds.), *La Notion d'Autorité au Moyen Age. Islam, Byzance, Occident*, p. 17

³⁰ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 89

³¹ Gmelin makes the point that the Roman *Princeps* not only exercised *auctoritas* as the first citizen, but as *dominus*, was vested also with the *potestas*. U. Gmelin, in "Auctoritas Römischer Princeps und Päpstlicher Primat", *Geistige Grundlagen Römischer Reichspolitik, Forschungen zur Kirchen und Geistesgeschichte*, 11, (Stuttgart, 1937), p.135ff.

³² R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 90

This interpretation is not without its detractors; some scholars have claimed that Ullmann has fallen foul of the mythology of prolepsis, namely the retrospective or teleological interpretation of a text according to what text came to mean at later times. In other words, it is more important for Ullmann that Gelasius's text came to serve as a foundation for the 'two swords' doctrine than whether Gelasius intended his letter to do so; he substitutes results for intentions, thereby attributing to historical documents characteristics that they never truly possessed.³³ According to Cottrell, rather than advancing a prescriptive statement of political theory, Gelasius merely intended to offer a descriptive statement of the informal relations between the two powers as they then existed in actual practice. He wished to unite, rather than to delimit the two powers; he wished to persuade the emperor to join him in combating heresy, rather than to enunciate a doctrine of political theory.³⁴ Cottrell's specious analysis ignores the driving factors that caused Gelasius to put pen to paper. To argue that his twelfth letter is merely a descriptive statement does not do justice to Gelasius. He would not have missed an opportunity to assert and to affirm the position of the Church. To think otherwise, would be to pay little regard to the history of the early Church and especially the political realities of the Acacian schism. This is not to assume that Ullmann's conclusion that Gelasius had claimed papal supremacy over imperial rule has found common acceptance³⁵ (it seems unlikely that this question will ever be resolved on merely philological grounds), rather, it would be wrong to think of it as anything other than as a pronouncement of political theory.

³³ A. Cottrell, "Auctoritas and Potestas: A Re-evaluation of Gelasius I on Papal-Imperial Relations", in *Medieval Studies*, Vol. 55, (1993), pp. 105ff

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 95ff

³⁵ Indeed, Dvornik argues that Gelasius never attributed to the Church any prerogative of the *imperium*, nor did his words imply that the secular power should be subordinate to the ecclesiastical: only as a man was the emperor subject to the auctoritas of the Church, which included the *potestas ligandi et solvendi*. F. Dvornik, "Pope Gelasius and Emperor Anastasius I", in *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 44, (1951), p. 113

POSTSCRIPT

There is an important distinction to make between the significance of Gelasius's words to his contemporary audience, and the significance that later adhered to them. His contemporaries did not regard his words as revolutionary; their significance arises from the way in which they were articulated and their consequent value to the protagonists of later political controversies. Indeed, his words, excised from their context, were taken to be the basis of the relationship between these two powers, and were to reappear again and again in political controversies throughout the Middle Ages, both in support of papal claims and to oppose them, both to defend royal autonomy and to assert papal superiority. It was his silence on the question of what were in practice the limits of each sphere that made his meaning so ambiguous, especially when borderline instances occasioned a clash between the two powers, and it was this very ambiguity that invited both papal and imperialist supporters to appeal to him with equal freedom.¹ This was something of a two-edged sword: secular monarchs appealed to his words, and to those of St. Paul at Romans 13:1ff, in support of the claim that they are directedly ordained by God, and therefore not accountable for their official acts to any superior on earth; popes also appealed to them in support of their claim to possess temporal as well as spiritual supremacy in earthly affairs; and, given the implicit logic of the argument, they did so more successfully and plausibly than kings could.²

It is also important not to exaggerate the immediate effect of Gelasius's ideas even in the West. In the sixth century the papacy appears to have retreated from his position in its dealings with the emperor who, it accepted, was in some sense king and priest.³ The attitude of Gelasius' successor Anastasius II (*pont.* 496-498) to the emperor was very deferent and he discarded much of Gelasian doctrine. Indeed, the

¹ S. Z. Ehler and J. B. Morrall, (eds.), *Church and State through the Centuries*, p. 8

² R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 87

³ J. Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought 300-1450*, p. 37

papal chancery seems to have forgotten about Gelasius's formulations for almost two-hundred and fifty years. From the ninth to the thirteenth century and beyond, however, his statements were central to any discussion of this subject. Even when quoted as a brief dictum without its accompanying argument his assertion emblematically represented a concept of *regnum* and *Sacerdotium*. Its meaning, however, changed radically as various writers quoted, misquoted, paraphrased, and discussed it; seen in these different contexts, the varying versions of the Gelasian formula serve as a kind of litmus paper, an indicator revealing the composition of the argument in which it was used.⁴ He provided ammunition for those who sought to radically expand the scope of what could be considered the due concern of spiritual jurisdiction in Christian society, and thus seriously limit the freedom of action of the secular ruler. Clearly Gelasius did not envisage that his words would come to be so significant, indeed, he sought primarily to protect the doctrinal independence of the Church. According to Jalland, he is one of those prodigies of history whose ideas were so far in advance of their time that not years but centuries were needed for their full appreciation. Such an assertion is far too bold and far too broad to remain unqualified. Gelasius had created the idea that the Church shares, as an equal and coordinate partner of the emperor, in the world's governance; in this respect he went beyond the claims of his predecessors like Hosius of Cordova, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine in their defences of the Church's *libertas*. This idea was an ingenious fiction in the late fifth century, and beginning in the ninth century, it was interpreted literally as an institutional reality.⁵ Indeed, by this time his name and his thoughts were held in high regard, and were frequently invoked to support the political ideas of the Frankish episcopate. Through Nicholas I (*pont.* 858-867), the first pope to seriously face the challenge of the Byzantine principate, through Gregory VII's (*pont.* 1073-1085) assertion of papal supremacy culminating in his prohibition of lay investiture (1075), and with the evolution of canon law, through Innocent III (*pont.* 1198-1216) under whom the temporal power of the papacy reached its height, and finally by way of the scholastic writers, we can trace the working out of these Gelasian ideas.⁶ By the twelfth century, his work became known by the appellation *Duo sunt*, an excerpt of which had found its way into the *Decretum* of Gratian, from

⁴ R. L. Benson, "The Gelasian Doctrine: Uses and Transformations", in G. Makdisi et al (eds.), *La Notion d'Autorité au Moyen Age. Islam, Byzance, Occident*, p. 13

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21

⁶ T. G. Jalland, *The Church and the Papacy: a Historical Study*, p. 329

which authoritative source, it was quoted innumerable times by political controversialists throughout medieval history.⁷

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What then, were the historical and intellectual origins of the Gelasian dualism? It is important to first stress that the intellectual origins of the dualism cannot be separated from the historical; they are not mutually exclusive, because changing circumstance and controversy frame the intellectual output of an age. Even religious text, which one might suppose is inviolable, has not only been subject to cogitation, but also to relativisation, politicisation and even modification (in terms of sense as well as content). The question that this thesis addresses is difficult to answer, because the origins of the dualism lie at the root of the Christian religion. Indeed, it is important to remember that the Christian religious manifesto, at its inception, represented the pretensions, hopes and aspirations of a largely world-effacing, marginalised and persecuted sect, and that this manifesto was translated into the ruling principles of a unified Christian society. Ultimately, the dualism represents the working out of some of its most fundamental suppositions of the Christian religion. This work is testament to the labours of those who attempted, through the course of the early Middle Ages, to relate these suppositions to the historical context within which the Church found itself. It is important not to overemphasise the importance of Gelasius's dualism *per se*, for the two powers principle of government was current in the minds of men in this age, and it embodied, in the broadest of terms, the intellectual consolidation of a process that began with the Christianisation of Rome. It was only when the Church had been embraced by the empire that it developed its own structure of governance, and men were given occasion to question the relationship between these hitherto alien powers. These questions became all the more pertinent in men's minds when conflict arose between Church and state, and some of the most important precedents were established under such conditions: that which was established under Ambrose and the emperor Theodosius being particularly important. The intellectual legacy that informs the dualism, however, surely belongs to St. Augustine; it was he, more than anyone else that provided the intellectual capital behind a dualistic theory of government, and

⁷ R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers*, p. 86

in so doing, rendered mute any attempt to develop an adequate theory of the relative dignity of Church and state. It was Augustine that paved the way for Gelasius's influential formulation.

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