

## The Church and State Struggle for Power

430 Through 1517 A.D.

A careful review of the period of history between roughly 430 A.D. and 1517 A.D. reveals that the Church and the State were wrestling with a problem that remains with us today. The issue was--who was to be in charge? The source of this conflict was intimately associated with the notion of power and how it was to be used to further either the Church's or the State's vision of the "good society." There was an important ebb and flow associated with this conflict which brings into focus the ongoing nature of the problem.

This essay will explore the nature of that struggle by examining at some length the historical phases and important personalities associated with this period of development, by discussing the condition of the Church at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and by drawing some conclusions about what I consider to be the benefits and detriments of this process to the Church. I will argue that this struggle can be best understood by analyzing three epochs of time in Church history where the ebb and flow was influenced by important ideas and personalities on both sides of the struggle. I will argue that the result of this struggle would affect the Church's condition at the beginning of the sixteenth century such that it would be very ripe for the coming Reformation period. And I will further argue that the struggle during this period of time obtained both good and bad consequences for the Church; and that on the whole, the credibility of the Church during this time was seriously compromised.

### Historical Analysis of the Ebb and Flow

The Church and State struggle for power during the period of 430-1517 A.D. can be analyzed in three phases or periods of time which I shall define as this essay develops. The first phase, 430-800 A.D., began in the chaos that occurred in the Roman Empire after the sack of

Rome in 410 A.D. by the barbarians. The important and influential personality in the Church during this time of transition was Augustine. Augustine's earlier view of the relationship of the Church to culture, that of the gospel transforming the culture, had evolved to a more pessimistic view and was expressed in his book, The City of God. Augustine's later view was that the City of God and the City of Man would be in perennial conflict and tension. History was God's story and it would be climaxed by the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of the City of God. Because of this the culture was under God's judgment and happiness and true peace would be found only in Him.

Despite this view the Church began to ascend in terms of influence and power during this period. The political leadership which had earlier moved with Constantine to Constantinople (formerly Byzantium), did not hinder the rise of the influence of the Church in Rome. The Church, which had grown and developed along the lines of the Empire, now provided the important infrastructure for the fragmented Empire in the fifth century. The monasteries which had begun as a reaction to the entry of worldliness into the Church under Constantine, provided a beacon of civilized light and learning during this period.

The process whereby the locus of spiritual power in the materially crumbling Empire consolidated to Rome was partially due to three things: numerous church councils, the size and wealth of the Church in Rome, and strong papal leadership. The Church councils which convened to settle doctrinal issues were dominated by the larger and wealthier provincial bishops of which eventually Rome became most prominent. Bishop Leo (441-460), who sincerely believed himself to be the successor to Peter, assumed the title of Pontifex Maximus and thus the high priest of religion throughout the Empire. He began to lay a foundation for priestly power above kingly power by taking the position that in civil affairs the clergy were to submit to the

Emperor, but that in ecclesiastical affairs, the Emperor was to submit to the Pope. Pope Gregory I, who later followed as Pope in the sixth century, began to use the papacy as an overt political instrument. Though he personally expressed a reticence to use power, he nonetheless employed it to feed the populace, make peace with the Lombards, and thereby, fill the gap of the collapsed Imperial administration. Importantly Gregory had a missiological perspective in that he realized that the future of the church lay with Northern Europe and he began to actively set out to evangelize the barbarians.

During this period great strides were made in converting the barbarians en masse. Figures such as Patrick in Ireland and Augustine of Canterbury were important in converting Ireland and England respectively. Boniface (680-754 A.D.) was a key figure in that he evangelized much of contemporary Germany and then organized it into dioceses under the jurisdiction of Rome. Importantly, in terms of the thesis of this essay, in 751 A.D. Boniface crowned Pepin as King of the Franks. This is an important indicator of the power of the Roman Church because it demonstrates the Church's preeminence over the State, the main characteristic of Phase I. This marks the high point of the Church's influence during Phase I and also the beginning of its decline.

The second phase (800-1122) is characterized in the beginning by a desire across Europe for stability, unity, order, and missionary activity. Western and Northern Europe had been effectively evangelized by the Roman Church during the last phase, bringing the barbarian tribes into the fold. However, the effectiveness of the barbarian conversions is to be contrasted with the lack of success in the Church's discipleship of the barbarians. Their tendency to violence and the exertion of raw power would come back to plague the Church in the future during the Crusades and periods of internal inquisition.

Charlemagne (768-814) played an important role in this period--he was to become the prototype of a Christian king and the architect of "Christendom." Charlemagne, the descendent of Charles Martel (who defeated the Muslims in France) and eldest son of Pepin the Short, was crowned King by Pope Leo on Christmas day, 800. He consolidated a great deal of Europe through numerous battles with the Saxons and Lombards and he wanted to revitalize the spiritual and intellectual life of Western Europe. Charlemagne introduced what would later be called the "Carolinian Renaissance" by bringing together the best scholars and providing an opportunity for their gifts to blossom.

Charlemagne administered his kingdom through new laws and, most likely as a result of his father's influence, commanded royal authority over the Church; he considered himself directly accountable to God for those entrusted to him. Following his death, however, the simmering struggle for power between the Church and State continued on with the Holy Roman Empire dominating. An important development during this period was the practice of simony--the buying or selling of Holy Orders or church offices--which increased the corruption within the Church. This practice had gone on occasionally since the fifth century, but during the ninth and tenth centuries in Europe, it became the norm.

Reacting to this corrupting development within the Church, a movement began to promote church independence and expanded throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries. There was a revival within the ancient Benedictine order to free itself from secular rule, abolish simony, and follow the Benedictine Rule. This signaled a coming change in the struggle for power which manifested itself most acutely under Pope Gregory VII and his struggle over lay investiture. Gregory's goal was to free the Church from State control. He, too, wanted internal reform for the Church and thus enforced clerical morality (celibacy) by removing all married

clergy. When Gregory deposed some German bishops who had been "invested" by Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV, Henry took offense. Gregory returned the favor by excommunicating Henry in 1076. Henry submitted at Canosa, Italy, in 1077 by performing penitence--standing in rags in the snow for three days! On a more official note, this process was benchmarked by the Concordat of Worms in 1122 with an agreement that the Church would "invest" a person with office and the clergy were to submit to the State in civil affairs. Phase II was characterized by an initial decline of power for the Church and an increase in the State's power. In the later part of this phase, the Church began to reassert its prominence.

The third phase (1122-1517) is characterized by conflicting developments. On the one hand, there was the increase of papal power through the three modalities: the series of Holy Land Crusades, the rise of scholasticism, and canon law. On the other hand, we see the State's power increase through the rise of strong nationalistic monarchies and the Church's influence decrease due to rising movements of dissension and heresy. Activities in this phase set the stage for major changes in the sixteenth century.

Moslem interference with Christian pilgrimages in 1071 began to frustrate the growing religious fervor of the common people. The warlike mentality which the nobility inherited from their barbarian past, coupled with the opportunity to climb the social-economic ladder, were seized upon by the papacy to unify Christians under papal control. What followed was a series of four Crusades (and an additional "children's crusade") through the beginning of the thirteenth century which accomplished the papacy's goal of uniting Christians under the Pope, but which left Islam unchecked and the Holy Land unwon.

The development of scholasticism was an attempt by the scholars of the middle ages to reconsider all Christian doctrine by placing greater stress on human reason and to codify all

Church teaching into an orderly system of law. It was a serious attempt to Christianize society under the watchful eye of the papacy. The goal was to use education to support papal dominance. As the Cathedral schools evolved into guilds and rudimentary universities, the desire to legislate every aspect of Christianity blossomed into what was called Canon Law. Canon Law defined the rights, duties, and powers of people within the church in minute detail. Its comprehensiveness in effect gave the Church the rational and legal basis to oversee all of life in European society! The result is that at the beginning of the thirteenth century the Church was in a position of predominance in Western culture.

On the other hand, the rising national sovereignties of France and England would eventually strengthen the hand of the State in the struggle. People began to think of themselves as "French" Christians or "English" Christians. This made it more acceptable when their monarchs claimed sovereignty over Boniface VIII.

Also, during this time, heretical and dissenting movements began to develop. The gnostic-like Albigensians were clearly misguided while others like the Waldenses reflected a healthy desire to return to Biblical teachings. The response of the Church was to try to convert the heretics and preserve society (the state and church intertwined) first by preaching and then by force if necessary. The result was an internal crusade and inquisition. While less than ten percent were actually executed, these actions significantly point to the abuse of power and wealth by the Church.

In summary, the struggle for power between the Church and State over this period of more than a thousand years yields mixed results. In the first phase (430-800) the Church gained power in the aftermath of the Empire's collapse. This power reached its zenith when Boniface crowned Pepin King of the Franks. The second phase (800-1122) saw a reversal of fortune for

the Church shortly thereafter when Charlemagne designed Christendom with himself as preeminent over the authority of the Church. Following Charlemagne's death, the struggle continued during this period with the State dominating the Church until Henry IV submitted to Gregory VII in 1077. The third phase (1122-1517) sees the Church ascending in power through its skillful manipulation of Crusades to unify Christians under the Pope and the efforts of scholasticism to legislate the church's power over every aspect of European life. The rise of monarchies in Europe and heretical and dissenting movements within the Church late in this period worked against Church dominance at the end. When the Church panicked and suppressed the dissent through inquisition, it overreacted and resisted reform; its burgeoning corruption and intransigence prepared the way for revolutionary change in the sixteenth century.

#### Conditions of the Church by 1500

The condition of the Church in 1500 was characterized by widespread corruption of the leadership creating a deepening desire for reform and change coming from the grass root's populace and a growing sense of independence by the European monarchies. The perception of corruption had a cumulative affect. The earlier so-called Babylonian captivity (1309-1377), followed by the Great Schism (1378-1409) which produced 3 popes ruling at the same time, were indicative of things getting out of control. Another example of continued widespread corruption was the Renaissance papacy (1447-1521) with its expressions of hedonism and worldliness. All this contributed to the sense that the Church could not handle wealth and power without becoming corrupt.

The rise of European monarchies and nationalistic feelings, plus the domination of the papacy by France during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, combined to create a broader desire to withdraw from a corrupt and controlling papal power. Despite failed attempts at reform

by important figures like John Wycliffe (1325-1384) and John Hus (1371-1415), the desire for reform persisted. Wycliffe and Hus scattered important intellectual and spiritual seeds which eventually took root.

In summary, the Church's condition by 1500 was characterized by corruption of the clerical leadership, a desire for withdrawal from papal power by rising monarchies in Western Europe, and by a grass roots movement to reform and dissent from within the Church. In short, it was a very ripe time for a charismatic and independent leader like Martin Luther to come forward and articulate his 95 theses against the Church.

### Interpretation and Evaluation

In this section, I will suggest an interpretation of the conflict between the Church and State for power and list some of my own conclusions about the benefits and detriments to the Church in this struggle. In a previous paper reviewing the status of the Church in the first 400 years of its existence, I asserted that the Church, in whatever its relation to culture, needed and could look to great leadership to help mitigate, but not eliminate, deleterious effects. But this period in the history of the Church unfortunately creates for me a greater pessimism. The opportunity for a golden age of Christianity during this period of more than a thousand years was there, but was not fulfilled. Power and wealth are remarkably seductive and one can hardly escape the conclusion that the Church repeatedly gave in to those temptations. Only God knows if the Church will ever have another chance to exert such power again before He returns.

What are some of the benefits to the church as a result of this struggle? There was the preserving of classical education and literature in the monasteries. There was a shift in monastic perspective from cloistered ascetic living early in this period to the later perspective of getting out, serving, and engaging the culture. Individuals involved in the counter-cultural movements



had the potential to gain heroic character in following their convictions to martyrdom--some fulfilled that opportunity such as John Hus. In an ironic way, the faults of the Church prepared the way to shape and focus the radical insights of the reformers yet to come.

There were detrimental consequences that occurred. The Church's predisposition to use force and violence cannot be considered praise-worthy. It is discouraging to realize that during the time of the wholesale corruption of the clergy, no one was raised up within Church leadership to reform it early on. The wealth and power which accrued to the Church opened the door for massive corruption. Certainly it is reasonable to question whether the institution of the Church (or for that matter any institution) can handle the temptations that come with cultural dominance. Another profound detriment to the Church was the development of doctrines and traditions which caused it to drift over time and in crucial aspects away from the means of salvation--faith in Christ Jesus. All this seriously compromised the Church's credibility

Other consequences are more difficult to characterize. The Crusades, perhaps, resulted in an increase in available knowledge, but on the whole their effect seems detrimental. The efforts of scholastic scholarship and canon law, although in some cases sincerely motivated, ended up merely being a tool of manipulation by the papacy. The universities that evolved from this period have been a mixed blessing. They were a blessing in the sense that they have provided the institutionalization of reflective thought; and they were a curse in that they have become a dominate and influential cultural authority in our age which is predominately hostile to Christianity.

### Summary and Conclusion

A survey of the Church's struggle for power with the State in this period reveals numerous ebbs and flows. One conclusion that can be drawn is that a strong case can be made

that the Church simply did not bear the mantle of cultural dominance well. Attempts to reform the Church during this period were not particularly encouraging either. My final conclusion bears resemblance to that of Augustine when contemplating the fate of Roman civilization. Our hope is not in the present City of Man but rather in a future Christ-led City of God.