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The Divine Monarch

Abstract

This paper is on the divinity of Monarchs in the middle ages, specifically the relationship monarchs had with the church, and how these monarchs utilized their 'divine' power. The examples used are those of Clovis the first king of the Franks, Charlemagne the first Holy Roman Emperor, the institution of the Papacy, and King Henry VIII king of England and founder of the Church of England. These examples are put under the scope of Ninian Smart's Dimensions of religion in order to highlight the various divine aspects of medieval kingship. It was found that through this relationship Monarchs and the church have taken different stances and have reacted to one another differently depending on the time period and circumstances. In most cases this relationship was about gaining power, both for the church and the monarch, and at times at the expense of the opposite party.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the role of the monarch has been intertwined with a divine essence. One could describe this phenomenon as the two bodies of the monarch, the spiritual and the secular. The question though, is in what way has religion been used as a means to gain and legitimize the rule of monarchs in the Medieval period? And what exactly was the relationship between church and monarch? These questions are not limited to just traditional monarchs, as it will become apparent the Papacy would utilize the divine as a means to legitimize more power than just spiritual the realm of the holy and religious.

A possible answer for this question can be found by examining various uses of divinity by monarchs through the lens of Ninian Smart and his dimensions of religion, which he discusses in his book *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*. Specifically the dimensions of ritual, myth, social/institutional, doctrine, and ethical/legal will be examined.

Through using Smart's dimensions as well as primary source accounts such as Gregory of Tours *History of the Franks*, as well as Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* and a variety of other primary and secondary sources; it will be shown that over the course of the Middle Ages the relationship

between monarch and church was ever changing this relationship varied with each of the monarchs that will be examined. This constantly changing relationship shifted the balance of power from one side to another, and allowed monarchs to use religious power to legitimize their reign. At times this is done by exploiting religion for personal gain, to use it as a tool of control, while other times it was not; but in the end whether intentional or not the ruler gains power from religion, more so than they would do without it.

The dimension of myth is one of the most important dimensions when discussing the divinity of rulers. For many rulers, their lives become ones shrouded in myth and legend, and through the mythologizing of past rulers; contemporary monarchs could validate their own divinity and legitimacy. Of course one of the most influential examples of kingship for the monarchs of the Middle Ages were the biblical kings David and Solomon, as well as Roman emperors and other kings from the early Middle Ages. The first king to be examined is the founder of the Merovingian dynasty, Clovis I. Clovis was the first king to unite all of the Frankish tribes, and in doing so he laid down the groundwork for the country now known as France. He lived from 466-511 CE and reigned as a king from the years 481-511 CE. Clovis was not only the first King of the Franks, but he was also the first Catholic Frankish king. This is worth noting because most Christians in Western Europe at the time were followers of Arian Christianity, which is considered a heretical school of belief according to the Catholics. The Arian doctrine stemmed from Arius a priest in Alexandria in 323 CE who did not accept the idea of the trinity being unified as one being known as God, "If...Christ was the Son of God, He must be younger than God, and therefore lesser than God." (Davis 20). By this logic Arius deduced that the Father and the Son could not be the same entity, therefore rejecting the idea of a holy trinity. This fundamental difference of doctrine caused uproar in Christian Rome, and from

Alexandria it spread to the Germanic tribes in Europe. This detail is very important because it prevented other western European rulers during this time from having a favorable relationship with Roman populations (Davis 118-119).

Clovis was not always a Christian king; he was originally pagan and later converted during his reign around the year 496 CE. Gregory of Tours famously retells the reason for this conversion in his *History of the Franks*. Gregory describes how Clovis was on the battlefield and while his army was losing the battle, he decided, in a last attempt to find victory, to ask the Christian God his wife worshipped for victory in battle. Supposedly, immediately after Clovis prayed for this request, his enemies began to flee the battlefield, and in exchange for victory Clovis pledged to be baptized in the Catholic church, and to spread the Catholic belief to his subjects (Tours 2.30) This mythologized account of the conversion of Clovis sets the Catholic backdrop of the future of the Frankish people, who would later become the French. This account displays the origins of Catholicism amongst the Frankish kings as well as the Frankish people, and according to Smart a myth is just that. Myths according to Smart are a narrative, one that tells the story of a religion, but in this case it tells not only the story of a religion in a sense, but also the story of a kingdom. Smart even says “But the realm of myth can also be said to extend to secular history where it is used in service of a worldview such as nationalism.” (Smart 9) This myth presented by Gregory of Tours creates the idea of a god sanctioned Frankish king, one who is able to overcome odds due to his spiritual closeness to God. The intervention of God in the battle Clovis was losing is the point where Gregory makes clear that Clovis was able to unite all the Franks not only because he was strong, but also because God willed it, and God legitimized his rule. This of course would then be the same reason the issue of Clovis, and future generations of Merovingians would use to legitimize their reign.

Ritual is another dimension of Ninian Smart, which holds great significance to Medieval Monarchs. This dimension is very important in regards to the relationship between church and monarch as well as the power that comes with it, so it will be broken up into several sub-sections. Throughout a regular Catholic's life in the Middle Ages rituals were abundant from day to day. One had to attend mass, confession, partake in the Eucharist, be baptized, confirmed, get married, observe lent, and participate in the rituals for feast days. All of these rituals are normal for any Catholic in the middle ages, never mind just a monarch. A monarch had to partake in all of these as well as the rituals that were specific to the monarch themselves. Several of these rituals are the coronation of a monarch, the healing ability of a monarch, and the death of a monarch. Each of these rituals, especially the first two mentioned, help the monarch establish their power through a religious sense.

It must be clarified that these rituals did not imbue the monarch with an ultimate form of religious power. "The flow of grace could be channeled through the king's person on the day of his coronation rites, under specific circumstances controlled by the church." (Boureau 29)¹ Here we see that despite the divine power gained by the king through coronation, there were limitations put in place by the church. "The temporary status of deacon that the liturgy of the coronation rites conferred on the new king, sometimes cited as a proof of the sacrality of Christian kings, actually demonstrates its strict limits." (Boureau 29) This shows that there were safeguards to how much power the monarch had in the actual affairs of the church, but the point that the monarch did gain some sort of divine power is still apparent. The practice of coronations and anointments were in fact a product of the Carolingian dynasty (Nelson 99) and the coronation of Charlemagne as Emperor was recorded in several different accounts. One of these

¹ From *Mystifying the Monarch*

said accounts, known as the Royal Annals, states “On that very and most holy day of Christmas, when the king, at Mass...Leo the pope put a crown on his head, and acclamation was made ... ‘To Charles Augustus, crowned by God, great and pacific emperor of the Romans, Life and Victory!’” (Davis 155) Here it can be seen that just like how Clovis became legitimized through his mythic victory, Charlemagne was legitimized by his coronation done by the Pope. Here the Pope even supposedly states that Charlemagne was “crowned by God” which further adds a sense of divine legitimacy to his rule. This act of having a Pope, or in other cases an Archbishop; crown a monarch becomes an integral part of the Coronation ritual. It is also worth noting that this event was a monumental moment for the Pope. This juncture gave the Pope the ability to crown an Emperor, and thus cut one of the final ties the pope had to the Byzantine Empire, which was created out of the old Roman Empire. As mentioned in the above quote part of the reason for this was to limit the amount of divine power that the monarch could receive, but it also provides a sense of divine legitimacy because an actual representative of the church must partake in the ritual of coronation. Another aspect of Charlemagne’s coronation as Emperor that is worth noting is the mythological aspect associated with it. Despite it being an honor and accomplishment to be crowned Emperor, apparently Charlemagne did not want to be Emperor. Einhard says in his *Life of Charlemagne*, “At first he was far from wanting this. He made it clear he would not have entered the cathedral that day at all... had he known in advance what the Pope was planning to do.” (Einhard sec 28) this segment fits into the modest nature that Charlemagne was famous for, and it is mentioned many times in the accounts, myths and stories about him.

There is still a question that remains about a coronation, and that is what part exactly during a coronation imbues the monarch with a divine power? The answer is the segment of the coronation known as the anointment, “Through the ritual application of the holy oil, it was

claimed, the king's body became holy, like that of a priest." (Monod 39) The application of these oils is almost like a new form of baptism; they change the spiritual make-up of the monarch, thus giving them divine power. This fusion of both the secular and spiritual is a tradition that dates back to the ancient world, and most likely has its roots in the tradition of the Roman Emperors in which the Emperor was the head of both the church and state (Monod 39). Although the spiritual aspect is nowhere near as prevalent as it was in ancient Rome, it shows that the ritual of fusing both the spiritual and secular dates back to beyond the medieval period.

Medieval monarchs, especially in England and France, also practiced a ritual, which utilized the divine power bestowed upon them through anointment, and that power was healing. This was a curious ritualistic act, which the English and French monarchs practiced, it involved healing a very specific disease called scrofula, a disease that swelled up lymph nodes in the neck "The malady treated by French and English monarchs...was known...as struma(s), scrofula(s), or glands, and, more popularly, as the King's Evil." (Barlow 3-4). It was believed that the monarch's touch cured the disease, or a token touched by them would cure it as well. This ritual could be seen as a means to legitimize not only the divine power in a monarch, but also to reinforce a sense of dependence on the lower classes towards their ruler. It added another quality that made the monarch superior to the subject. It has been speculated that the origin for this practice, at least in England, dates back to Edward the Confessor the saint king (reign 1042-1066). "...thought to have had general curative powers, and the patients mentioned are...the blind and a woman suffering from diseased glands, a complaint which at least in France would have been called scrofulas." (Barlow 17) here it is shown that as early as the beginning of the 11th century the use of ritualistic healing was used by monarchs, and since the cult of Edward the Confessor was prevalent amongst future English monarchs, it is probable that many after

performed this healing rite as a means of emulating the Saint King.

For Edward it seems natural that he would have a holy gift, and it was generally accepted by the church that he was able to perform healing rituals, on account of his ascension to sainthood. On the other hand some church officials regarded the mystical powers of the monarch as false and took an ill disposition towards it. This point can be illustrated by a remark made by an English monk by the name of William of Malmesbury. William is quoted saying “and so today some men set out to deceive by asserting that the power to cure that sort of disease is not the product of Holiness, but an hereditary royal prerogative” (Barlow 17)² This quote reflects a strong point that the church had begun to adopt in regards to the ‘holiness’ of kings. Here specifically William is remarking that the holy power displayed by certain kings is the result of a holy nature, such as that of a Saint, like Edward the Confessor, not through hereditary means, which many kings used as a claim to their ability to heal, along with their anointment. Another man of the cloth, Hincmar Archbishop of Rheims said in 861 ““no man since the coming of Christ could be both king and priest. He was led, accordingly, to assert the authority of bishops, not simply over the king as individual Christian believer, but over the way in which he was discharging his royal office.” (Oakley 109) This demonstrates another important point believed by the church, that for a king to consider himself both a spiritual leader as well as a secular one in a sense is heretical, because the only true priestly king was Christ. This quote further illustrates the point that kings cannot be spiritual leaders, and that even their royal actions as king should be open to dictation by the church.

For the church a holy king was useful for spreading the word of the catholic faith, as well as defending the church and its lands from invaders. Charlemagne and his ancestors are great

² See footnote 4 on page 17 for source information on quote.

examples of this. From Charles Martel, to Pepin the Short to Charlemagne, all three generations not only protected Christendom, but also extended it. They each held off Muslim invaders from the Iberian Peninsula, and Pepin as well as Charlemagne protected the pope back in Italy by driving off his enemies. During the time of Pepin the Short, he fought off the Lombards in Italy, and gave the freed lands to their proper 'owner' the Pope. This act of course made the Pope and church significantly more powerful, and as thanks for defending the pope and his interests, the pope crowned Pepin the new King of the Franks making him the first Carolingian king (Davis 142). Through the gift of land given by Pepin, it is arguable that the Pope himself became a divine ruler. Throughout the Middle Ages the pope controlled a space of land in Italy known as the Papal estates. This land he controlled belonged to the Church, and therefore it belonged to the Pope. The pope then became more than a spiritual leader, he in fact became a secular leader as well. These 'legitimate' claims of land were backed by a forged document known as the Donation of Constantine. This document "...alleged that the Emperor Constantine had recognized the Pope as Christ's vicar on earth...he had bestowed on the Pope the rank and ceremonial dress of an emperor...together with the government of Rome and Italy." (Davis 142) This document was a crucial part of the Roman Catholic Church when it came to legitimizing the rule of the Pope as a secular leader; it was not until many years later (1440) it was discovered as a forgery. The secular image of the pope grew as well as the medieval period progressed. In the year 1298 a chronicler wrote this account from the life of Pope Boniface VIII: "Sitting on a throne... his right hand on the hilt of the sword ... he [the pope] cried out: "Am I not the Supreme pontiff? Is this throne not the pulpit of Peter? Is it not my duty to watch over the rights of the Empire? It is I who am Caesar, it is I who am emperor" (Oakley 116). This image is more of that of a tyrannical king rather than a holy leader. The image of a throne and sword as well as

a crown invokes an image of King rather than Pope, especially the sword. The sword has always been a symbol of the secular authority of the king, as a symbol of protection; for a pope to be wearing one while claiming to be the heir to the Roman tradition truly demonstrates how, in regards to the papacy, in some ways the lines between king and pope became blurred. The strength of the Pope only grew as Charlemagne succeeded the Carolingian line. As mentioned earlier, the Pope granted himself the ability to appoint a Holy Roman Emperor by giving the title to Charlemagne, and helped solidify his break from the church in Byzantium. This combined with the previous quote and the forged document the Donation of Constantine, demonstrate how the Papacy was in many ways attempting to become the actual successors to the Roman Empire, at least in Western Europe. Through spiritual control the Papacy throughout the Middle Ages maintained a strong form of control over all of Western Europe, at least until the protestant reformation.

In England King Henry VIII took a step farther than any other monarchs in the Middle Ages, he completely broke away from the Papacy and established himself as supreme head of the Church of England. Henry decided to split with the Catholic Church after the pope would not annul his marriage with queen Catherine. Besides this one discrepancy it seemed like the Catholic Church and England were on decent terms. “English monarchs already exercised close control over church appointments within their kingdom... They already received the lion’s share of papal taxation collected in England” (Coffin 486). Here we can see that England had a good relationship with the Catholic faith and was not under the same distress as other emerging protestant nations. Henry VIII had even been given the title Defender of the Faith, through his defense of the seven sacraments against Lutheran Doctrine (Sharpe 103)³. It was not until this

³ This is taken from *Mystifying the Monarch*.

schism on the validity of Henry's marriage that Henry decided to take matters into his own hands. Here it can be seen that the monarch, in this case Henry, has become the embodiment of several of Ninian Smart's dimensions. He demonstrates the doctrinal, the ethical/legal, the ritual, and the social/institutional dimensions that Smart presents. Through becoming the head of the Church of England, Henry became master of the church's doctrine, its ethical and legal aspects, the manner in which it conducted its rituals, and the social/ institutional aspects of the church. He maintained strict control over the institution of the Church itself; through his various decrees including the Six Articles he wrote. In these articles, Henry established core ethical values as well as the ritual and doctrinal aspects of the Church of England. These Six Articles, which were written in 1539 "reasserted a set of traditional Catholic Doctrines..." (Coffin 487) Here we can see although the king was head of this church he did not want to stray far from the church the English had previously been part of. In fact of all the protestant faiths the Church of England and its future offshoots retained more Catholic elements than any other sect. When England finally did split from the Papacy it was declared "the King's highness to be Supreme Head of the Church of England [having] the authority to redress all errors, heresies and abuses." (Coffin 487-488) here it can be further seen that Henry's power encompassed many of the dimensions put forth by Smart, and made his power and rule absolute. Now not only was Henry the ruler of the secular, but now he ruled the spiritual as well, he had gained ultimate authority over his kingdom, and reached a new apex of Divine power that was unknown to previous monarchs.

The Medieval monarch utilized the spiritual and divine in many ways. At times they were champions of the church like Charlemagne, while in the case of others the use of Divine power was frowned upon and seen as quasi-heretical by some clergymen, and in a select few cases like that of Henry VIII the monarch completely broke away from the papacy and became the head of

their nation's Church. In a varied manner of ways the monarch has utilized the power of the Divine, Some used it as a means to further their own goals such as Henry VII, others turned to it in desperation and in search for power like Clovis, while others were Spiritual leaders like the Pope who at times craved secular power and saw themselves as successors to the Roman Empire. This fluctuating relationship between monarch and church was key to the molding of medieval society, as well as an essential aspect of the historical, social, spiritual and political evolution of Europe. Although the time of Divine Monarchs and Emperors has passed, the legacies of these Christian rulers still live on, and in the words of the English after the death of a king, The King is dead, long live the king.

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