Section III: The Medieval Church

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7. The Two Swords in Theory and Practice

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Contemporary Civilization, Christianity, Church, God, Faith, Religious Society, Christian Society, Middle Ages, Church and State

**Abstract**
The claims to universality advanced by the medieval Church brought it into close relationship with an ancient human institution: the state. Especially after the fourth century, when it was first recognized and then given status as the only legal religious body, it was necessary for the Church to formulate a set of political principles, comparable to those for economic activity, which could then be applied to the many and continuing relations between church and state. The general outline of these principles was completed by 500 and was transmitted to the Middle Ages. [excerpt]

**Comments**
This is a part of Section III: The Medieval Church. The Contemporary Civilization page lists all additional sections of Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, as well as the Table of Contents for both volumes.

**More About Contemporary Civilization:**
From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of “introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages.”

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems. A second edition, retitled Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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7. The Two Swords in Theory and Practice

The claims to universality advanced by the medieval Church brought it into close relationship with an ancient human institution: the state. Especially after the fourth century, when it was first recognized and then given status as the only legal religious body, it was necessary for the Church to formulate a set of political principles, comparable to those for economic activity, which could then be applied to the many and continuing relations between church and state. The general outline of these principles was completed by 500 and was transmitted to the Middle Ages.

Medieval thinkers held that Christian society was one, embracing all men. To satisfy human needs God had decreed that this society should be ruled by two governments, which derived not only their reason for being but also their power from Him. The spiritual government, the sacerdotium, was entrusted to the Church and the temporal, the imperium or regnum, to the state. There were at least four important corollaries which could be drawn from the foregoing statements. (1) Both church and state were sanctified by God as instruments of His will. The powers, responsibilities, and limitations of each would have to be defined with this fact in mind. (2) The areas in which church and state operated in this universal society were distinguishable, but not really separate. Conflicts, should they arise, would resemble a family quarrel rather than a fight between strangers. (3) An attitude of helpfulness had to prevail between church and state. Although each had its own functions to perform, in times of emergency each was expected to come to the assistance of the other. (4) Finally, because souls were considered more important than bodies, the Church was held to be more important than the state. Ordinarily, this corollary might make little practical difference in the operations of either institution, but in a crisis it would give the Church precedence in all things.

These principles were expressed in a form which was the common property of early medieval thinkers by Pope Gelasius I (492-496). It was called the theory of the two swords on the basis of an incident recorded in Luke 22:38, when Jesus replied to the disciples who had two swords with them: "It is enough." Gelasius was writing to the Eastern Roman emperor, Anastasius I (491-518), to whom he looked as his temporal sovereign.

Indeed, august emperor, there are two [things] by which the world is principally ruled: the sacred authority of the bishops and the royal power. In respect to these the burden of the priests is the heavier because they will render account at the Last Judgment even for the kings of men themselves. For you know, most gentle son, in respect to what you are granted authority to rule over the human race; however, like a faithful follower, you yield to the leaders
of divine things, and from them you look for the causes of your salvation. And in taking the heavenly sacraments and in arranging those things as is fitting, you know that you ought to be made subject to the order of religion rather than to rule over them. Therefore, among those things you ought to be dependent upon their judgment and ought not to wish that they be reduced to your will. For if the leaders of religion themselves, because they know that the command has been bestowed on you through the arrangement of God, also obey your laws in all that pertains to the order of public obedience, so that you do not meet a barrier in your mundane plans, why, I ask you, is it not proper to obey with kindly feeling those who have been assigned to administer the venerable mysteries? *

During the five centuries between the papacy of Gelasius I and the end of the Dark Ages, generally unsettled conditions prevailed in western Europe. In the first section of this chapter, we saw how the Church often exercised functions which, both before and since, have been regarded as temporal. At the same time, we saw how secular rulers often gained a commanding position in the Church, which they could use for good or ill. For example, Charlemagne during his long reign (768-814) dominated the Church in his realm and interfered, often personally, in matters of doctrine and polity, for what he believed were the best interests of Christendom. After his death and with the spread of feudalism, ecclesiastical and lay magnates were the center of power in church and state. Monarchy, both papal and feudal, was weak. The Cluniac revival of the papacy which began in the eleventh century provided the Church, under papal leadership, with a hitherto unequalled opportunity to make the concept of a Christian society a reality. Almost contemporaneously with this development began a political revival as feudal monarchs took advantage of equally new opportunities to wrest powers away from the feudal nobility.

This simultaneous rise of papal and royal power led, in the High Middle Ages, to what were essentially a new church and a number of new states and to frequent conflict between them. Basically these contests developed from the fact that during the Dark Ages both institutions had entered into the wide and ill-defined (perhaps indefinable) areas in which, theoretically, their helpfulness could be extended to each other. The papacy resented the control which temporal authorities were exercising over the Church and the secularization which that control usually involved. The kings resented the special position which the Church and its clergy enjoyed in their domains. Church property, always an important aggregation of wealth in a medieval state, was exempt from royal taxation without the Church's consent. The same privilege applied to clergymen who were, in addition,

exempt from the jurisdiction of royal courts. Especially when the papal revenue system approached its zenith, it was most irksome to a monarch to see large sums of money from a source which he could not touch being drained off to the papal monarchy, while he had great difficulty in getting the funds which he needed.

The first important phase of the conflict between church and state broke out in 1075, when Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) denounced the prevailing practice by which bishops and abbots were inducted into office. They received the symbols of their spiritual and temporal power from royal officials. Lay investiture, as this practice was called, was a symbol of that dependence of the spiritual power upon the temporal which was epitomized by the predominant voice of lay lords in the choice of bishops and abbots. Gregory probably chose to strike at this symbol as the first step in eliminating what he regarded as the substantive evil: secular influence in the Church.

The investiture controversy involved England, France, and the Holy Roman Empire. Gregory directed most of his attention to the empire. Perhaps he believed that here the secularization of the Church had proceeded furthest. Perhaps he felt that the empire, whose rulers the popes usually crowned and whose lands surrounded the Papal States, was a special case which merited his closest care. In any event, the ensuing struggle was long and bitter. In 1075 Henry IV (1056-1106) was succeeding in his attempt to build the empire into the strongest state in Europe, thanks to the powerful support of the German bishops. Henry and Gregory both knew that, if the pope were to win his point, it would make the bishops servants of the papacy to the exclusion of their service to the state.

The issue was not resolved until long after the original protagonists had died. The Concordat of Worms (1122) provided that episcopal and abbatial elections should take place according to canon law, in the presence of the emperor, who was authorized to make a choice among candidates in the event of a dispute. Bishops and abbots were to be invested first with the symbols of their temporal power and do homage to the emperor. Without their fief they could not function as bishops and abbots. Only then could they be invested with the ring and staff of their spiritual office by the Church. Similar agreements had been reached earlier (1107) in England and France. The investiture controversy ended in compromise. The very presence of the ruler or his agent at an episcopal or abbatial election could, and often did, mean continued temporal ascendancy. But the papacy had made an entering wedge, albeit a smaller one than it wanted, which eventually enabled it to subject both bishops and abbots to its control.

During the investiture controversy both sides argued on the basis of the political ideals with which they were familiar. Basically, these were the ideals which had been expressed by Gelasius and which had to be interpreted to meet the particular
conditions prevailing in the late eleventh century. It was now evident, if it had never been before, that there was sufficient latitude in the theory of the two swords to allow for wide variations in interpretation and ample opportunity for dispute. Gregory had insisted on his right, as successor of St. Peter, to excommunicate Henry for his failure to obey papal decrees against lay investiture and then to discharge his subjects of any obligation to obey an excommunicated ruler. In reply, Henry had accused Gregory of far exceeding his authority by "despising God's holy ordination which willed...that...the kingdom and the priesthood should remain not in the hands of one, but as two, in the hands of two."

A second phase in the church-state controversy occurred during the pontificate of Innocent III (1198-1216). An experienced canon lawyer before he became pope, Innocent had an exalted view of his office, which he expressed in many sermons, letters, and bulls. In his inaugural sermon he preached on the text: "See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthow, to build and to plant." He described the papacy as an office which places its incumbent in a position where he is "below God but beyond man" and where he can judge everyone but in turn be judged by no one. Later, he compared papal power to the sun and royal power to the moon and observed that, just as the moon gets its light from the sun, and is inferior to the sun in every way, the royal power gets the "splendor of its dignity" from the papal authority and must act accordingly. He asserted that since, by reason of sin (ratio peccati), all men stand in need of the grace which only the Church can give, the pope as its head could interfere in any conceivable situation, because sin is always present therein. While for the Greeks political power was based on reason and for the Hebrews on law, for the Christians it was here being based on grace. In these ways Innocent gave a new and different emphasis to the theory of the two swords.

Innocent's pontificate included an imposing array of achievements, some of which have already been indicated. During a long dispute with King John of England over the choice of an archbishop of Canterbury he laid the country under an interdict (1208). Later John surrendered his kingdom to Innocent (1213), who then gave it back as a papal fief. During a long dispute with Philip Augustus of France over the queen he had rejected in a way that was contrary to canon law, Innocent laid that country under an interdict (1200), which was withdrawn only when the king yielded enough of his position to satisfy Innocent. The pope dabbled continuously in the affairs of the Holy Roman Empire. He insisted on his right to pass on candidates for the imperial throne. When he died in 1216, his candidate was emperor and had promised to free the German church from the royal influence which the Concordat of Worms had recognized as valid. Finally, in addition to England, Innocent received homage from such

states as Aragon, Norway, Bohemia, and Bulgaria, which in effect meant that they were recognizing him as their feudal lord and themselves as his vassals.

It cannot be denied that the papal monarchy under Innocent III possessed and exercised great -- probably its greatest -- power. And yet there is a hollow ring about his political achievements which suggests that he had overreached himself. His victory over King John came when it suited that monarch's purposes to make peace in order to stop a French invasion of England, which the pope was supporting. The victory was not without its price, if only in terms of the unpopularity Innocent aroused when later he excused his vassal from fulfilling the royal promises of the Magna Carta. Philip Augustus stood up to Innocent for years and agreed to restore his queen to her full rights only when he wanted the papal blessing as he prepared to resist a German invasion. To get his candidate on the imperial throne, Innocent had to help prolong civil war in the empire and support four successive claimants. He finally turned to the candidate he had rejected at the beginning of his pontificate, Frederick II (1212-1250), who proved to be one of the wildest and most unorthodox foes the medieval papacy ever faced. The homage which Innocent received from a number of European states resulted in little more than a money payment from them.

A third phase in the controversy between church and state began in the pontificate of Boniface VIII (1294-1303). The issue at first was whether the king could tax the clergy in his country without their consent. Philip IV of France (1285-1314), who wanted money to finance war with England, levied such a tax. The pope's reply was to deny (1296) Philip's right to do this and threaten with excommunication anyone who paid the tax. Whereupon Philip forbade the export of money from France. Since he was able to enforce this prohibition, the king placed the pope in an almost impossible situation. Boniface needed the money and soon yielded. The king relaxed the ban. An uneasy peace prevailed until the two antagonists fell out again over royal treatment of a French bishop. In the ensuing contest the pope issued (1302) the bull Unam sanctam, in which were made the most extreme papal claims to temporal power.

We are compelled, our faith urging us, to believe and to hold -- and we do firmly believe and simply confess -- that there is one holy catholic and apostolic church, outside of which there is neither salvation nor remission of sins; her Spouse proclaiming it in the canticles: "My dove, my undefiled is but one, she is the choice one of her that bare her;" which represents one mystic body, of which body the head is Christ; but of Christ, God. In this church there is one Lord, one faith and one baptism. There was one ark of Noah, indeed, at the time of the flood, symbolizing one church; and this being finished in one cubit had, namely, one Noah as helmsman and commander. And, with the exception of this ark, all things existing
upon the earth were, as we read, destroyed. This church, moreover, we venerate as the only one, the Lord saying through His prophet: "Deliver my soul from the sword, my darling from the power of the dog." He prayed at the same time for His soul -- that is, for Himself the Head -- and for His body, -- which body, namely, he called the one and only church on account of the unity of the faith promised, of the sacraments, and of the love of the church. She is that seamless garment of the Lord which was not cut but which fell by lot. Therefore of this one and only church there is one body and one head -- not two heads as if it were a monster: -- Christ, namely, and the vicar of Christ, St. Peter, and the successor of Peter. For the Lord Himself said to Peter, Feed my sheep. My sheep, He said, using a general term, and not designating these or those particular sheep; from which it is plain that He committed to Him all His sheep. If, then, the Greeks or others say that they were not committed to the care of Peter and his successors, they necessarily confess that they are not of the sheep of Christ; for the Lord says, in John, that there is one fold, one shepherd and one only. We are told by the word of the gospel that in this His fold there are two swords, -- a spiritual, namely, and a temporal. For when the apostles said "Behold here are two swords" -- when, namely, the apostles were speaking in the church -- the Lord did not reply that this was too much, but enough. Surely he who denies that the temporal sword is in the power of Peter wrongly interprets the word of the Lord when He says: "Put up thy sword in its scabbard." Both swords, the spiritual and the material, therefore, are in the power of the church; the one, indeed, to be wielded for the church, the other by the church; the one by the hand of the priest, the other by the hand of kings and knights, but at the will and sufferance of the priest. One sword, moreover, ought to be under the other, and the temporal authority to be subjected to the spiritual. For when the apostle says "there is no power but of God, and the powers that are of God are ordained," they would not be ordained unless sword were under sword and the lesser one, as it were, were led by the other to great deeds. For according to St. Dionysius the law of divinity is to lead the lowest through the intermediate to the highest things. Not therefore, according to the law of the universe, are all things reduced to order equally and immediately; but the lowest through the intermediate, the intermediate through the higher. But that the spiritual exceeds any earthly power in dignity and nobility we ought the more openly to confess the more spiritual things excel temporal ones. This also is made plain to our eyes from the giving of tithes, and the benediction and the sanctification; from the acceptance of this same power, from the control over those same things. For, the truth bearing witness, the spiritual power has to establish the earthly power, and to judge it if it be not good. Thus concerning the church and the ecclesiastical power is
verified the prophecy of Jeremiah: "See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms," and the other things which follow. Therefore if the earthly power err it shall be judged by the spiritual power; but if the lesser spiritual power err, by the greater. But if the greatest, it can be judged by God alone, not by man, the apostle bearing witness A spiritual man judges all things, but he himself is judged by no one. This authority, moreover, even though it is given to man and exercised through man, is not human but rather divine, being given by divine lips to Peter and founded on a rock for him and his successors through Christ himself whom he has confessed; the Lord himself saying to Peter: "Whatsoever thou shalt bind," etc. Whoever, therefore, resists this power thus ordained by God, resists the ordination of God, unless he makes believe, like the Manichean, that there are two beginnings. This we consider false and heretical, since by the testimony of Moses, not "in the beginnings," but "in the beginning" God created the Heavens and the earth. Indeed we declare, announce and define, that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff. The Lateran, Nov. 14, in our 8th year. As a perpetual memorial of this matter. *

Boniface VIII lived for only a few months after the issuance of this memorable bull. Philip's advisers had concocted a plan to seize the pope, bring him before a council called by the king, and depose him. They actually forced their way into his residence at Anagni and may have manhandled the aged pontiff, who died a few days after he returned to Rome. His successor served for less than one year and may have been poisoned. After a vacancy of almost a year a Frenchman was elected pope (1305) and took the name Clement V. In deference to Philip's wishes Clement did not go to Rome. Instead he took up residence at Avignon (1309), a southern French town belonging to the count of Provence. This was the beginning of a stay at Avignon which lasted until 1377. During this period, often called the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, Unam sanctam was revoked, a French college of cardinals was created, Frenchmen were elected popes, and Avignon was purchased by the papacy (1348).

Although the papal monarchy as described earlier in this chapter continued in full operation, the Babylonian Captivity, by uprooting the popes from Rome, seriously weakened their claims to be the political arbiters of Christendom. But even by the time of Boniface it was evident that such claims, though they still might be advanced with vigor, had little basis in fact. The distinctions between secular and religious authority were being clarified to the point where papal interference in temporal affairs was regarded as unacceptable, even in time of

* Ernest F. Henderson, Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages (London: George Bell and Sons, 1892), pp. 435-437.
emergencies. Upon close examination it will be found that the position of the pope as arbiter of European politics depended primarily on his ability to capitalize on the weakness of temporal rulers. Whenever that weakness was not a significant factor in the dispute, the pope usually was unable to carry his point. The French nobles, and even the French clergy, stood firmly with Philip in his quarrel with Boniface. Philip and his fellow-rulers were able to draw effectively on greater material strength than the papacy and win, if the papacy chose to wage its battles with material strength. It is instructive to note that the same Roman law which helped to fashion the papal doctrine of plenitudo potestatis was also used to justify royal absolutism. Likewise, the same Aristotle whose use of reason was turned by Aquinas to the service of faith was employed by others to fashion a secular political theory which eventually replaced the theory of the two swords.

By the time of Boniface VIII an increasing number of people were beginning to regard the proper sanctions of religious authority as moral. It would appear, in fact, that all along there was a fatal flaw in the pope's temporal pretensions. This flaw can be illustrated by the famous incident which occurred during the investiture controversy. In 1077 Pope Gregory, having excommunicated Henry IV and commanded his subjects to withdraw their allegiance from the emperor, was on his way to Germany to preside over the election of a new emperor. At Canossa, in northern Italy, Henry approached the pope and begged for forgiveness. Gregory forced the deposed emperor to wait as a humble penitent for three days before granting his wish. This incident is often interpreted as a great victory for church over state. But in the moment of his great spiritual triumph -- bringing Henry to do penance -- Gregory suffered a tremendous political defeat. He never got the opportunity to preside over the election of a new emperor. Even at Canossa, the pope was first and foremost a priest; and, as a priest, he had to accept Henry's request for pardon at face value. Whether or not Henry was truly penitent only time would tell. Actually, Gregory died in exile in 1085, with Henry in possession of Rome and supporting an antipope. But Gregory had succeeded in maintaining the spiritual value over the temporal, the heavenly over the earthly aspect of human life. It was only after the papacy had lost this spiritual stature in Christendom that its most crucial test would come.

The degree of papal intervention in temporal affairs reached between the pontificates of Gregory VII (1073-1085) and Boniface VIII (1294-1303) was a relatively brief and passing thing, limited almost entirely to the period known as the High Middle Ages. Even then, it is doubtful whether the popes ever seriously expected to exercise any direct temporal authority outside the Papal States. What they seem to have wanted was a peaceful Christendom in which the moral law would reign. At this particular moment in history they tried to get it by suggesting how monarchs should behave and by backing their suggestions with references to the Petrine theory, which equated them with the will of God.