The Emergence of Western Political Thought in the Latin Middle Ages

The Mortgage of the Past

Reshaping the Ancient Political Inheritance (1050–1300)

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Yale UNIVERSITY PRESS
New Haven and London

Published with assistance from the Kingsley Trust Association Publication Fund established by the Scroll and Key Society of Yale College.

Set in Filosofia type by Integrated Publishing Solutions.
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Oakley, Francis.
The mortgage of the past : reshaping the ancient political inheritance (1050–1300) / Francis Oakley.
p. cm. — (The emergence of Western political thought in the Latin Middle Ages ; v. 2)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-300-17633-9 (cloth : alk. paper) 1. Kings and rulers—History—To 1500. 2. Church and state—Europe—History—To 1500. 3. Political science—Europe—History—To 1500. 4. Middle Ages. I. Title.
JC375.O342 2012 321'.609409022—dc23 2011046339

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48–1992 (Permanence of Paper).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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VOLUME ONE

Empty Bottles of Gentilism: Kingship and the Divine in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (to 1050)

VOLUME TWO

The Mortgage of the Past: Reshaping the Ancient Political Inheritance (1050–1300)

VOLUME THREE

The Watershed of Modern Politics: Law, Virtue, Kingship, and Consent (1300–1650)

To

Claire-Ann

If a man could well observe that which is delivered in the histories, concerning the religious rites of the Greeks and Romans, I doubt not but he might find many . . . [of those] . . . old empty bottles of Gentilism, which the doctors of the Roman Church, either by negligence or ambition, have filled up again with the new wine of Christianity, that will not fail in time to break them.

THOMAS HOBBES, *Leviathan,* pt. 4, ch. 45

General Introduction

IN THE THREE VOLUMES I plan for this series it is my ambition not simply to address, and in adequate depth, the political thinking of the centuries labeled by stubborn historiographical convention as "medieval," but also to effect something of a shift in the perspective from which we characteristically view that body of thought.[1] And beyond that, indeed, it is also my ambition to engineer if I at all can a modest measure of reshaping in the constitutive narrative which has long served to frame the way in which we understand the full course of Western political thought. No more than implicit, that narrative has served nonetheless to determine the periods to which most attention has usually been paid (classical Greece—or, more accurately, Athens—of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE and western Europe of the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries). It has served also to foreground the texts on which students have habitually been encouraged to focus (Plato and Aristotle, Machiavelli, the great contract theorists from Hobbes to Kant, the nineteenth-century Utilitarians, and so on), and to frame the interpretative perspective from which those texts have usually been approached. In that formative narrative, it is fair to say, the medieval contribution has never bulked all that large. Certainly it has never succeeded in finding a place under the bright lights of center stage. Instead, the Middle Ages have characteristically been seen as standing out in the long history of Western political thinking as something of an aberration, as a deviation from the norm, as a period in which the "natural" categories of political thinking were pushed to one side by religious motifs of supernatural bent.

Thus despite a century and more of cumulative endeavor in the fields of cultural anthropology and comparative religion, we continue to hear about "the essentially *secular* unity of life in the classical age" and about the Hellenistic propensity for *introducing* the supernatural into politics.

We are still reminded that Christianity made "*purely political* thought impossible," that "the peculiar problem of Church and State," which Christianity introduced, involved "the greatest perturbation which has ever drawn men's thoughts about the state *out of their properly political orbit,*" that "Medieval Europe offers *for the first time in history* the paradoxical spectacle of a society trying to organize itself politically on the basis of a spiritual framework," and that it was only with the collapse of the medieval ideal of a Christian commonwealth" that there occurred "*a return to a more purely political* conception of the State."[2] Such was the perspective embedded also in Walter Ullmann's many learned contributions to our understanding of medieval political thinking.[3] Implicit in this view is the assumption that despite all surface differences there is a fundamental continuity between modern political thought and that of the classical world, both periods being committed, presumably, to the "natural" and "secular" modes of analysis proper to "purely political thought."

I would venture to suggest, however, that that way of looking at things is destined to change if one makes the bracing effort to approach and judge the European and Western political experience from the outside as well as the inside and to see it, especially, from the broader perspective afforded by a reflective engagement with the millennial unfolding of universal or world history. In this work, then, it is my endeavor to do precisely that.

Adopt that perspective, of course, and the transition from the archaic and classical (or, indeed, from the world of Celtic and Germanic paganism) to the Christian outlook emerges as a shift not so much from a secular to a religious viewpoint as from one ancient and widespread mode of religious consciousness to another and radically different one. In effect, the historical "rhythm" that one finds emerging from the ebb and flow of ideas is not a secular-religious-secular one, but rather, religious-religious-secular. Adopt that perspective, too, and one's attention is inevitably drawn not simply to the marked secularity characteristic of political thinking in the modern era but also to some other of its features that are, historically speaking, really quite singular. Namely, its preoccupation with the nation-state and the emphasis it tends to place on the limited, instrumental, "artificial" nature of that state; the intensity of its focus on the problem of political obligation; its reliance on the notion of consent as the principal route to a resolution of that problem; its specific under-

standing of consent not in collective terms but as a concatenation of individual acts of willing, and, presupposed by that, its bone-deep commitment to the notion of autonomous individuality, and, with it, its marked preoccupation with the vindication of the subjective rights of individuals.[4] These dominant characteristics of modern political thinking are so familiar to us, so much part of the inherited furniture of our minds, that we are habitually tempted, sometimes at the expense of rampant anachronism, to take them utterly for granted as something *natural* to humankind. Seen from world-historical perspective, however, those characteristics stand out instead (and in comparison no less with what we identify as our own ancient past than with the cultural heritage of civilizations other than our own) as marked by great singularity and as calling, accordingly, for a strenuous effort at explanation. Embark upon such an effort, moreover, or so I will be arguing, and one is led ineluctably to focus on the Latin Middle Ages as the intellectual seedbed, in political thinking as in so much else besides, of Western cultural singularity. For it was "the Middle Ages," as Umberto Eco once memorably put it, that "turned us into Western animals."[5]

Hence the overall title of this series, obviously and by intention tendentious. That duly acknowledged, I should concede that it is also inadequately descriptive because in order to achieve my purpose, I have had to transgress, and at both ends, the confines of the period traditionally designated as "medieval." Thus, at one end I have been led to reach deep into the ancient past, and at the other, to extend my story well into the centuries we are now accustomed to labeling as "early modern." Though it remains immovably embedded in the chronological vocabulary we are forced, willy-nilly, to deploy, the traditional periodization of European history into ancient, medieval, and modern (essentially a Renaissance humanist contrivance) is as much a hindrance as a help when it comes to understanding the course of European and Western intellectual history. It has come across time, indeed, to take on the attributes of a cumbersomely Ptolemaic system, calling for an ever-increasing number of enabling epicycles to keep at all functional. If we must operate within that system, it should be recognized that we do so, perforce, uneasily.

Those to whom it is anathema for an historian to seek from the past answers to questions generated by "presentist concerns" rather than chastely restricting himself to the questions that people in the particular period under scrutiny themselves generated, or who are prone to insisting

that the historian *must* derive his notions of what is significant from those of people living in the particular historical period under discussion, may doubtless be inclined to label my own admittedly present-oriented approach to the medieval phase in the history of political thought as crassly "presentist" or as mired in some sort of "mythology of prolepsis."[6] While doubtless useful for frightening the children, the charge, however, carries no real intellectual force. Any intellectual history, certainly, that was written in strict conformity with such strictures would be a very odd history indeed. Most such histories, accordingly, will be found to combine, albeit in differing measure, the historian's traditional focus on the historicity of past texts with some orientation also to the concerns and questions generated by the era and circumstances in which the historian is himself doing his writing.[7] And properly so. To attempt to preclude such an approach on the grounds of some forlorn quest for a species of historical "purism" reflects, I believe, a confusion of concerns pertaining to the genuine historicity of the *meanings* we wrest from the documents of the past with those very different concerns that pertain to the *significance* that we ourselves, anchored in the present, attach to such meanings.[8] As Quentin Skinner has properly acknowledged, there is nothing illegitimate about an historian's being "more interested in the retrospective significance of a given historical work or action than in its meaning for the agent himself." Always assuming, of course, that that historian is not tempted to turn judgments about such a work's significance into affirmations about its contents.[9]

In this work, then, my choice of perspective notwithstanding, it is my hope that medieval specialists will find that the texts discussed have been handled with due attention paid to their embedment in the historically specific conditions and circumstances of the era and society in which they were produced. It being my hope, too, that my overall interpretation may conceivably have something useful to say to nonmedievalists whose concerns have focused on the modern phase in the history of political thought, I have attempted to encourage an appreciation of the conditioning specificities of time and place by beginning with a brief "historical orientation." Its aim is to provide at least the general coordinates needed if the evolving argument is to be situated on the historical map. Readers for whom such historiographic props are redundant need not hesitate to skip

that chapter and to move on without delay to engage the unfolding argument in the more substantive chapters that follow it.

In the first volume of this series I focused most intently upon the theme of kingship which was central to the first millennium of the Christian or Common Era—its ubiquity worldwide, its deep rootage in the archaic past, its fundamentally sacral character, and the complex transpositions its supportive ideology underwent at the hands of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian writers, Greek as well as Latin. In that volume we saw Hobbes's "old empty bottles of Gentilism" being refilled indeed with the new wine of Christianity, but that move accomplished, astonishingly, without having the effect of immediately shattering them.

During the two and a half centuries covered by this second volume, that state of affairs began to change and the first serious cracks began to open up in the archaic cultural carapace under which, so far as politics were concerned, the destabilizing novelties that were part and parcel of the Christian tradition had for long centuries been contained. The period, which was one buffeted by unusually vigorous winds of change and shaped by great economic, cultural, and economic creativity, began and ended with moments of great drama. It began with the revolutionary assault which Pope Gregory VII launched against the age-old and well-nigh universal notion that kings were sacred figures assigned an integral role, if you wish, in the order of redemption. They were now to be viewed, instead, as lay folk and nothing more. And it ended in September 1303 with a moment of aggressive secularity, the abject humiliation of Pope Boniface VIII at the hands of mercenaries under French leadership and in French royal pay. If the Gregorian onslaught did not altogether succeed in eliminating the sacral dimension of kingship (and we will see that it did not), what it did do was to quicken the process whereby the cultural nutriments upon which that royal sacrality had depended for its vitality gradually leached out of the European cultural subsoil. To the early medieval era in which "the sacred and profane had been almost inextricably mingled"[10] succeeded now "a period of firmer boundaries and one in which they came progressively to be disengaged one from another."[11]

Acknowledgments

MY ENGAGEMENT AS both teacher and scholar with the issues addressed in these three volumes is of such long standing that my indebtednesses exceed my ability to remember, let alone acknowledge, all of them. But some debts stand out and call for recognition. For the sabbatical support and research awards or appointments that afforded me the opportunity over the years to spend much-needed time in a whole series of American and European research libraries and rare book rooms, I must thank the President and Trustees of Williams College; the Social Science Research Council; the American Council of Learned Societies; the National Endowment for the Humanities; the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton; the National Humanities Center, North Carolina; the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the Folger Shakespeare Library, both in Washington, D.C. For the timely award of the Mellon Emeritus Research Fellowship that encouraged and enabled me to commit in my retirement years to a project of these dimensions I owe a particular debt of gratitude to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, New York. For their imagination, tenacity, and general good cheer as they wrestled with the challenges posed by such as Eusebius, Augustine, the canonists, Aquinas, John of Paris, Marsiglio of Padua, Locke, Rousseau, and the like, I must thank the generations of fine students it has been my privilege to teach here at Williams in my seminars and tutorials in the history of political thought. For their patient reading of a rather untidy draft manuscript I must thank my friends and distinguished fellow medievalists Marcia Colish, Kenneth Pennington, and Jeffrey Burton Russell. I am deeply indebted to them for their kindly criticism and sage advice, as I am, similarly, to my colleagues in our weekly seminar at the Oakley Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences here at Williams, with whom I was able to share drafts of several chapters. For her characteristic promptness, accuracy, and efficiency in

preparing the final manuscript for the press I am happy, yet once more, to thank Donna Chenail, who has cheerfully discharged that task for so many of my books. Finally, this volume, the second of a projected series of three, it gives me enormous pleasure to dedicate to my wife, whose unfailing support I have long cherished. I do so, as she well knows, with much love and abiding admiration.

Williamstown, Massachusetts, February, 2011 F.O.

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Prologue

Kingship and Its Changing Profile in the Central Middle Ages

DURING THE LATE ANTIQUE and early medieval centuries a Christianized version of the archaic pattern of sacral kingship had dominated the political scene in the Latin West no less than the Byzantine East. From the late eleventh century onward, however, in the former region, though not in the latter, that was all destined to change. It was not that the institution of kingship itself was called into question or consigned to a process of marginalization. What was called into question, rather, was its age-old sacral dimension. It is true that by the closing years of the thirteenth century town dwellers in the quasi-independent cities or city-states of northern Italy and in the independent-minded communes of Flanders had become accustomed to living under forms of government which, while they did not lack their own sacral dimension,[1] were essentially oligarchic in nature. By that time too, a broader and more variegated cross section of the populace right across Europe had become directly acquainted with the consensual modes of governance characteristic alike of cathedral chapters, of the newer forms of monastic and religious life (Cistercian, Franciscan, Dominican), of the well-nigh ubiquitous merchant and crafts guilds,[2] and of the universities—themselves guilds of masters or students—which had sprung up at such principal centers of learning as Salerno, Bologna, Paris, and Oxford.[3] But all of that notwithstanding, kingship remained the dominant form of government in Europe. And in striking measure, it was with kingship—its mission, forms, and attributes—that the political thinkers of the era continued overwhelmingly to be concerned.[4]

Testimony to that fact is the enduring popularity of the old *speculum*