

# Res Publica Christiana Revisited: International Organization in the Middle Ages

Written by Declan McClean

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This paper is primarily a theoretical one, a reaction to dehistoricised theorisations of the Middle Ages and an attack on dictums of modernity in the vein of Ferguson's (1948; see also Melve, 2006) 'revolt of the medievalists', this time fought in the camps of International Relations rather than History. A dearth of scholarship examines International Relations in the Middle Ages, which too often considers a millennia of history as a space between more important events, such as in Orthodox Marxism, or as an example of a tradition such as Capitalism in a foetal state, for example in World Systems Theory (Braudel, 1972). This paper will begin to correct this, demonstrating the existence of IR in the form of a transgeographic hierarchical organisation, established and maintained by the Catholic Church.

This paper contests both Bull's idea of a vague 'international society', and the theorisation of religion as merely a superstructural epiphenomenon, arguing more radically that clear organisation existed across Europe during the 'High' Middle Ages (1000-1250) a period of relative stability and advancement following the collapse of the Carolingian order. Beginning with the Gregorian Reforms of 1050, this paper will extend a historicising critique to examine the peculiar social relations of the Middle Ages, identifying this period as the first in which general European network can be observed, in which the Catholic Church transformed itself from an essentially sovereign organisation in Rome, to a transgeographic hierarchical network across Europe, extending beyond the old boundaries of Francia and influencing all aspects of society.

The logic of exposition will investigate the historiography of the Middle Ages, with particular emphasis on conceptualisation of 'the International' within the period, arguing that neither the current historiography nor International Relations theory adequately convey the historical and international context. This paper accepts the Political Marxist concept of geopolitical accumulation as the impetus for Gregorian Reforms, and argues that these reforms allowed the Church to centralise and expand across Europe, presenting the concept of moral power as a form of social capital, institutionalised by the Papacy. Organisation across Europe was provided in three iterative forms, first in the regulation of Christendom across polities, ultimately answerable to the Pope, then by normative efforts, in transforming the Church's relationship with feudal lords, and finally by organising a grand European strategy while directing violent impulses, stifling internal threats and managing expeditionary campaigns against external enemies.

### **'The International' in the Middle Ages**

Do not the Middle Ages, that epoch of ignorance, stagnation, and gloom, stand in the sharpest contrast to the light and progress and freedom of the Italian Renaissance which followed?

Nobel's (2011, p.2) statement satirises the early historiography of the Middle Ages, which predominantly neglected close examination of the period, a millennium of history between the 'death' of Rome in 476 and the literal 'rebirth' (in French) of the Renaissance around 1500. This can be seen as a microcosm in the treatment of the Crusades, with Runciman's (1951) 'barbarian invasion', echoing the Classical Realist view of human nature, while Vryonis (1971) offers an almost Neo-Realist account of international great power balancing. Some authors come closer, characterising the crusades not as thoughtless blundering, but as deliberate strategy to expand the power of the church (Madden, 2005), yet these views still fail to comprehend the reasons for the conflict in the beginning.

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These failures are due to a consistent conceptual exigence, wherein the defining concepts of 'the International' are abstract, requiring empirical referents to make the concept measurable. Too often however these referents have only measured restricted concepts, excluding periods of history in which these concepts are absent, as in much of the Realist literature, which notes the lack of 'real' (Barbato & Joustra, 2017) theorisations and declares that there is no international because there are no modern states, and therefore no interstate warfare. While Revisionist scholarship has corrected this to some extent, developing the idea of the medieval state as *sui generis*, concepts such as *Personenverbandsstaat*, 'a state of associated persons' (Mitteis, 1975, p.5), or 'parcellised sovereignty' (Anderson, 1974b) still fail to sufficiently account for the historical circumstances of Medieval International Relations as while Anderson accepts the reality of feudo-vassilic pyramids, he still presents these as multiple but separate, failing to acknowledge the complex interconnected networks between different 'pyramids'. Indeed, the scholarship itself is limited by its terminology which remains very much in, with Davies (2003) cautioning against the 'Tyranny of a Concept', condemning an infection of 'Whiggish history' and instead arguing for the abandonment of modernist terminology, a stance this paper shares.

In this sense, there are no International Relations in the European Middle Ages, as the Realist position seems unassailable; without proving the existence of modern states, modern concepts such as sovereignty cannot be reasonably applied. Instead, this paper will examine Bull's 'society of states' to argue that while International Relations did not exist, organisation did in the form of the Catholic Church. It remains therefore to examine the circumstances in which this organisation emerged.

## Geopolitical Accumulation and the Gregorian Reforms

Following the final division of the Carolingian Empire in 888, including the decline of the bureaucracy and the fragmentation of administration, the Reforms of Gregory VII reflected a general European preoccupation with order. Whilst occasional warlords would establish large kingdoms, Europe at the time was fragmented, with no common language at the basic level, neither human nor physical infrastructure, nor any prevention against banditry. For Rome, the Reforms can be seen as an attempt to reassert authority after the disgrace of the Pornocracy, and to address the Great Schism which had divided Christendom. Beginning with legislation against various spiritual abuses such as simony in 1050, the Reforms quickly assumed a secular dimension, disrupting the dual rule of spiritual and temporal over Europe and establishing the supremacy of the Roman church as divinely founded and therefore supreme over temporal princes. The Reforms were therefore an attempt to transform Europe from *imperium christianum* (Garipzanov, 2008) to *res publica christiana*. Where Carolingian bishops had been politically integrated into the Empire, this integration had lapsed when the Empire fell, the Reforms allowed the Church to 'immunise' (Teschke, 2003, p.71) itself from hierarchical authority of temporal lords, yet remain politically involved and therefore influential.

The Reforms consisted of three parts, first, to reorganise the Church after the Carolingian collapse, hierarchising the disparate system of ecclesiastical lords across Europe into one universal Church, predicated on the supremacy of the Bishop in Rome. This assumption led to discursive advances, with the Pope's legal power strengthened by bull *Dictatus papae*, and peace movements in *Pax* and *Treuga Dei*, restricting warfare and protecting the Church from attack.

Some scholars have described the assumption of feudal power by spiritual lords as a defensive mechanism (ibid, p.102) against the menaces of warlords. However, these developments must be understood in their unique social context, not as factors of social property relations alien to spiritual forms of domination. Accepting therefore that the Catholic Church transformed itself from a centre of state, this paper refutes the use of the term of '*Kirchenstaat*' (ibid, p.104), instead contesting that the simultaneously vertical and horizontal, transgeographic nature of the church, defying and infiltrating all barriers of medieval state forms, is instead the logical consequence of spiritual power as discursive power. The efficacy of bulls, their enforcement mechanisms and the compliance of temporal actors is contained within this notion, with aspects such as the moral authority of the Church weakened over time by the assumption of power by the growing national state which foretold the Early Modern Period.

If internationalists fail to historicise, historicists fail to internationalise. Theories of historical critique which attempt to

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examine the material conditions of a period to understand the present better often rely on the assumption of international status by a predominantly domestic circumstance. The Political Marxism of Brenner (1985) and Teschke (2003, p.58) argue during the pre-Modern eras, profit was derived through surplus accumulation, extra-economically compelled from peasants by lords. However, this analysis fails to comprehend the nature of spiritual duties and administration, as while the Church did indeed maintain a network of regional administrators in a hierarchical, transgeographic structure, spiritual power proved far more effective. Theories of 'social determinants of feudal power' (ibid, p.48) fail to convey the importance of what we might describe the 'spiritual accumulation' which allowed power over the moral sphere. This spiritual accumulation meant that any lord who did not obey could be excommunicated, sometimes *latae sententiae*[1], a condition that brought even Emperors from their thrones to grovel at the Pope's feet, such as Henry IV's famous 'Road to Canossa'. While these rights were opposed vigorously whenever they infringed on secular matters (Duby, 1962, p.189), the Church retained great power.

Thus, the Political Marxist perspective cannot adequately convey the spiritual organisation under the Roman Church, only the 'secular struggle between classes' (Anderson, 1974a, p.11), with Teschke's (2003, p.58) 'four conflicts' of the Medieval period existing between and among lords (temporal and spiritual) and peasants. A dichotomy is therefore apparent between clearly accumulative conflicts in southern Italy (1061) and spiritual struggles in the Baltic and Levant. If all conflict occurs because of geopolitical accumulation, why travel so far to attack such hostile and dangerous lands?

Ultimately, Political Marxism concerns itself with the material conditions of production and while comprehending the relations of domination inherent therein, fails to examine the ideological aspects of these relations sufficiently, dictating that during the medieval period those who held property rights over others enforced the rights secularly, 'by the lance' of extra-economic compulsion that the Church relinquished in 1122 at the Concordat of Worms. Comparably, Rome retained socio-political compulsions 'by ring and staff' which formed rights over the soul, an untheorised capability, serving as the mortar to the 'classical feudal pyramid' (ibid, p.60). *Deus Vult!* is not merely a 'religious veneer' on accumulative efforts (ibid, p.98), but the manifest development of discursive to strategic.

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While this paper accepts the primacy of geopolitical accumulation for secular profit, it insists on the understanding of geopolitical competition as essential to religion-as-organisation. Due to persistent warfare, regulative and organisational efforts emerged first, reacting to the Carolingian decline, in which the Church organised strongly hierarchical structures. Simultaneously, Rome became the world, expanding outwards through its knightly servants across Europe under the legitimacy of Papal Supremacy, wresting normative power away from feudal lords and assuming the mantle of universal authority in a separate but interlinked status to the feudal state, thus, the Papacy acted as a powerful counter-force to which political oppositions throughout Europe could appeal and as an active intervener (Miller, 2011, p.118).

Examining Medievalist historiography and rejecting modernist classifications, this paper uses Teschke's 'geopolitical accumulation' to explain the geopolitical conditions of the Middle Ages, leading to the Gregorian Reforms and the transgeographic hierarchisation of the Catholic Church. Critiquing Political Marxism as deinternationalist, a theoretical framework sufficiently historically specific, yet internationally motivated to comprehend systems of organisation is required. Carl Schmitt's '*Nomos*' is useful here, signifying an apparatus of appropriation which orders the distribution of extraction and production. Schmitt uses this concept to expand a '*jus publicum Europeum*', or spatial order in which relations between Christian princes can be conducted under the supreme authority of the Church (Odysseos & Petito, 2007, p.5). In this manner Schmitt's *nomos* regulates conflict, establishing specific permitted systems of cooperation and competition, such as the concept of Just War, where the war may be acknowledged as an economic necessity (Teschke, 2003, p.147), yet compartmentalised and directed outward.

Schmitt's ideas are similar to those of the English School, reinforcing Schmitt's ideas that anarchy existed, yet within it order, based on a persistent set of 'political, juridical and cultural restrictions' (Odysseos & Petito, 2007, p.23) such as the *Pax* and *Treuga Dei*. However, these theories, like those before them, rely on modernist assumptions regarding the Middle Ages. Schmitt and the Realist-leaning English School scholarship (Bull, 1977, p.13) lapse into a

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discussion of states' interactions, while even Wight, who argues for institutions of ecclesiastical exchange in diplomacy and the *res public christiana* arrives at this conceptual failure from the other side, through idealist preoccupations with international institutions. Even scholars who comprehend both the importance of inter-political interaction, and religion as an organising force such as Latham (2012) maintain a fixation with modern terminology such as the conditions of sovereignty in medieval geopolitics, from which Latham takes his book's title. Thus, Religion and organisation in the Middle Ages are again seen as superstructural epiphenomenon, only relevant when employed by the relevant conflict units.

## Religion-as-Organisation

Having established the theoretical framework against a background of competing theories claiming to explain IR in the Middle Ages, it remains to demonstrate this theorisation through historicised examples, demonstrating that the period was neither a time of anarchy among political communities driven to violence, nor the modern established system of states and interstate diplomacy. Rather, the Papacy, rising from the ashes of the Carolingian Empire, organises European interaction in a temporally specified transgeographic multi-axis cultural unification, leading to organisation throughout the continent. Whilst this may recall forms of Neo-Gramscian analysis, this rather concentrates on the independence of the 'clerical organisation', rather than its subordination by feudal classes (Adamson, 2013), similarly, this cannot be defined as cultural hegemony because the Church does not represent the dominant class (Bocock, 1986), rather, organises its activities using discursive means.

As this paper has established, organisational reforms provided the regulative power to create a structure and being what Bagge (2011, p.172) terms 'the first stage of the European conquest', not only reforming the ecclesiastical infrastructure within the old Frankish empire, but infiltrating lands outside that dominion (Teschke, 2003, p.93) such as Ireland and Scandinavia. What may appear as theological elements, such as prohibitions on lay investiture or simony, allowed the Gregorians to enlarge the normative spaces, in a 'global, rather than international' world (Chong, 2013), in turn allowing the Papacy to be far more influential than it could have been if it had indeed been a 'church-state', inseparable from feudal forms of dominion.

These organisations powers allowed the Church to change European society, with some scholars commenting on the use of religion to construct a European community, in a policy of aggressive liminality, internally against Jews (Newman, 2011, p.355), and externally against Muslims, for instance with the Pope's attempts at banning export of timber and iron to the Islamic world as attempts at defining what it meant to be a Christian and preventing social mixing and the weakening of the church's authority (Constable, 2011), especially in opposition to heresy.

Similarly, the Reforms robbed the nobility of much of their ability to fight back. The compulsion of celibacy among the clergy and peace movements removed dynastic and military strategies as methods of resistance, while the later development of militant orders such as the Knights Templar established counter-balancing forces against feudal lords, both attracting the best knights and donations under spiritual authority but also channelling extractive conflict violence outwards in crusades and 'just wars' restricting the passionate and violent impulses of the European cadets (Evergates 1995, p.17). These conflicts served to legitimise the Church's domination in the creation of an 'other' to battle against, but also in the degrading of heretics which threatened the established theological structure, exemplified in the chastisement of the Albigensian Crusade, in which geopolitics of accumulation were employed by the Pope to persuade a temporal lord to undertake a spiritual campaign.

Thus, the regulative power of the Gregorian Reforms allowed the Papacy to organise itself both above and within the existing Feudal structure, making itself immune from attack, yet influential in every event. The Reforms allowed the Church to assume the unbounded 'moral power' which percolated through Medieval society, previously held by the Carolingians under the divine right of kingship, and use it to prevent or allow actions as legitimised by the doctrine of Papal supremacy, interpreted by the Church themselves, as while they did not hold general ownership of production, the monasteries and other production centres of spiritual nature had already been centralised.

The final and perhaps most significant aspect of the transgeographic European organisation by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages can be seen in strategic organisation. Following the restriction of warfare and opportunities for

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geopolitical accumulation, instead of allowing Christendom to tear itself apart, the Papacy was able to direct aggression outwards, further enforcing its own legitimacy, but also demonstrating a significant power over noble and peasant classes, persuading almost 100,000 soldiers to attack the Islamic kingdoms in the First Crusade, consistently displaying similar persuasive power in organising successive actions, uniting nobles from across Europe, from Norway to Nicaea while simultaneously organising their logistics and the administration of their conquests through Italian merchant republics in the Aegean and Levant. It is remarkable that instead of collapsing back into chaos and a succession of warlords who would conquer and eventually fall to various demographic pressures, the use of Christianity and the concept of *miles christianus* allowed Christendom to expand across Spain and the Mediterranean world, but also into the East, directly German knights and trading cities for the conquest of Prussia, Lithuania and Pannonia. This does not infer that internal conflict disappeared, nor that every crusader sought spiritual rather than material wealth, but it remains likely that knights organised only by their own accumulative desires would have done so closer to home, rather than sailing across the known world to fulfill their economic needs.

## Limitations and Questions

To conclude the Roman case, it may be said that just as the Church acts, it is too acted upon. While Popes after the Gregorian Reforms successively transformed and organised European relations, these transformations often failed to adequately channel the accumulative efforts of nobles outward, instead merely allowing the nobles to accuse their enemies of various sins, giving them *casus belli*. This can plainly be seen in the original case, where enemies of Henry IV used his excommunication as a pretext to abandon their obligations to him, declaring this the pretext for rebellion (Volrath, 2011, p.132). This agency must be further examined, but also raises questions of efficacy. Given Henry was excommunicated five times in his life, and Gregory VII died in exile, his opponents having set up an antipope against him, can it be said that the transformation from discursive to strategic was truly effective? Can this failure be attributed to the relative youth of the policy? Or alternatively, is this instead a failure of modern scholarship, so far removed from the circumstances of the events that ideas of excommunication as a foreign policy tool become 'hard to imagine' (ibid, p.133). Indeed, given the importance with which some spiritual lords considered temporal matters, can we even consider these lords to be spiritual anymore? We might look to the decline of the Templars who while initially successful in the Church's mission of expanding Christendom, eventually succumbed to the same concerns as ordinary feudal lords, involving themselves in feuds and bickering, with the western chapter houses more interested in expanding their power without necessarily supporting the Crusading efforts of their eastern brothers.

Further research must therefore investigate the historicisation of the issues raised in this paper, maintaining a caution toward myopia and miscategorising, yet exploring time and space outside the scope of this analysis. Cogent of this, discussion has been limited to the European 1000-1200 period, a temporally and geospatially specific context, in an attempt to prevent the same unhistoricised statements this paper has criticised other theories for. To universalise is to dehistoricise, and scholars must remain semantically careful when investigating patterns in wide areas or times. Religion-as-organisation has been demonstrated here, yet in other times this may not be as clear, for example toward the end of the medieval period approaching the chaos of the Reformation.

Despite these limitations, religion remains highly relevant in the modern age. The Papacy in modern diplomacy and international society has been extensively theorised, with scholars arguing the transgeographic nature of the Roman Church has allowed spiritual figures, though significantly less powerful than in previous eras, to maintain influence on a 'world society of individuals' (Diez, 2017) and that studies of individual agency and comparisons between the 'Two Popes' of the Catholic Church and United Nations exemplify the puzzle of authority in institutions, though neither wields 'hard' power (Troy, 2017). Similarly, the War on Terror, which has come to define almost two decades of global warfare, has frequently been described as a crusade (Cockburn, 2002; Hussain, 2013) and its religious aspects scrutinized. Study of the past informs the present, Religion as an organising principle must be theorised to better understand the modern world, as well as the historic one.

## Conclusion

The European order of the High Middle Ages existed as violence predicated on economic necessity toward surplus

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accumulation, yet restricted and modified by normative efforts to order this society. There existed no hegemonic actor, nor any passive society of states, but first a defensive, then proactive universal Church, distinct from feudo-vassilic networks of power, yet linked to them. The Church's moral power stemmed from regulative reforms early in the period, allowing for an expansion of discursive space and finally leading to the formation of a grand strategy for the *res publica christiana*.

This phenomenon must be examined with proper historicised analysis, not with binary terminology contingent on an understanding of modern state forms. This paper rectifies this error, dismissing statements of confusion by scholars fixated on the Middle Ages as a path or platform to more modern concerns, and arguing for a historicised view of actor-structure relations during the period.

If scholars of International Relations intend to understand the progression of history, they cannot continue to force the complexities of the Medieval period into modern categories. Considering a millennia of history as a transitional period, irrelevant to study for its own merits, will maintain a tradition of ignorance that the most limited scholars of centuries past would greet as their own argumentations.

Nor can the importance of religion in societies, modern or historical, be neglected. Theories considering singular aspects of 'the International' must understand efforts by actors to exploit opportunities which the modern scholar may consider laughable. To Urban II, religion was not a superstructural epiphenomenon but a means to organising Europe for the general welfare of all Christians. Likely we will never know the true motivations of those who took up the cross, but we must acknowledge the incredible feats necessary to subdue and direct the nobility of Europe in accordance with 'God's will'.

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## Notes

[1] *Automatically upon the committing of the offense*

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