

The conflict between church and state history essay



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The conflict between church and state has been an historical issue that has plagued Europe for much of its history. Ever since the introduction of Christianity in the Roman Empire during the fourth-century, there has been a constant struggle between temporal and spiritual authorities for ecclesiastico-political primacy. That struggle involved both the Church and the State using religion as a means to further their respective interests. By analyzing the following two primary documents: ' The Edict of Milan' and ' The Program of Gregory VII', I will argue that both documents reveal a common historical theme: Religion being used as a means for the advancement of ecclesiastico-political interests. In the first document ' The Edict of Milan' the Emperors Constantine and Licinius issued an edict that promulgated religious toleration for all religions including Christianity. While Constantine may have been sincere in his desire to protect religious minorities, he was primarily motivated by his desire to ensure the safety and security of the Empire (reference). He was all too aware of the destructive consequences that sectarian tension could pose to the Empire. In addition to his edict being politically motivated, it can be argued that his very conversion to Christianity was at least partially motivated by political interests. In the second document being analyzed, ' The Program of Gregory VII,' the Pope was not only attempting to institute church reforms in regards to morality, but he also wanted to secure temporal rule for the Roman church while eradicating the influence of the Emperor in spiritual affairs. He was in a protracted confrontation with King Henry IV and his dictates were part of his attempt to coalesce ecclesiastical power with temporal power. Both documents reveal a common theme of religion being used to further political aims.

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In the 'Edict of Milan' issued by co-emperors Constantine and Licinius in 313, it was decreed that there would be religious toleration for all religious minorities. While a cursory reading of the document might lead one to conclude that the Emperors were acting out of altruism and that they were motivated by devotion to the Church, a thorough understanding of the historical context reveals the Emperors' primary motivations were political. Constantine used Christianity to serve his political needs and even the sincerity and genuineness of his conversion to Christianity has been brought into question by various historians. Historian Daniel Shubin stated that Constantine "required a utilitarian religion with a superficial appeal to the senses in order to consolidate the loyalties of [his] subjects" (33). He essentially argued that Constantine's conversion was politically motivated. Even historian Edward Gibbon in his groundbreaking work "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" drew the conclusion that Constantine was simply "an opportunist politician" and he viewed Constantine's conversion as a "piece of political expediency." Still another historian has argued that his conversion to Christianity "was no more than a cynical, callous political move, dictated by overweening ambition motivated by political interests." (JSTOR-Jordon).

Another aspect that needs to be taken into consideration when analyzing the 'Edict of Milan' is that Constantine was well aware of the potential for religious divisions to develop into civil disturbances and do disrupt stability. It was Constantine himself who arbitrated over the Donatist controversy which erupted within a few months of him becoming sole emperor of the West. In the Edict of Milan, Constantine and Licinius make it clear that they

are acting primarily in the interest of state stability for in the opening sentence Constantine stated that he and Licinius met in Milan and were “ conferring about all things which concern the advantage and security of the state”. (reference). Historian Francis Betton opined that Licinius only acquiesced to issuing the decree out of deference to Constantine and not because he was truly committed to religious toleration. Licinius remained a pagan for the duration of his life and even continued the persecution of the Christians later in his reign. (jstoredictofmilan)

There are numerous examples throughout the ‘ Edict of Milan’ that serve to demonstrate that the Emperors were using the guise of religious toleration as a means to ensure the stability of the Empire. In the Edict, the Emperors call for the return of confiscated church property stating:

Moreover in regard to the legal position of the Christians we have thought fit to ordain this also, that if any appear to have bought, whether from the exchequer or from any others, the places at which they were used formally to assemble, concerning which definite orders have been given before now, and that by a letter issued to your office – that the same be restored to the Christians (ref)

The Emperors decreed that confiscated church property should be returned to the Christians but they were careful not to extend that demand to the restitution of private property that was confiscated from the Christians by the pagans. Christians routinely had their private property looted at the hands of the pagans during their persecution, and demanding restitution of that private property would be a severe financial setback to the pagans and

it had the potential to lead to major civil disturbances

(jstoedictofmilancatholicreview)). Because stability and security of the empire was of primary importance to the Emperors, they remained extremely cautious in their attempt at reconciliation between the Christians and the pagans and hesitated to demand the return of confiscated private property.

Another point worthy of emphasis is that throughout his life, Constantine never acted in a manner that could be interpreted as subordinate to the church. In fact, Constantine took a lead role in the affairs of the church. Within a year of Constantine's victory at Milvian Bridge, he was faced with the Donatist controversy. He presided over the entire affair and it was Constantine himself who ultimately saw to it that the issue was settled. Even more significant than presiding over the Donatist controversy was the role Constantine took in the Council of Nicaea in 325. The issue at hand was one of fundamental importance as it concerned the Divinity of Christ. Constantine not only summoned the Council but presided over it. It is interesting to note that Constantine thought the issue of the divinity of Christ was frivolous and that no answer needed to be given, let alone the question being asked in the first place. The reason why allowed the issue to be debated and resolved was because he was afraid that religious differences could lead to civil disorder or even war. Constantine was more concerned with religious unity than with religious truth (text). It In that context we can better understand how the ' Edict of Milan' was used to advance Constantine's political interests.

The second document entitled “ The Program of Gregory VII” is a list of twenty-seven dictates that lay out the rights and privileges of the Pope and the Roman church. The document was written at a time when the Roman church was undergoing serious reform, both within the church and in respect to the church’s position regarding temporal authority. It is important to note that this document was written in the eleventh-century and consequently the historical context surrounding this document differs significantly from the previous document, ‘ The Edict of Milan’. Even though the historical context is different, the common theme of religion being used as a means of advancing one’s ecclesiastico-political interests remains a central element of “ The Program of Gregory.”

Under the Ottonian System established in the tenth-century under the Emperor Otto, the Emperor consolidated his control over both the secular and spiritual realms by controlling both the appointment of bishops and abbots for the church, and by also appointing them as his imperial vassals (text). When Pope Gregory ascended to the Papacy, he realized that for him to establish papal supremacy he would first need to put an end to the Ottonian System. With the Emperor enjoying such enormous clout over church clergy, the clergy would likely remain loyal to the imperial office and owe their allegiance to the Emperor (text267). It was under this context that the Pope issued his twenty-seven prerogatives which would subsequently lead to a significant confrontation between Pope Gregory VII and King Henry IV of Germany surrounding the issue of lay investiture.

The investiture controversy was arguably one of the most significant

confrontations between church and state. The Pope wanted sole authority
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not only in appointing bishops but also in deposing of emperors. The Pope dictated: “ That he alone can depose or reinstate bishops” and “ That it may be permitted to him to depose emperors.” Pope Gregory VII wanted to end the influence of the Emperor in selecting church clergy. With his decree against lay investiture, Pope Gregory sought to establish papal supremacy at the expense of King Henry VI. Historian Brian Tierney argued that “ the prohibition of lay investiture was the essence of Gregory’s program, and it was a demand that no king of that time could have accepted.”(googlebook) If the prohibition of lay investiture was the essence of the Pope Gregory’s program, it can dually be said that the continuation of lay investiture was the essence of the Ottonian System. If the Emperor lost control of the Church he would almost simultaneously lose control of the entire Empire. (text 267)

The Pope’s reforms aiming for the eradication of the practice of simony and lay investiture were more than just moral initiatives, they involved the important confrontation between church and state and their respective spheres of authority. As has already been stated, under the Ottonian system, the Emperor held the authority of anointing and deposing bishops. The dictates of the Pope clearly illustrate his ambition to wrestle temporal power away from the emperor. He wrote that the Pope could not be judged by anyone. Within a few years of assuming the Papacy, Pope Gregory VII had clearly laid out his opinion that temporal power should lie with the Roman Church and that the Roman Church reined supreme. The Pope even went so far as to state that the “ Roman Church has never erred; nor will it err to all eternity.” It is clearly evident that the Program of Gregory was written with and eye towards ecclesiastico-political interests on the part of the Pope and

serves as further proof that the author used religion to further his political interests.

Through the analysis of the documents “ The Edict of Milan” and “ The Program of Gregory VII” and with a thorough understanding of the context that lay behind the writing of both documents, it becomes evident that both authors used religion a means to advance their own interests. Constantine wrote the “ Edict of Milan” at a time of serious internal strife in the empire that was due primarily to religion. Christians were being persecuted and their property and possessions were being confiscated by the pagan barbarians. Not only was there conflict between Christians and non-Christians, there was also conflict within the Church itself. Both the Donatist controversy and the Arian controversy potentially threatened the stability of the Empire. Constantine used religion primarily as a means of bringing stability and unity to a fragmented empire and to increase his own authority. Similar to Constantine, Pope Gregory also used religion to bolster his own claims for supremacy. He was a firm believer in papal supremacy and was directly responsible for one of the most significant confrontations between church and state. After establishing papal supremacy within the church hierarchy, he set his sights on papal authority in the secular realm as well. He effectively used the guise of moral reform to combat the State for authority in both the spiritual and secular realms. While the context surrounding the two documents may differ significantly, the motivating factors behind the writing of the documents shares a single, common feature: The use of religion to advance political interests.