The divine right of kings and humanism assignment

Art & Culture

Absolutism and the Divine Right of Kings The defense of monarchical absolutism, which asserted that kings derived their authority from God and could not therefore be held accountable for their actions by any earthly authority such as a parliament. Originating in Europe, the divine-right theory can be traced to the medieval conception of God’s award of temporal power to the political ruler, paralleling the award of spiritual power to the church. By the 16th and 17th centuries, however, the new national monarchs were asserting their authority in matters of both church and state.

King James I of England (reigned 1603??? 25) was the foremost exponent of the divine right of kings, but the doctrine virtually disappeared from English politics after the Glorious Revolution (1688??? 89). In the late 17th and the 18th centuries, kings such as Louis XIV (1643??? 1715) of France continued to profit from the divine-right theory, even though many of them no longer had any truly religious belief in it. The American Revolution (1775??? 83), the French Revolution (1789), and the Napoleonic wars deprived the doctrine of most of its remaining credibility.

The bishop Jacques-Benigne Bossuet (1627??? 1704), one of the principal French theorists of divine right, asserted that the king’s person and authority were sacred; that his power was modeled on that of a father’s and was absolute, deriving from God; and that he was governed by reason (i. e. , custom and precedent). In the middle of the 17th century, the English Royalist squire Sir Robert Filmer likewise held that the state was a family and that the king was a father, but he claimed, in an interpretation of Scripture, that Adam was the first king and that Charles I (reigned 1625??? 49) ruled England as Adam’s eldest heir.

The antiabsolutist philosopher John Locke (1632??? 1704) wrote his First Treatise of Civil Government (1689) in order to refute such arguments. The doctrine of divine right can be dangerous for both church and state. For the state it suggests that secular authority is conferred, and can therefore be removed, by the church, and for the church it implies that kings have a direct relationship to God and may therefore dictate to ecclesiastical rulers.

The most commonly studied form of absolutism is absolute monarchy, which originated in early modern Europe and was based on the strong individual leaders of the new nation-states that were created at the breakup of the medieval order. The power of these states was closely associated with the power of their rulers; to strengthen both, it was necessary to curtail the restraints on centralized government that had been exercised by the church, feudal lords, and medieval customary law. By claiming the absolute authority of the state against such former restraints, the monarch as head of state claimed his own absolute authority.

By the 16th century monarchical absolutism prevailed in much of western Europe, and it was widespread in the 17th and 18th centuries. Besides France, whose absolutism was epitomized by Louis XIV, absolutism existed in a variety of other European countries, including Spain, Prussia, and Austria. The most common defense of monarchical absolutism, known as “ the divine right of kings” theory, asserted that kings derived their authority from God. This view could justify even tyrannical rule as divinely ordained punishment, administered by rulers, for human sinfulness.

In its origins, the divine-right theory may be traced to the medieval conception of God’s award of temporal power to the political ruler, while spiritual power was given to the head of the Roman Catholic Church. However, the new national monarchs asserted their authority in all matters and tended to become heads of church as well as of state, as did King Henry VIII when he became head of the newly created Church of England in the 16th century. Their power was absolute in a way that was impossible to achieve for medieval monarchs, who were confronted by a church that was essentially a rival centre of authority.

The English humanists English humanism flourished in two stages: the first a basically academic movement that had its roots in the 15th century and culminated in the work of Sir Thomas More, Sir Thomas Elyot, and Roger Ascham, the second a poetic revolution led by Sir Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare. Though continental humanists had held court positions since the days of Humphrey of Gloucester, English humanism as a distinct phenomenon did not emerge until late in the 15th century. At Oxford William Grocyn (c. 446??? 1519) and his student Thomas Linacre (c. 1460??? 1524) gave impetus to a tradition of classical studies that would permanently influence English culture. Grocyn and Linacre attended Politian’s lectures at the Platonic Academy of Florence. Returning to Oxford, they became central figures in a group that included such younger scholars as John Colet (1466/67??? 1519) and William Lily (1468? ??? 1522). The humanistic contributions of the Oxford group were philological and institutional rather than philosophical or literary. Grocyn ectured on Greek and theology; Linacre produced several works on Latin grammar and translated Galen into Latin.

To Linacre is owed the foundation of the Royal College of Physicians; to Colet, the foundation of St. Paul’s School, London. Colet collaborated with Lily (the first headmaster of St. Paul’s) and Erasmus in writing the school’s constitution, and together the three scholars produced a Latin grammar (known alternately as “ Lily’s Grammar” and the “ Eton Grammar”) that would be central to English education for decades to come. In Sir Thomas More (1478??? 1535), Sir Thomas Elyot (c. 490??? 1546), and Roger Ascham (1515??? 68), English humanism bore fruit in major literary achievement. Educated at Oxford (where he read Greek with Linacre), More was also influenced by Erasmus, who wrote The Praise of Folly (Latin Moriae encomium) at More’s house and named the book punningly after his English friend. More’s famous Utopia, a kind of companion piece to The Praise of Folly, is similarly satirical of traditional institutions (Book I) but offers, as an imaginary alternative, a model society based on reason and nature (Book II).

Reminiscent of Erasmus and Valla, More’s Utopians eschew the rigorous cultivation of virtue and enjoy moderate pleasures, believing that “ Nature herself prescribes a life of joy (that is, pleasure)” and seeing no contradiction between earthly enjoyment and religious piety. Significantly indebted both to classical thought and European humanism, the Utopia is also humanistic in its implied thesis that politics begins and ends with humanity: that politics is based exclusively on human nature and aimed exclusively at human happiness. Sir Thomas Elyot chose a narrower subject but developed it in more detail.

His great work, The Book Named The Governor, is a lengthy treatise on the virtues to be cultivated by statesmen. Born of the same tradition that produced The Prince and The Courtier, The Governor is typical of English humanism in its emphasis on the accommodation of both classical and Christian virtues within a single moral view. Elyot’s other contributions to English humanism include philosophical dialogues, moral essays, translations of ancient and contemporary writers (including Isocrates and Pico), an important Latin-English dictionary, and a highly popular health manual.

He served his country as ambassador to the court of Charles V. Finally, the humanistic educational program set up at the turn of the century was vigorously supported by Sir John Cheke (1514??? 57) and codified by his student Roger Ascham. Ascham’s famous pedagogical manual, The Schoolmaster, offers not only a complete program of humanistic education but also an evocation of the ideals toward which that education was directed. Ascham had been tutor to the young princess Elizabeth, whose personal education was a model of humanistic pedagogy and whose writings and patronage bespoke great love of learning.

Elizabeth I’s reign (1558??? 1603) saw the last concerted expression of humanistic ideas. Elizabethan humanism, which added a unique element to the history of the movement, was the product not of pedagogues and philologists but of poets and playwrights. http://www. wsu. edu/~dee/GLOSSARY/DIVRIGHT. HTM http://history. wisc. edu/sommerville/351/351-172. htm http://www. historyguide.

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