

The Papacy and the Historian—VII: The Feudal Papacy?

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An ideology was matured, if not created, in the reformed communities of the tenth and eleventh centuries. This was mostly done under the banner of the Rule of St Benedict. What this means, is not that all the reformed communities were really Benedictine, nor that all those who called themselves Benedictine were what we should recognise as Benedictine monks. In Northern Italy in the sources emanating from the more conservative churchmen it is obvious that the term Benedictine conjured up ideas of rabble-rousing radical churchmen urging their lay supporters to prevent married and unreformed priests from celebrating mass, by force if necessary. The centre of this activity was the Burgundian abbey of Cluny: it is instructive to compare the conventional image of a venerable, ivy-grown, primitive Ampleforth purveyed in the works of some modern historians of Cluny (the works of Dr Noreen Hunt are excellent examples of the scholarly hagiography of our own day that is quite as false as anything put out by a medieval writer) with the picture given by a hostile contemporary, Bishop Adalbero of Lâon. Adalbero presents us with a power-seeking, ruthless, abbot of Cluny, socially subversive, tottering on the verge of heresy, the enemy of the natural 'feudal' order of the day. Adalbero's abbot is St Odilo, the charming old dear of modern hagiography. Adalbero, himself a deeply political bishop in an age when all senior churchmen, and above all the abbot of Cluny, had to be politically alert, knew what he was talking about. Cluny was born of an attempt to manipulate the intricacies of the feudal world to the advantage of the kind of monasticism envisaged by Gregory the Great, Columbanus, and St Wilfrid. Cluny lay in the kingdom of the West Franks, in the duchy of Burgundy, the territory of the count of Mâcon and the see of the bishop of Mâcon. But the original endowment was the property of the neighbouring and more powerful duke of Aquitaine, who was also count of Mâcon. The duke of Aquitaine was giving up land his successors would have more difficulty in clawing back than any of their other land, just because it lay outside their own duchy. The West Frankish kings Carolingians reduced in power but far from *fainéant*, accorded it dignified privileges and some of the prestige still conveyed by their name: the real enemy was the bishop of Mâcon, whose power could be severely circumscribed by reviving the kind of privilege of exemption Honourius I had given to Columbanus' Bobbio.

On top of this the second abbot of Cluny, Odo, who had been the right-hand monk of the first abbot, Berno, at his first foundation, Baume, was the son of the founding-duke's own principal vassal, Ebbolord of Déols. Odo's mother had connexion with the area around Orléans, where the Capetian family looked for their principal support until their elevation to the throne of West Francia and their seizure of Paris. As a result Odo also got a family monastery endowed by his father, on the model of Cluny, and more important, the ancient foundation of Fleury, with the bones of St Benedict included. Odo based his reform principally on Cluny and Fleury. The estates he got he parcelled out giving them to the monastery nearest in location so that his monasteries were the centre of a moderately compact body of estates, the easier to administer and the easier to protect and maintain. In fact Cluny acquired a reputation for efficient estate management and when the reforming monks conquered Rome it was to Cluny that Gregory VII looked for men to reform the papal finances and run the papal estates efficiently. More remarkable still as Odo and Cluny's fame grew, influential persons, often on their death beds, gave Odo more monasteries to reform. Again it is clear Odo had the notion of spheres of influence. Cluny looked largely to the monasteries of the South and West: Fleury to the North and West. The Fleury connexion lay in lands where a few powerful princes were open to persuasion and short-cuts were possible. The Cluny connexion lay in lands where power was fragmented amongst a host of noble but more or less equal families a great many of whom had to be persuaded. I think myself that none of this was fortuitous, but that Berno and above all Odo knew their world and were prepared to exploit its contradictions.

The institutional side of Cluny's life was expressed in documents, perfectly feudal in form, but deeply anti-feudal in practice. What they stood for was a Church free of the kindred and its power, and free of secular ties and obligations so far as this could be achieved. In the tenth century this could only be done in a few monasteries patronised by families powerful enough to despise the general currents of feudal opinion. Nothing suggests that even in Odo's day the monks meant to stay in their reformed cloisters for ever. Very early in the history of monastic reform the leading men of the cloister meant to take over the high places of the Church and fashion it in a new image—naturally they said they meant to restore it to an ideal state long since lost. In the middle of the eleventh century they got their chance to take over the papacy itself. For seventy years or so reformed monks and their close friends ran the papacy. Urban II and Pascal II were Cluny monks in every sense of the world: Gregory VII, Stephen IX and Nicholas II—the vital names, all had connexions of a kind with Cluny. The tale of Cluny's and its sister foundations' immigrants to the papal curia is considerable. More important perhaps is the theology and the indoctrination they took with them and, from the see of Peter, attempted to spread to all the unreformed places.

There were important elements of continuity in the reformed the-

ology with what had gone before. When reformed theologians tried their hands at producing compilations of canon-law (compilations that were really polemical tracts representing right church order as the reformers understood it and expressed in legal form) it was above all the letters of Gregory the Great they pillaged. Whilst it is true much water had flowed under the bridges since Gregory's day, the reformers were still right in thinking there was an important family resemblance between what they represented as right and what Gregory was aiming at. In particular, between the two eras lay the impact of the Carolingian Empire. Gregory the Great would not have cared for Charlemagne's version of theocratic kingship: neither, for that matter, did the reformers, but they could not ignore the impact Carolingian political theology had had on the overlapping worlds of theology and politics. In many ways they themselves were deeply imbued with Carolingian thought. About the year 1000 Abbot Abbo of Fleury in a remarkably sophisticated 'collection of canons' included many items from the imperial legislation of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious. He was aware not everyone accepted the propriety of taking canons in church matters on the authority of lay rulers but he did not dissemble, as some did: when, Abbo asked, had the utility of the Church been served as it was served by those two Emperors? In consequence the oldest thread in the reforming ideology, and perhaps the thread around which the rest crystallised out, was that of secular authority, or as they saw it, kingship. The Carolingians inherited from the Merovingians a royal theology based on an OT conception of royal authority. Good kings were as David, bad as Saul, no more easy to get rid of. But as Charlemagne showed on occasions, an OT view of kingship had drawbacks for men so very much of the Church as these reformers were.

The OT, the Davidic, conception of royal authority was quietly dropped. A process made easier by the disappearance of the Carolingians from power by the early tenth century and from view by the end of the same century. In its place was put a comparison between a Christian king and Christ himself. This Christocentric theology of kingship is best known in its development by the court theologians of the Saxon Emperors of East Francia and has occasioned some over-hasty judgements of caesaro-papism by many scholars. The same theology is found in West Francia and England too. It was embodied in the new and interconnected coronation rites adopted in the tenth century in all three countries; most important is the emphasis on anointing with holy oil and the replacement of the ornamented helmet by the lily crown. In England King Edgar was compared by St Æthelwold to the Good Shepherd and his coronation was retarded until he was in his twenty-ninth year, as was Jesus when he began his public ministry. Not even Otto III was treated to more Christocentrism than this. But the main stream of the reformed theologians meant the very reverse of caesaro-papism. It is necessary to ask: what did these theologians think of Christ? What kind of Christ, what aspect of Christology were they appealing to?

Already we find the beginnings of the new theology of the atonement, fully and brilliantly developed by St Anselm a century or so later. The 'new' Jesus was the suffering Jesus, exemplified in the phenomenally successful pious symbolism of the Crucifix. It was these reformers who made the representation of Christ, naked and suffering upon the Cross a popular form of devotion. It is important to realise that a very important part of the motivation was political: the reformers meant by turning the pious layman's thoughts to the suffering Christ to turn them away from what they called dominating the bride of Christ, the Church. It was with the suffering Christ that the Christian prince was compared. For the first time Christian theologians faced squarely the probability that to follow Christ was to court earthly defeat and misfortune. Abbo of Fleury wrote a neglected tract on this kind of kingship in the shape of a life of Edmund of East Anglia, who had been killed by the Vikings. As history the *Life* is without interest but as an ideological tract its importance is great. Edmund meets his death for no patriotic reasons. He will not submit to the Viking terms because as a triply anointed Christian (baptism, confirmation, and royal unction) he cannot submit to a pagan. Martyrdom was the likely crown of a truly Christian king—to be received into the senate of the heavenly court as Abbo quaintly puts it. But it had to be accepted. Pagans could never be allies or overlords: a Christian king's duty is to fight them. The ideology of the Crusade is not very far below the surface of Abbo's *Life*.

Because a king was equated with the suffering Christ, arguments for the control of high Church offices from *raisons d'état*—the importance of having bishops who could be trusted to keep their quotas of warriors on their toes, and the securing of the great influence bishops had in their localities for royal policies—could be brushed aside. The effect of all this is very noticeable in Gregory VII's correspondence. That a candidate for episcopal office had the confidence of the king is treated as irrelevant: the most striking example of this is the disputed election to the great see of Milan. Milan was in the grip of social revolution. The old establishment, an aristocracy based on the countryside, had a monopoly of benefices in the province of Milan, more or less modern Lombardy. The archbishop of Milan had some power in secular affairs too. This monopoly was challenged by a party called the *patararia*, rag-pickers. It is often said that this name was given to them because of their poverty: they were social outcasts. They do not behave like the dregs of society but as a party with the capacity to persevere in revolutionary action over long periods of ill-fortune; they plainly had funds. It seems to me they were very far from social outcasts. It is at least possible they were given the name *patararia* because of a connexion with the textile trade. At any rate it is clear that at Milan there was a class of person, who had been called in a generation before the civil war broke out, to help out the feudal aristocracy in a local war. It was from then onwards that we see a class of people, established enough to be of military use, challenging the old

dominant class for power. Lombardy being what it was, a challenge for political power meant a challenge for the control of the local Church. The *patararia* were astute enough to jump on the reform bandwagon. Until political trouble between the social classes broke out, Northern Italy was one of the most obdurate and reactionary areas from the reformers' point of view. Gregory VII not only forced Henry IV, the German king, to abandon his candidate for the see of Milan (and that meant virtually writing off the traditional German influence in Northern Italy, where as many as half the episcopate were on occasion either Germans or German trained) but he sought to make Henry use his military power to force the recalcitrant Milanese to accept the patararian candidate. I do not believe that Gregory saw any relevance in the political consequences of what he was trying to do in Lombardy: plenty of his critics however did.

From kingship, with the need to exalt it when it was on the side of the utility of the Church but to humiliate it when the Christ-king, *horribile dictu*, was a tyrant and therefore, not like an OT king to be put up with, but to be torn down if the reforming churchmen were in a position to manage it, the rest of the ideology flows naturally enough. Before the reformers' day the Church meant not the clergy *en masse* but all baptised persons living and dead. The Church did not lie within the confines of time and space. But the reformers wanted to emphasise the importance of the Church here and now. They were already moving away from the traditional theology of the atonement, which took it to be a cosmic drama of which men were helpless, if interested, spectators, to a view that emphasised the importance of the individual, here and now, earning the redemption the cosmic drama had secured for him. Alongside the traditional view of the Church there arose a new concept, of *Christianitas*, *crisendom* is the O.E. word which has stuck. When Gregory the Great, no slouch when it came to defending the rights and authority of the Church of Rome, had rebuked the patriarch of Constantinople for claiming the title oecumenical, he did not do so because it was a papal title. It was a monstrous claim because it implied variations in status amongst bishops. Gregory VII said bluntly that only the pope can be called universal bishop. They were not contradicting each other but talking in different universes of discourse. Gregory the Great thought of bishops as leading functionaries in the Church, i.e. the community of the living and dead. He himself was only one of some dozens of bishops of Rome. In this eschatological context it is indeed odd for bishops to claim such special titles. Gregory VII was talking about Christendom and in the perspective of this world the position of the papacy might well be expressed by the title 'universal bishop'.

The distinction between *clerici* and *laici* is as old as written evidence survives but the reformers moulded the terms into quite new concepts controlled by the idea of Christendom. *Christianitas* was not just divided into clerks and laymen but into the clergy and the laity. Influenced no doubt by Roman law they made the distinction one between

two corporations defined by their mutual rights and obligations. The laity were headed by the Emperor—the relation of the Emperor to independent kings was never seriously worked out—or, in practice by the king or sovereign prince of the region. If royal, he had *dominium*, sharply distinguished from *prioratus*, legitimate from illegitimate rule, marked by the public ceremony of unction and coronation. The function of *dominium* was to serve the Church as its leaders saw fit to decide it should be served. In particular he was to use physical force if necessary to purge unworthy bishops and abbots, and to back up attempts to purge their communities, at whatever cost in the ill-will of the local establishment. But once these communities had been reformed they were to be left alone as self-perpetuating institutions and the prince was to accept as bishops or abbots whomsoever the local community chose. The clergy were obliged by their orders to be celibate. No longer was it a case of enjoining celibacy as Gregory the Great had enjoined it, in the spirit of the Benedictine Rule, Hear ye my brethren, but accept it or get out. Of course Gregory VII, who began the campaign for a celibate clergy in earnest, never lived to see it achieved, but within half a century of his death the high places of the Church, from canons upwards, were as a rule celibate. The celebrated story of Heloise and Abelard was set in this time of transition and illustrates the growing acceptance of clerical celibacy. A generation earlier Abelard could have married his Heloise with little likelihood of much fuss.

The reformers were basically monks from monasteries of strict observance. Not surprisingly, since most of them had been dumped on the monastery as children, their sexual teaching is bizarre. But the concern with celibacy was more than a demand for a restrictive sexual discipline. The only way to keep the property of the Church in the hands of churchmen and to destroy the kindred's traditional control over it was to cut off the senior churchmen from their kinship groups as much as possible. Partly this was done by elevating men who had been brought up from childhood in the *ambience* of an austere celibate community, where they could be imbued with the principles of theology as the reformers saw them, partly by seeing to it that they never founded families of their own or had any pressing reasons to identify back to the kin rather than with their fellow-clergy. A very important part of the reformers' concern for a celibate clergy was the seeking of an antidote to status-seeking and reversion to worldly things: it seems to me the modern opponents of clerical celibacy are not meeting the case when they talk as though nothing but sex was involved. But without doubt the reformers were absurdly—and dangerously—extreme in their sexual morality. They taught that laymen, too, could not enjoy sexual pleasure within matrimony without sin: sex was for procreation only. They succeeded to a remarkable degree in imposing their views on the laity, up to a point. They taught the upper-classes that sexual pleasure was a sin. Concubines were for pleasure, wives for procreation. The magnates were therefore not unnaturally inclined

to ask, if their wives were barren, could they not divorce them and try again. The reformed churchmen had no very good theological answer beyond citing the words of Scripture, but in a context that deprived them of sense. If there was nothing more to the sexual side of marriage than the reformed theology taught, then prohibitions against dismissing barren wives made no sense. The reformers did a good deal of damage by the inadequacies of their thinking here.

The reformers were not solely concerned with kings and princes. They had some new ideas about what knights ought to do too. They must desist from fighting fellow-Christians and fight the infidel instead. Gregory VII, as Leo IX before him, rushed headlong into the incorporation of holy war into the Catholic scheme of things. What they achieved in the short run is debatable, that they greatly reduced the credibility of the Church as a source of moral teaching in political matters in the long run seems indubitable. The level of the moral demands the reformers made in the end created a steadily increasing cynicism and scepticism.

But long before this they had made part of the scheme of things their division of the Church, first between Christendom and the Church in Heaven, then their division of Christendom into two corporations, the laity and the clergy. The laity's obligations and status were above all embodied in the position of the legitimate prince—and only the clergy could give, as they could retract, legitimacy. At the coronation of King Edgar, one of the high-points of the reformers' political achievements, a contemporary source says the King was decorated with lilies and roses. Lilies and roses as a source of Christian symbolism go back to Venantius Fortunatus at least: but the reformers gave the flowers a new significance. The roses are the symbol of martyrdom: here Abbo's King Edmund is a perfect example of what they meant. The lilies are a symbol of chastity, the laymen's duty to observe only a modest and minor indulgence in sexual intercourse. The lilies that decorated King Edgar must be the lily crown he seems to have been the first English king to wear. The roses must be part of the regalia too, though I have not identified what part. The clerical corporation, by the very bent of this very antique Roman way of thought, must have a *princeps* too, who could only be the pope. After 1049, with the advent of a capable and fully fledged reforming pope, Leo IX, and after Alexander II, a generation later, backed by Norman knights had seized Sant'Angelo, the radical party need have no inhibitions about pressing on with their programme since now they had the papacy. They needed to make their control of Rome self-perpetuating, as had been done in dozens of other sees. In this case they had to prevent the local nobility and the traditional clerical families from exercising their customary control over papal elections. They did this by confining the title cardinal—before this time an honorific title for the senior clerks in a number of sees—to the senior clergy of Rome, and at first attempted to give the sole right to nominate the new pope to the half dozen cardinal bishops. By 1100 the college of cardinals

had emerged from all this: a casual expedient necessitated by the needs of a special situation and justified by some astonishingly dangerous and facile arguments. Cardinal Humbert, who seems to have produced the title-deeds of the later college, argued that the cardinals were to act as a collective metropolitan for the Roman Church. An argument that was to bear some very deadly fruit in the generations to come. The college of cardinals was created to meet an eleventh century need by the machinations of a small but determined party; it could be abolished by a stroke of the pope's pen. In the context of two thousand years of Church history it is not all that venerable, has never been an unmitigated blessing, and has no other rationale than the utility of the Church.

Finally all this was to be underwritten by a body of legal principles re-interpreting the laws of the Church in the light of this ideology. All canon-law is to be papal law, either directly by papal decrees or implicitly by papal toleration. Where conflicts of law occur the canon with the highest authority wins, of course in the end that must mean papal authority. It was assumed—it never seems to have occurred to anyone to question it—that the Church could only have one set of laws valid for all times and places. To make the law of the past conform to the new ideas there was some ruthless purging and barefaced forgery. The justification of this was uttered by the dreadful Cardinal Humbert, perhaps the stupidest man ever to wield great intellectual influence. When it was pointed out that Gregory the Great had expressed himself clean contrary to the Cardinal himself, Humbert's reply was that the Devil pushed his pen at that point. But dishonesty and intellectual fiddling were incorporated into the body of canon-law at the same moment as it was conceived of as of absolute validity and universal application.

All this was protected by the Church's—i.e. the papally led clergy's—control of the process of legitimation. Humbert, Leo IX, and an influential portion of the reforming curia, knew that the conservative clergy usually paid a sort of death duty on entering their benefice, as did secular vassals, to the lord of the church in question. This they succeeded in moving from the realm of taxation to that of doctrine by claiming it was simony, and therefore heresy. Wives and/or concubines were also a heresy, nicolaitism. Consequently the more radical taught that these 'heresies' invalidated orders and that priests ordained by bishops who had paid their entry fee into their sees had no valid orders. It will not do to evade the implications of this by saying it is merely a canonical question of licit or illicit ordination. Humbert specifically cited Cyprian on the invalidity of heretical baptism with approval. This doctrine is proto-protestant. It is impossible to imagine Gregory VII and Humbert at home in the Rome of the Medici. They would have adored Zwingli's Zurich. This was why radical reform was so attractive to the social movements of Northern Italy. Simony and nicolaitism were perfect excuses for ejecting the aristocratic clergy where they had the power, and installing their own beneficiaries in their stead.

There is, of course, a lot more that needs to be said: the reform movement was not as monolithic as I have described it. But nonetheless what I have outlined was dreamt up in tenth-century monasteries and imposed by three generations of popes (Gregory VII, Urban II, Paschal II) on the Church at large, with considerable, if not entire, permanent success. Looking at all this in the perspective provided by hindsight, it seems to me that it is facile and misleading to speak of the high medieval papacy as 'feudal'. On the contrary what was special about the high medieval papacy was created as a consciously anti-feudal policy. The reformers sought, with some success to get the Church out of the network of kinship and vassalage into which it was knotted. They could not have succeeded without rogue feudatories like the Norman knights of Southern Italy, or the emerging communal movements in North Italian cities. Gregory's bellicose curia was financed by new families like the Pierleoni and the Cencii, who were not part of the traditional Roman aristocracy but were still very rich. Gregory himself came from a bourgeois family in the original sense: his mother lived in the *faubourg* outside the walls of her native city. The kind of liberty the reformers fought for soon produced schools, and those schools opened a career for the talented but unconnected in the Church which could, at any rate sometimes, lead a very long way. Given the traditional Marxist definition of feudalism, in terms of economics, and the existence or lack of it of a dependent peasant class, then of course nothing happened in this period, because the position of the peasant was unchanged. But common sense and common observation suggests that something did happen and that some of the symptoms of an emerging capitalist society, the increasing importance of extra-agricultural economic enterprises and the creation of bureaucratic institutions and a status group of bureaucrats to run them, go back to this period and the Church reformers. To adapt Marx, the feudal world produced its own grave-diggers and some of them could be found in the Rome of Gregory VII. The pope however was not one of them because he was not by origin, career, or outlook, anything that could properly be called feudal.