

Theological Studies



THE INFLUENCE OF ROMANS XIII ON PRE-AUGUSTINIAN CHRISTIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

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FOR the first 1,250 years of the Christian era the thought of the Catholic Church about the power of the secular state was largely conditioned by two passages in the New Testament. The first of these is found in *Matthew 22* and is the famous saying of Christ about God and Caesar. The second was the passage in Saint Paul to the *Romans*, 13, 1-7, which I give here from one of the current forms of Challoner's revision of the Rheims version:

"Let every soul be subject to higher powers; for there is no power but from God; and those that are, are ordained of God.

Therefore he that resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God. And they that resist, purchase to themselves damnation. For princes are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good: and thou shalt have praise from the same.

For he is God's minister to thee, for good. But if thou do that which is evil, fear; for he beareth not the sword in vain. For he is God's minister: an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doth evil.

Wherefore be subject of necessity, not only for wrath, but also for conscience' sake.

For therefore also you pay tribute. For they are the ministers of God, serving unto this purpose.

Render therefore to all men their dues: tribute, to whom tribute is due; custom, to whom custom; fear, to whom fear; honor, to whom honor."

The passage from *Matthew* merits a separate treatment, for it rightly came to be understood in time to set forth first a policy and then a doctrine concerning the relations of Church and State. The Pauline teaching alone will be studied here in the influence which it exerted on writers in the Patristic Age and the Middle Ages in their thinking about the nature and origin of political authority.¹

The purpose Saint Paul had in mind in issuing his warning is still not altogether clear. Saint Augustine thought that it was due to his fear that his teaching on Christian liberty² might have led some Christians to refuse obedience to secular rulers, and this would have been particularly dangerous in Rome. Saint Jerome, more historically minded, was of the opinion that he spoke as he did because the Christian Judaizers, still expecting a temporal Messiahship and following Judas Galilaeus, were rebellious toward Rome.³ However this may be, it is clear to us now, though it was not to all early Christians, that the passage has a definite political significance. It is universal in its bearing and refers explicitly to secular government, whose power, it says, is a legitimate thing, is derived from God, and must be obeyed from a religious obligation. It caused considerable embarrassment to some early writers that the Emperor in Saint Paul's time was no less a person than Nero, and hence we will come upon no little intellectual squirming,

¹Other passages which were frequently quoted in this connection were: Wis. 6, 1-11; Prov. 8, 15; Dan. 2, 37; 4, 22; Osee, 8, 4; 13, 11; Matt. 22, 17-21; 17, 23-26; Luke, 22, 25-26; Acts, 5, 29; 25, 8-12; 1 Cor. 6, 1-6; 7, 23; Gal. 4, 31; 1 Tim. 2, 1; 1 Pet. 2, 13-17.

²1 Cor. 7, 23, "be not the bondslaves of men," and Gal. 4, 31, "the freedom wherewith Christ hath made us free."

³Augustine, *Expos. in Rom.* 72; Jerome, *In Titum*, 3. (ML 35, 2083-4; ML 26, 626)

and even sophistry from some, in an effort to evade its obvious meaning. It is not so clear of itself that the precept also holds whether the rulership is legitimate in its origin or not, and there was great hesitation on this point among the early writers. The question was not entirely cleared up until Saint Thomas brought Aristotle to bear upon the point of the true end of the State, the common good of the community. On the other hand, the word by which Saint Paul described rulers, "ministers of God," made a tremendous impression on all Christian thought. It is interesting to note that the two Greek words which Saint Paul uses and which are both translated *ministri* in the Vulgate. They are *diakonoi* (verse 4) and *leitourgoi* (verse 6). Both words seem to have a religious connotation.

With these few explanatory words, we will take up in turn the four periods in which the Pauline passage underwent definite developments in its interpretation: pre-Augustinian, Augustinian, Early Medieval, and Later Medieval. In each of these I will attempt to portray the influence, and especially the conflicts, to which the passage gave rise, until the whole matter was finally cleared up in the Scholastic period.

THE PRE-AUGUSTINIAN PERIOD

The very earliest Christian writers, whom we call the Apostolic Fathers, occupied themselves very little with political matters. Saint Clement of Rome, who was Pope from A.D. 92 to 101, has nothing to say on the matter. Neither has the *Didache* (A.D. 90-100). Saint Ignatius of Antioch (d. A.D. 107) likewise does not say anything about it in the shorter and probably purer form of his letters, though the interpolated forms of three of the letters insist on the duty of obedience to secular rulers under the inspiration of *Matthew* 22 and Saint Peter rather than Saint Paul.⁴ While these passages are now not admitted to be by Saint Ignatius, they do probably represent a very early thought, if for no other reason

⁴*Ad Antiochenos*, 11; *Ad Philadelphenses*, 4; *Ad Smyrnaeos*, 9. (MG 5, 906-7; 5, 826-7;

than that they do not quote Saint Paul in this connection. Saint Polycarp (d. A.D. 156) likewise ignores Saint Paul and merely cautions the Philippians to "pray also for kings and the powers and for princes and for those who persecute and hate us, and for enemies of the Cross,"⁵ echoing in this Saint Paul to Timothy.⁶ On the other hand the *Epistle of Barnabas* uses a striking expression which may be Pauline in inspiration and which will recur in the Middle Ages: "Be subject to the Lord and also to your lords (*kyrioi*) as to the image of God, in modesty and fear."⁷

When we reach the Apologists, however, we come upon a change. Saint Paul's bold statements may have seemed too risky to be placed before new Christians who were unable to say when those same powers might not fall upon them and destroy them, but when Christian writers began to go out and argue with the pagan world, they found in the passage to the Romans a precious apologetic for the loyalty of Christians to the Roman Empire. If the post-Apostolic period found *Romans* 13 too audacious, the Apologists found no such embarrassment. It is true that the prince of them, Saint Justin (A.D. 100-167) rather leans upon *Matthew* 22 than upon Saint Paul.⁸ Tatian the Syrian (ca. A.D. 165), however, definitely brings Saint Paul into play when he says: "Does the King order us to pay taxes? I am ready to pay them. Does the ruler (*command*) me to serve and to minister to him? I acknowledge my subjection to him."⁹

It is not, however, until we reach Saint Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch, writing about 181 A.D., that we find the passage in *Romans* explicitly quoted. "This also," he says, "the Scripture commands, that we be subject to the magistrates and authorities and that we pray for them 'that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life.'¹⁰ And it also teaches us to render

⁵*Ad Philippenses*, 12. (MG 5, 1015)

⁶1 Tim. 2, 1.

⁷*Epistle of Barnabas*, 19. (MG 2, 780)

⁸Cf. *Apol.* 1, 17. (MG 6, 354)

⁹*Oratio adversus Graecos*, 4. (MG 6, 813)

¹⁰1 Tim. 2, 1.

all things to all men: 'Tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; owe no man anything except to love one another'.¹¹ In an earlier part of this same work, *Ad Autolyicum*, he even dares to tell the pagans that they have their rule from God: "The king was not made to be adored, but to be honored with legitimate honor. For he is not a god, but a man made by God, not that he may be adored but that he may judge justly. In a certain way *he has been entrusted by God with the administration.*"¹²

Here we see the Christian mind beginning to grapple with the thought that must have been to many Christians a scandal and a stumbling block: even the pagan emperors have their authority from God. Theophilus may not have been altogether clear in his own mind as to how it could be true that a pagan and persecuting ruler might have his power from God. That problem was not to be settled for the Church before many centuries had passed. "In a certain way," he says, God entrusted the ruler with his power. It was enough that Saint Paul said that it was so, without his trying to explain how it might be true. We shall see that many explanations were attempted before the whole truth became clear.

Another aspect of this crucial matter, however, also begins to emerge in Theophilus. The fundamental quarrel between the Roman Empire and the Christian Church was that the Church refused to identify the two orders, and in fact separated them. The Empire demanded the absolute union of religion and political government, while the Church insisted that each be confined to its proper sphere. This separation, of course, was based on Christ's own dictum about the separate duties owed to God and to Caesar. On the other hand, Saint Paul elevated Caesar, that is, political government, to a higher plane, since he derived Caesar's powers from God Himself. This duality of Christian thought—separation of the two orders and their common origin from the same God—must be re-

¹¹*Ad Autolyicum*, lib. 3, c. 14. (MG 6, 1142)

¹²*Ibid.* lib. 1, c. 11. (MG 6, 1140)

membered in all that follows. The early Christian mind went a long way before it was entirely at ease with it.

Later in the second century, in the writings of one who unites himself with both Eastern and Western thought, Saint Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons and disciple of Saint Polycarp in Syria, we find a remarkable passage which is a sort of summary of all that orthodox Christians must have held at the time on the relations of the individual to the political state.¹³ It is in this passage that we first meet several ideas which were destined to play a large part in the development of Christian political theory and some of which were not to die out until the Middle Ages. Saint Irenaeus is the first Christian writer to repeat the old Stoic notion of the origin of society. According to this notion, repeated here by Irenaeus,

man . . . came to such a savage state that he even considered his blood brother to be an enemy and lived without fear in every disturbance and murder and avarice; therefore God placed human fear upon him (for he did not know the fear of God), that subject to the power of men and bound by their laws, men might arrive at some justice at least and be moderate toward each other, fearing the sword that was placed before them, as the Apostle said, "not without reason does he carry the sword; for he is a minister of God, an avenger to execute wrath upon him who doth evil."¹⁴

Thus the origin of authority lay in sin, not in any natural law or inherent tendency of man. It came from God, of course, but as a punishment, or at least as a corrective. The principal effect of law is fear, and it is, therefore, solely coercive in its action. "Therefore," Irenaeus concludes, "the earthly kingdom was set up by God for the help of the gentiles . . . so that, fearing the human kingdom, men shall not devour each other as do the fishes,¹⁵ but by the passing of

¹³*Adversus Haereses*, lib. 5, c. 24; 1-4. (MG 7, 1180 ff.)

¹⁴Rom. 13, 6.

¹⁵This expression, "devour each other like the fishes," has a curious history. After Saint Irenaeus it next appears in Saint John Chrysostom, *Sermo in Genesim*, 4, 2; then I find it in the tenth century in the commentary on *Romans* by Atto, Bishop of Vercelli; it is also in that passage of the play, *Sir Thomas More*, which is attributed to Shakespeare, "And men like ravenous fishes would feed on one another," (cf. *London Tablet*, 175, 5219, May

laws may strike down the manifold injustice of the gentiles." Obviously, therefore, in the state of innocence there would have been no authority, since laws and the lawmaking power were solely the result of sin. It will be interesting to note that this account of authority as not a natural consequence of human nature as such, will persist until it is destroyed by Saint Thomas after the introduction of Aristotle's thought into Western philosophy, and will not appear thereafter until it is revived by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Apparently, this seemed at the time to be the only feasible explanation of Saint Paul's teaching about the secular sword and its purpose as "an avenger to execute wrath," and the old Stoic theory appeared to fit into the Divine Word. Moreover, it afforded a coherent explanation of the different kinds of rule, bad and good, and all equally from God.

"The powers that are, are ordained of God," quotes Saint Irenaeus from *Romans* 13, and goes on, "By Whose command men are born, by the command of the Same kings are instituted, adapted to those who in any given time are ruled by them. For some of them are given for the correction and help of their subjects and for the preservation of justice; some for fear and punishment and reproach; some for deception and contumely and pride, accordingly as each one is deemed worthy, for, as we said before, the justice of God reaches all equally."

This conclusion is quite consistent with Irenaeus' interpretation of the passage in *Romans*, but, as we shall see, in the hands of later writers, such as Origen and Saint Hilary, it becomes a dangerous and subversive doctrine.

Meanwhile we may register in passing that Saint Irenaeus also teaches that secular kingdoms, even before revelation reaches them, are legitimate and must be obeyed. Because,

18, 1940, page 480). An allusion is found also in Shakespeare's *Pericles*, Act II, Scene I, and in Algernon Sidney's *Discourses on Government*, Chap. II, Sect. XVII. Finally, it has been shown to me in Roger Williams' *Bloody Tenent* (cf. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, I, 68) What its origin is I do not know, but it may be derived from Habacuc, 1, 13-14, "When lookest thou upon them that do unjust things and holdest thy peace when the wicked devoureth the man that is more just than himself? And wilt thou make men as the fishes of the sea and as the creeping things that have no rulers?"

however, Irenaeus did not make a distinction between the kingdom, which is of human origin, and the authority of the ruler, which is of Divine origin, innumerable difficulties were bound to arise. Christians are going to be faced with the insuperable objection that kings came from God and yet were impious and persecutors.

Before leaving Saint Irenaeus, we may also record that in the passage I have just been quoting he informs us that there were Christians in his day who entirely refused to believe that the meaning of Saint Paul was that secular rulers held their power from God. He says: "Since he said these things not of angelic powers or of invisible princes, as some dare to expound the passage, he said: 'For you also pay tribute, for they are the ministers of God, serving this purpose.' This also the Lord confirmed, certainly not doing something inspired by the devil, since he ordered tribute to be paid for himself and Peter." Political government may be the result of sin, as Irenaeus held, but not for that reason does it have a diabolical origin. Human rulers may be bad, but they must be obeyed, for their authority comes from God.

Writing in Africa about the same time and a little later, Tertullian (A.D. 160-222) adds a new element to the picture, that of a patriotic Roman and almost a fanatical Christian, so fanatical in fact, that in later life he became a Montanist. "A Christian," he writes,

"is enemy to none, least of all to the Emperor of Rome, whom he knows to be established by his God, and so cannot but love and honor, and whose well-being, moreover, he must needs desire, with that of the Empire, over which he reigns so long as the world stands—for so long as that will Rome endure. To the Emperor, therefore, we render such reverential homage as is lawful for us and good for him; regarding him as the human being next to God, who from God has received all his power and is less than God alone."¹⁶

Until we reach the Middle Ages we will find only one other Christian writer placing the Emperor next to God, and then

¹⁶*Ad Scapulam*, 2. (ML 1, 700)

it will be said of a Christian ruler, whereas Tertullian is speaking of a pagan. Undoubtedly, however, this seemed to him as a Roman patriot to be the clear implication of Saint Paul's teaching, and it does not seem unfair to state that Tertullian was glad that his Christian theology suited his patriotism so well.

On the other hand, he put severe limitations on the Emperor's power. In the *Apologeticus*, writing as a Christian before the passage quoted above, Tertullian shows the same application as there of Saint Paul's words.

"They [our princes] know from whom they have obtained their power; they know, as they are men, from whom they have received life itself. They are convinced that this is God alone, on whose power alone they are entirely dependent, to whom they are second, after whom they occupy the highest places, before and above all the gods. . . . He [the emperor] gets his sceptre where he first got his humanity; his power where he got the breath of life."¹⁷

In spite of this statement of a Divine Right of Kings, he knows enough to limit that right:

"On valid grounds I might say that Caesar is more ours than yours, for our God has appointed him. . . . In keeping the majesty of Caesar within due limits and putting it under the Most High and making it less than Divine, I commend him the more to the favor of Deity, to whom alone I make him inferior. But I place him in subjection to One whom I regard as more glorious than himself."¹⁸

Tertullian, who was a skeptic in many things, seems to have had no doubts on the score of his political allegiance. A Roman citizen, who sincerely loved and admired the Empire, however much he detested its religion, he saw in it a great instrument of God's justice and he found in Saint Paul's teaching to the Romans a providential guarantee and justification of his own patriotism. It is true that later in life, as a Montanist, he refused to allow that a Christian could bear arms for his country, but this arose rather from his quasi-Manichean view

¹⁷*Apologeticus*, 30 (ML 1, 440 ff.)

¹⁸*Ibid.* 33 (ML 1, 440)

of life than from any change in his interpretation of Saint Paul.¹⁹

Another great African, whose life overlapped somewhat that of Tertullian, was the martyr Bishop of Carthage, Saint Cyprian (A.D. 200-258). He, however, was far from sharing the Roman patriotism of his fellow-countryman. In fact, the only political allusion I have been able to find in his writings is an obvious plagiarism of the famous passage of Minucius Felix in which the Roman apologist (A.D. 180-192) in his *Octavius*,²⁰ describes the origin of the Roman Empire as simply a great crime against mankind, one of the *magna latrocinia* of Saint Augustine. There is no evidence whatever that Saint Cyprian derived governments from God's will; in fact, the whole source of government seems to him to be sinful. It is not probable that Saint Paul's teaching had for him any immediate concrete meaning, as it had for Irenaeus, for instance. "Kingdoms," he says, paraphrasing Minucius,

"do not rise to supremacy through merit, but are varied by chance. Empire was formerly held by Assyrians and Medes and Persians; and we know, too, that both Greeks and Egyptians have held dominion. Thus in the varying vicissitudes of power the period of empire has also come to the Romans as to others. But if you recur to their origin, you must blush. A people is collected together from profligates and criminals, and by founding an asylum for them, immunity for their crimes makes the number great. . . . Of all these the principle is the same, which misleads and deceives, and with tricks which darken the truth leads astray a foolish and credulous people."²¹

Saint Cyprian, living in a period of intense persecution, was not likely to have seen in government anything but an unmitigated evil, and for this reason was led to adopt the pessimism of Minucius Felix. But it still remains strange that in all his stirring exhortations to the martyrs to stand fast, he did not come to grips with the Pauline paradox which derived the

¹⁹Other passages where he uses *Romans*, 13, are *Scorpiace*, 14, (ML 2, 173) and *De Anima*, 33. (ML 2, 700) But these do not add anything notable to the above.

²⁰*Octavius*, 25 (ML 3, 305)

²¹*De Idolorum Vanitate*, 5 (ML 4, 591)

persecuting power itself from God. He apparently solved the problem by simply ignoring it.

If, however, a harassed administrator like Saint Cyprian did not attempt to solve this problem, another African, a great teacher and the most learned of all the early Fathers, Origen, came to grips with it violently and solved it in a most startling manner. In a sense it may be said that the most pressing need that confronted the early Christian Church was what to do about the secular and the temporal. The secular was deified by the pagan Romans, and in fact, identified with the religious. The Christians, knowing that Christ Himself separated the two orders, could take one of two choices. They could derive both orders at the same time from God, a thought which was worked out by Saint Augustine and which reached its height in the early Middle Ages, or they could cling to the religious exclusively, and entirely withdraw from the secular, looking on it as evil, or at most as an order from which true Christians must be progressively, and finally completely, emancipated.

The second of these two solutions was adopted by the Alexandrian *catechesis*, under the leadership of Clement of Alexandria. This pioneer has, so far as I know, only one passage in which he treats of the secular government, and in that he leaves St. Paul entirely apart from his considerations. His successor, Origen, however, devoting himself to a systematic explanation of the Scriptures, could not well avoid it. Already in his exegesis of the passage in *Matthew* in which Our Lord speaks of Caesar and God, he has completely explained away the traditional meaning of the passage: Caesar is the Prince of this world, the devil, and before we can come to God, we must divest ourselves of all that is of this world, handing it over to its possessor, the devil. This is the meaning, according to him, of the precept to "give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." It does not at all mean that we are to obey the secular authority as we obey God.²²

Consequently, when he comes to the passage in Saint Paul

²²*Comment. in Matt.* 22, 17. (MG 13, 1420 ff.)

to the Romans, Origen is faced with a real difficulty. He side-steps it, however, in characteristic fashion. He takes refuge by an ingenious subterfuge in the Platonic theory of a trichotomy in man: body, soul and spirit. He points out that Saint Paul rightly says that "every *soul*" must be subject to the higher powers, not every *spirit*.

"He would never have said that every spirit should be subject to the higher powers. . . . If we are such that through our union with the Lord we are *one spirit* with Him, then we are said to be subject to the Lord. But if we are not yet such, but there is in us the common soul which retains something of this world, which is still bound to it by some business, for such a one the Apostle lays down his precept, and says that it is subject to the powers of the world; because the Lord also said that those who bear upon themselves the superscription of Caesar should render to Caesar what is Caesar's. Peter and John had nothing to render to Caesar for Peter said: 'Gold and silver I have none.'²³ He who has not this has nothing to render to Caesar, nor anything in which to be subject to the higher powers. But he who has money or possessions or any business in the world, let him listen to 'let every soul be subject to the high powers.'²⁴

While, therefore, Origen does not go so far as those whom Saint Irenaeus mentioned who denied that the "higher powers" are those of the visible world, nevertheless he just as completely nullified the Apostle's precept. Only the worldly are subject to these powers, and that only by reason of their imperfection. The just, the perfect, are exempt from obedience to the secular authority, because in them the "spirit" is in control; if only the "soul" rules a man, then he is still subject to the powers. It may be remembered that the Alexandrian doctrine of the spirit, as opposed to the soul, preaches a kind of mystical union with God, by which man is emancipated from secular concerns entirely. This kind of Christian anarchy, fortunately, did not obtain any foothold in the Christian tradition, at least in the crude form in which Origen taught it.

²³Acts, 3, 6.

²⁴Comment. in Rom. 9, 25. (MG 14, 1180 ff.)

It must be said also, that Origen was consistent in his preaching, for when he comes to face the ever-pressing problem of the scandal of obeying pagan persecuting rulers, he denies that Saint Paul had them in mind when he said that "he who resists the power, resists the ordinance of God," for "There is here no question of the powers which bring persecution upon the faith." His reason is that the words "There is no power but from God" refer only to the powers inasmuch as they have received from God the right to punish us when we have abused our senses, which we have received from God, and "thus put ourselves in their power."²⁵

How, then, according to Origen, could St. Paul have said that the power is the minister of God? He explains this saying in the same sense, namely, by holding that the authorities of the world exist only for the wrong-doer, and, by implication, do not extend their power to the just and the perfect.²⁶ It may be noticed in passing that in one point Origen was followed by some of his successors, namely, in explaining in what sense the bad king could be said to be from God. In his *Homily on the Book of Judges*, he examines the case of the bad kings of Israel. Some of them, he says, come from God, namely the good ones; but the others, those who were bad, came from the people in their sins, against the will of God, but they, too, were from God in the sense that God permitted them to reign in order to punish His people.²⁷ In that case the people were bound to obey for their sins.

It is interesting to note that we have an echo of Origen in a document that is probably contemporary with him, or a little after him, but which for many centuries was thought to be of Apostolic origin. The unknown author of the so-called *Clementine Homilies*, writing, no doubt, in remembrance of Saint Paul's precepts, but in the spirit of Origen, makes the same attempt as he to avoid the obvious meaning of the com-

²⁵Ibid. 26. (MG 14, 1181)

²⁶Ibid. 28. (MG 14, 1182)

²⁷*Hom. in Lib. Judic.* 4, 3. (MG 12, 968)

mand. The writer of this document is a forerunner of Saint Augustine in speaking of two kingdoms or cities, though in a very different sense from that of the great Doctor of Hippo. For to this writer the two kingdoms exist or will exist on this earth as human governments. He is definitely millenaristic in his thought.

"Two kings have been appointed, of whom one is selected to rule by law over the present and transitory world, and his composition is such that he rejoices in the destruction of the wicked; but the other one, who is king of the age to come, loves the whole nature of man. . . . Each man has power to obey whichever king he chooses for the doing of good or evil. If anyone chooses to do what is good, he becomes the possession of the future good king; but if anyone should do evil, he becomes the servant of the present evil king, who having received power over him by just judgment on account of his sins and wishing (to use it) before the coming age, rejoices in punishing him in the present life; and thus by gratifying, as it were, his own private passion, he accomplishes the will of God."²⁸

Now it is fairly obvious that all this confusion in the interpretation of Saint Paul's precept of obedience to the secular power arises from a primitive inability to make the proper distinction between the Divine origin of the authority which the king possesses, and the human origin of the office which he holds. Failure to make the distinction leads logically to a doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings. Such a doctrine, however, was abhorrent to the mind of the early Christian, living as he did under bestial and inhuman tyrants. It was natural, therefore, that a metaphysical mind like that of Origen would essay to evade the Pauline precept by sophistry.

As a matter of fact, there was another distinction which had to be made and which would have saved the meaning of Saint Paul. Even the good king is to be obeyed only when he commands what is right and what is just. Though Saint Paul does not make it, it is not contrary to his teaching. But, as we shall see, it was necessary to complement Saint Paul by Saint Peter's

²⁸*Clementine Homilies*, Hom. 20, 2. (MG 2, 450)

words, "We must obey God rather than men,"²⁹ when, of course, God and man command contradictory things. But it may be remarked that this passage also, wrongly interpreted, may be brought to confirm Origen's unorthodox theories.

Origen is quite aware of this distinction, but when he comes to quote it in his polemic against the pagan philosopher, Celsus, he does so with a subtle distortion which robs it of its true meaning. His words are:

"When nothing is commanded of us which is contrary to the law and the word of God, we are not so mad as to stir up against us the wrath of kings and princes, which will bring upon us sufferings and tortures and death. For we read: 'Let every soul be subject to the higher powers. For there is no power but from God. Whoever therefore resists the power, resists the ordinance of God.' We take these words in their more obvious and generally received acceptance, to meet the saying of Celsus, that "it is not without the power of demons that kings have been raised to their royal dignity."³⁰

Speaking, therefore, before the pagan world, Origen, even though he admits that kings have their power from God, such as it is, yet puts obedience to them on the part of Christians merely as a matter of expediency, as if he had said: "we do not really have to obey them, but we do so in order to avoid greater calamities, when it is possible for us to obey with a good conscience." This is quite in accord with the general otherworldliness of the Alexandrian school.

After the liberation of the Church by Constantine, the historical milieu changed and the objective data of the Christian political problem were vitally altered. There was now a Christian Emperor, and there was now no longer any difficulty in admitting that he had his power from God. On the other hand, there was the opposite danger of accepting a Divine Right of Kings, by which not only the authority but the office itself are received from God. This is well illustrated by the

²⁹Acts, 5, 29.

³⁰*Contra Celsum*, lib. 8, 65. (MG 11, 1560)

famous letter of the Spanish Bishop, Hosius, in 355 A.D. to the Arian Emperor Constantius, quoted by Saint Athanasius in his *History of the Arians*. Hosius wrote:

“God has put into your hands the kingdom; to us he has entrusted the affairs of His Church, and as he who would steal the Empire from you would resist the ordinance of God, so likewise fear upon your part, lest, by taking upon yourself the government of the Church, you become guilty of a great offence. It is written: ‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.’ Neither, therefore, is it permitted to us to exercise an earthly rule, nor have you, Sire, any authority to burn incense.”³¹

Hosius finds it quite within his right to resist Constantius because Constantius was a heretic; and the resort to the Caesar-and-God doctrine is perfectly legitimate in any case. But the Christian position is immeasurably weakened when the Emperor becomes a Christian, if the doctrine of the Church is that to steal the Empire away is to resist the ordinance of God, as if what is of purely human origin had become a Divine command. This is merely to accept the dilemma which arises from not making the distinction between the authority and the office and the person which exercised the authority. It is the obverse of Origen’s position.

Saint Gregory Nazianzen meets this difficulty in another and characteristic fashion. He says to the rulers of Nazianzus:

“You rule along with Christ and with Him you administer your office. From Him you have received the sword, not that you may use it, but that you may threaten with it. Therefore see to it that you keep it pure for Him who gave it to you as a gift. You are the image of God; but you also rule over the image of God, which is ruled here below but is on the way to another life to which all of us are going.”³²

Speaking to Christian rulers, Saint Gregory seems to imply that they will have nothing to do with the sword with which Saint Paul supplied them. Law being still looked upon as a

³¹*History of the Arians*, 44, of Saint Athanasius. (MG 25, 746)

³²*Oratio*, 17, 9. (MG 35, 975)

merely coercive power to restrain sin, in a society of the good and perfect there will be no use for it. This will come about because the Church will have brought about a new society. In a preceding paragraph to the one quoted above, Saint Gregory told the rulers, "The law of Christ has subjected you also to my rule and my throne. For we also rule. It is a rule which is more excellent and more perfect, unless the spirit is to be subjected to the flesh, the celestial to the earthly."³³

Saint Epiphanius, however, another Greek Bishop (A.D. 315-403), for the first time introduces another element into the functions of law and authority. After quoting the passage in Saint Paul, *Romans*, 13, he asks: "Do you see how this power of the world is established by God and how it obtains the right of the sword? It does not have that right to punish except from God." And in his mind it is not merely a power to punish, for he concludes: "For this reason are powers constituted, that for the proper and well-ordered rule of the whole world all things are set in order by God and administered."³⁴ In other words, there is something about society as such that demands order and hence a rule to create and safeguard that order. This would not be merely a result of sin, but of man's nature itself. It is this thought, which stems from Aristotle, which, when it is properly apprehended, will at last give a complete solution to Saint Paul's paradox.

A great contemporary of Saint Epiphanius, Saint John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople (A.D. 344-407), carries the development of Christian thought far beyond his age. His *Homily on Romans*, 13, is a compact and brilliant treatise on Christian political thought.³⁵ One by one he takes up the difficulties that have tortured pious minds before his time, and answers them. The highest authorities in the Church, he says, are bound to obey the civil power. No one is exempt.

³³Ibid. 8. (MG *ibid.*)

³⁴*Adversus Haereses*, 40, 4. (MG 41, 682)

³⁵*Homilies on Romans*, Hom. 23. (MG 60, 616-17)

Chrysostom first sets down his basic propositions clearly:

“To show that these regulations are for all, even priests, he has made this plain at the outset, by saying, as follows, ‘let every soul be subject to the higher powers,’ even if you be an Apostle, or an Evangelist, or a Prophet, insofar as this subjection is not subversive of religion. And he does not merely say *obey*, but *be subject*; and the first claim such an enactment has upon us, and the reasoning that suits the faithful, is that all this is of God’s appointment. ‘For there is no power but from God.’”

There is, however, a pitfall here. If we do not take care, we will be falling into the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, making a human event of Divine right.

“What say you? It may be said, is then every ruler elected by God? I do not say that; he (Saint Paul) answers. I am now not speaking about individual rulers, but *about the thing in itself*. For that there should be rulers, and some rule and others be ruled, and that all things should not be carried on in confusion, the people swaying like waves this way and that, this, I say, is the work of God’s wisdom. Hence he does not say ‘there is no ruler but from God;’ but it is the thing he speaks of, and says: ‘There is no power but from God. And the powers that are are ordained of God.’”

Here is the long-sought distinction between the power, which is of Divine origin and the office, which is of human origin. Moreover, it is God’s wisdom, His eternal law, operating, as we should now say, in the natural law, which decrees that there should be rulers. It would appear, therefore, that in Chrysostom’s mind authority is natural to man under God, so that there may be order in society. It is the *thing* that we obey, not the man who holds the thing. Civil obedience, therefore, is something paid not to any man, but to God. Here is the essence of Christian liberty: not a complete emancipation from subjection to secular powers, but obedience to God alone, though externally shown to man as God’s minister.

“Lest the Faithful should say: ‘You are making us very cheap and despicable, when you put us, who are to enjoy the Kingdom of Heaven, under subjection to rulers,’ he shows that it is not

to the rulers but to God again that he makes them subject in doing this. For it is to Him that he who subjects himself to authorities is obedient. . . . He gives it a more precise form by saying that he who does not obey is fighting with God, who framed these laws. He is in all cases at pains to show that it is not by way of favor that we obey them, but by way of debt."

It is, therefore, on the objective basis of justice, or, as he calls it, debt, that Chrysostom places the mutual relations of citizen and government, and therefore raises them to the level of a religious duty. It is in this sense that he emphasizes in what follows the Pauline concept of the ruler as a minister, and of his rulership as an office, which he holds for the public good, to the detriment of his private affairs.

"This is their life, this is their business, that you should have peace. . . . To no small degree they contribute to the present tranquillity, by keeping guard, by beating off enemies, by restraining the seditious in the cities, by putting an end to differences among all. Do not tell me of some one who makes an ill use of the thing, but look to the good order that is in the institution itself."

Chrysostom, therefore, clearly sees that in the matter of human government there is a kind of mixture of Divine and human planning. "It was for this," he says, "that from of old all men *came to an agreement* that rulers should be maintained by us, because to the neglect of their own affairs, they take charge of the public, and on this they spend their whole time and so our goods are safe." This is the first time, to my knowledge, that in theological writing, as distinct from legal works, there is a concept in the Christian mind of a pact among men concerning political authority. Moreover, it must be noticed, as a most important development, that law is conceived not wholly as a coercive power, to keep crime within bounds, but also as a means to the general welfare.

Now so far it would seem that Saint John Chrysostom has expressed rather fully what came later to be the whole Christian position as regards political government. Besides that,

there is good evidence that he is influenced by Aristotle in his thinking, and is attempting to adapt the Stagirite to Paul. In His *Homily on Empire, Power and Glory*, he appears definitely to espouse the theory that authority comes about, not as a result of sin, but for the sake of order, justice, and the general good.

"He who obeys his rulers does not really obey his rulers, but God who ratifies such laws, and he who does not obey them is an adversary of God, 'for there is no power but from God,' says Saint Paul. For that there be rulers, and that some rule and some are subject, and that not everything be so disorderly and the peoples be tossed this way and that like waves, this is the effect of Divine Wisdom. . . . For as, if you deprive a boat of its helmsman, you sink the boat; if you take away the general from the army, you hand over the soldiers bound to the enemy; so if you take away the rulers of the state, we will live a life more irrational than the beasts. For what the joists are to buildings, that rulers are in cities. Therefore, if the prince is faultless, with whatever power he will he can punish his subjects and reward them."³⁶

Here Chrysostom definitely seems to teach, following Aristotle, that authority, as well as society itself, is a necessary element in human nature, and therefore is a natural phenomenon, not a conventional one. This cannot be finally established, however, until we ask him the question put by Saint Thomas Aquinas. Granted that men naturally, under the impulse of a law of God, seek the communion of their fellows for the common good, and in this communion agree that there should be one to rule and the rest to obey, as Saint Paul tells us God ordained, still we have not finally settled the matter until we decide whether there would have been such authority in a state of innocence, or whether it is imposed on men by God as a consequence of sin. If it is the latter, then we have not firmly established the State on a basis of pure natural law.

Now we have Saint John Chrysostom's answer to this ultimate query in his *Commentary on Genesis*.³⁷ In this sermon, after taking up the first two kinds of subjection according to

³⁶*Homily 21 on Empire, Power and Glory.* (MG 63, 696-7)

³⁷*Sermo in Genesim, 4, 2.* (MG 54, 596-7)

Aristotle, and attributing them to sin, he treats the third, "much graver and more formidable than the others."

"It is the dominion of princes and rulers, not like that of the woman or of the slave, but much more formidable. . . . And that you may know that this kind of rule also is *the result of sin*, hear Saint Paul teaching, 'If thou dost not wish to fear the power, do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise from it. But if thou dost that which is evil, fear: for not without cause does he carry the sword.'³⁸ . . . He did not say, 'not without reason is there a prince,' but 'not without reason does he carry the sword.' He has put a judge over you who is armed. As a father who loves his sons and sees them doing their duties negligently and is despised by them for his indulgence, places them out of his goodness under severe masters and teachers; so God, seeing Himself contemned by our nature, out of His goodness has handed it over to certain princes to correct it. . . . *Because of our depravity there was need of government.* . . . He has no need of law who lives in moderation. Saint Paul testifies to this when he says, 'The law is not placed for the just man.'³⁹ But if the law is not placed, much more is the prince not placed over him. Here is the third kind of rule which had its rise from sin and wickedness."

Chrysostom, therefore, entirely agrees with the other Fathers when he makes secular authority the result of sin, and hence obviously would not hold that in the state of innocence there would be authority in society. Law and government are still regarded merely as coercive restraints over evil passions. If all men were thoroughly good, there would be no need of a law and hence no need of a lawgiver or prince. This seemed to the Fathers the obvious and imperative meaning of Saint Paul's teaching. All through the Middle Ages this idea will bedevil political thought, and it will not be until Saint Thomas introduces out of Aristotle the necessary qualifications and distinctions that a true basis of authority will be established. It will be clear to the reader that the latter part of Chrysostom's sermon just quoted, if logically carried out, leads either to anarchy or tyranny, just as the somewhat similar modern theory of Rousseau has done.

³⁸Rom. 13, 3-4.

³⁹1 Tim. 1, 9.

For if secular authority is placed over men only because of sin, then either one of two things follows, and we have seen both horns of the dilemma accepted by different writers of the Patristic Age before Saint Augustine: either the just man can claim that he enjoys Christian liberty and owes no political allegiance to civil rulers; or the obvious necessity of some rule is admitted and a ruler is set up, theoretically over those whom he has no right to govern, and hence he is a tyrant. It is this dilemma of anarchy or tyranny which destroys all those systems of government which are laid upon the foundations of Locke and Rousseau. It is only when we postulate the necessity of civil rule and political government as a necessary consequence of the nature of man, whether man sinned or not, that we can have a solid foundation of just political rule. But that will not fully happen until we reach Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Before leaving the Greek Fathers, let me remark in passing that a few whom I have not mentioned merely quote Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, without any other elaboration than the necessity of obedience to civil rulers. These are Saint Cyril of Jerusalem,⁴⁰ Basil the Great,⁴¹ Saint Cyril of Alexandria,⁴² and Theodore of Mopsuestia.⁴³

Passing from the Greek to the Latin Fathers, I omit with reluctance Lactantius, who has some very interesting remarks on the origin of civil authority, but who does not seem to have been inspired by Saint Paul.⁴⁴ Saint Hilary (A.D. 315-366) is another whom I must pass over lightly in this study, merely remarking that from his *Commentary on Matthew* we can gather what would have been his thought about Saint Paul. Saint Hilary lived many years in the East, but too early to be influenced by the clear-sighted opinions of Chrysostom. Rather he seems inclined to follow Origen, not unnaturally, perhaps, for he suffered much from the Arian Emperor Constantius. Even in the three short books against Constantius, however,

⁴⁰*Catecheses*, lect. 8, 5. (MG 33, 634)

⁴¹*Moralia*, Regula 79, cc. 1-2. (MG 31, 859)

⁴²*De Recta Fide ad Theodosium*, 1. (MG 76, 1134-5)

⁴³*Comment. in Ep. ad Rom.* 13, 5. (MG 66, 863)

⁴⁴Cf. *Divinae Institutiones*, lib. 6, c. 10; lib. 5, c. 15. (ML 6, 667-671, 598)

where we might expect him to treat of the Emperor's power as from God, he nowhere refers to it. In the *Commentary on Matthew*, however, he has the following, so reminiscent of Origen's position:

“. . . that he might free devout minds from all cares and human obligations, He decreed that to Caesar was to be given what is his. For if nothing of his remains within us, then we are not bound by the condition of rendering to him what is his. But if we are entirely taken up with what is his, if we profit by the right of his power, and if we subject ourselves as hired men to the working of another's patrimony, there is no complaint in rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's. But to God we must render what is His own: our body, our soul, our will, for from Him we had their origin and increase."⁴⁵

From this I think we may rightfully conclude that Saint Hilary, like some of the Easterns, felt that the only course for Christian men to pursue with regard to the secular power was to ignore it, give up the world, and live entirely to Christ. Let those who insist on being bound up with the world, and have handed themselves over to Caesar, render back to Caesar what is his. Let the good Christian also give over to Caesar what is his and then have none of it forever. It would, then, be highly consistent with this position for Hilary to interpret Saint Paul in a similar sense, as did Origen before him.

On the other hand, another Bishop, who did not suffer at the hands of a tyrannical Emperor, but used a friendly Emperor's power to crush his theological adversary, took an almost opposite position. Saint Optatus of Milevis, railing against the declaration of independence of the heretic Donatus, places himself almost as a defendant of the Divine Right of Kings: "He [Donatus] believed that he held the principality of Carthage. Now since above the Emperor there is nobody but God alone, who made the Emperor, when Donatus raised himself above the Emperor, he surpassed almost the bound of humanity, in making himself God, not man, when he did not revere him who after God is most feared by men."⁴⁶ We will

⁴⁶*Contra Parmenianum* 3, 3. (ML 11, 999-1001)

⁴⁵*Comment. in Matt.* c. 23. (ML 9, 1044-5)

see further on in this study that Saint Paul gave later writers occasion for drawing Tertullian's conclusion that the Emperor, who was God's creation (not as man, merely, of course, but as Emperor), was next to God in this world. It may also be recorded in passing that it was Saint Optatus who in this same passage I have quoted said that the Empire is not in the Church but the Church is in the Empire.

As we move onward in the fourth century, however, we find opinion in the West also crystallizing. All of the Emperors after Constantine have been Christian, except the Apostate; some have been good, some bad, some even heretics. The Christian mind has had ample time to estimate the precept of Paul in the light of events. Saint Ambrose, the great Bishop of Milan (A.D., 333-397), was one who saw the teaching of the Church measured against two great Emperors, Theodosius and Valentinian, who had their weak moments before God, but who remained on the whole valiant defenders of the Faith. Yet in his own ideas Ambrose remains curiously indecisive. The Church was on the eve of Augustine; it had not yet reached him.

Saint Ambrose was clear enough in his mind on the general proposition that Saint Paul's meaning was definitely that all, even the priest, must pay due obedience to the civil ruler.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, his thought was in the main hesitant and obscure. In a long passage in which he is discussing the claim of the devil to Christ that all these kingdoms had been given to him, Saint Ambrose introduces the passage from *Romans* to illustrate that claim. All power is from God, he says, for the world comes from God. Hence if a king is bad it is not the power which is bad, but the acts of the power. Then, after quoting the words again, "There is no power but from God, and those that are, are ordained of God" he says:

" . . . they are not given, but ordained, and 'he who resists the power, resists the ordinance of God' . . . the power is not bad, but he who uses the power."

⁴⁷*Enarratio in Psalmum 37, 43. (ML 14, 1080)*

His final conclusion, then, is formulated in the following way:

“The ordinance of the power by God reaches to the point that he is the minister of God who uses the power rightly: ‘He is God’s minister to thee, for good.’ Therefore there is no fault in the office, but in the minister; it is not the ordinance of God that can displease, but the act of the minister.”⁴⁸

It may be that Saint Ambrose means that the ruler has the power from God as His minister only so long as he uses it rightly. If so, then we have a new concept: that justice is an essential part of government, and the right to rule is lost by injustice.⁴⁹ However that may be, we have his valuable distinction between the office and him who holds the office. The former, he seems to hold, is from God; only the latter is human. He is aware, however, that this is not enough. If the office itself is from God, then it exists by Divine Right. Hence it is not surprising to find Ambrose taking a sort of refuge in the Origenistic formula, by which we are subject to the powers only when we put ourselves in their dominion.

“It is a great and spiritual lesson, he says, that Christian men are taught that they must be subject to the higher powers, lest anyone think that the rule of the secular king is to be dissolved. For if the Son of God pays the tax, who are you that think that the tax is not to be paid?”

So far he follows the simple orthodox teaching. But he adds:

“You who follow after the riches of the world, why should you not recognize the obligation of the world? Why do you put yourself above the world in a kind of arrogance, when by your miserable greed you are the subject of the world?”⁵⁰

There is an unknown writer of the fifth century whom, because of certain similarities to Saint Ambrose, we call Ambrosiaster, though at one time his writings were attributed to Saint Augustine. This writer is frequently quoted as an early ex-

⁴⁸*Expositio in Lucam, lib. 4, 29.* (ML 15, 1704)

⁴⁹Carlyle, *History of Medieval Political Theory*, I, 162, believes this; “The passage is indeed somewhat obscure, but that seems to be his meaning.”

⁵⁰*Expositio in Lucam, lib. 4, 73.* (ML 15, 1718)

ponent of an extreme form of the Divine Right of Kings.⁵¹ In one place he uses the curious expression: "the king has the image of God, as the Bishop has the image of Christ."⁵² In another, he speaks of the king as the "Vicar of God."⁵³ In the first passage, however, immediately after the words quoted, he says:

"As long, therefore, as he is within that institution, he is to be honored, at least for his office. Hence the Apostle said, 'Be subject to the higher powers. For there is no power but from God, and those that are, are ordained of God.' Hence it is that we honor an unbeliever though he is in power, even though he be unworthy, and holding the order of God, does honor to the devil. The power demands it, since it merits honor."

Whatever he means, therefore, by apparently placing the king next to God above the Bishop, the Ambrosiaster is otherwise quite orthodox, along the line laid down by Chrysostom, in the distinction between the office and the man. On the other hand, without any further qualification it is quite obvious that his words could lead to a serious deviation of conduct. For unless it is made clear, as Ambrosiaster does not do in this passage, that the unworthy king must be obeyed only when he commands what is right and just, we have a doctrine of the absolute state which in the name of Saint Paul would justify tyranny.

However, in another passage, later on, the Ambrosiaster at least approaches this very distinction. Commenting on the words of *Psalm* 1, 1: "Nor sat in the chair of pestilence," he says:

"We call the chair of pestilence that which is outside the ordinance of God and set up for the purpose that unjust judgments should come from it. . . . Moses received the chair of life which was set up for the purpose that upon it should be the authority of the just Judge and Creator, God. Hence the Lord said, 'Upon the Chair of Moses have sitten the Scribes and Pharisees;' and the

⁵¹For instance, by Carlyle, *op. cit.* I, 149.

⁵²*Quaest. Vet. et Nov. Test.* 35. (ML 35, 2234) This is repeated by Hugh of Fleury (A.D. 1106) in his *De Regia Pot.* 1, 3. (*Mon. Germ. Hist.*, Lib. de Lite, II, 467 ff.)

⁵³*Ibid.* 91. (ML, 35, 2284)

Apostle, 'There is no power but from God; and those that are, are ordained of God.' Hence he said to the prince of the people, 'sittest thou to judge me according to the law, and contrary to the law commandest me to be struck?'⁵⁴ When he said 'according to the law,' he meant the just and salutary authority of the chair. But when he said 'contrary to the law thou commandest me to be struck,' he indicated that very unjust judge who, sitting on the chair of God, judged unjustly. . . . Hence if those who sit on the chair of God oppress the innocent, the judgment will be unjust, not the chair. For when it is the chair of pestilence, the judgment cannot but be unjust.'⁵⁵

It is true that this passage leaves something to be desired in the matter of clearly freeing the subject from obedience to an unjust command, even emanating from the "chair of God;" nevertheless the writer seems to have had that in mind.

The last Patristic writer we meet before we come to Saint Augustine is the great Scripture scholar, Saint Jerome (A.D. 342-419). In one place he quotes Saint Paul's admonition to Titus, "admonish them to be subject to princes and powers."⁵⁶ Then, after having likened that passage to *Romans* 13, he gives the reason for it: the fear that the preaching of Judas Galilaeus still flourished, and that Christians, at least some of them, acknowledged no lord but God. Then, after bringing to bear the passage in *Matthew* about God and Caesar, he continues:

"Agreeing with this answer, the Apostle Paul teaches that the Faithful are to be subject to principalities and powers. The Greek word means rather principalities than princes and powers, and refers to the power itself, not the men who are in power. . . . Hence he added: 'to be ready for every good work.'⁵⁷ If what the Emperor or prefect commands is what is good, then we are to submit to his will. But if it is evil and seems against God, answer him out of the *Act of the Apostles*, 'We must obey God rather than men.'⁵⁸

Thus Saint Jerome, with his sturdy common sense, does three

⁵⁴Acts, 23, 3.

⁵⁵Ambrosiaster, op. cit. 110. (ML, ibid., 2330)

⁵⁶Tit. 3, 1.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Comment. in Titum, c. 3. (ML 26, 626)

things: he sees that the passage in *Romans* has a definite political meaning and imposes on all Christians obedience to the secular power; he sees the distinction between the power possessed by the prince and the prince himself and his office; and he refutes any suggestion that Saint Paul's admonition means that we are to obey any and every command no matter how bad, but holds that we have a freedom to resist when the command is bad. This might almost be put forward as a summary of the stage which the development of Christian thought concerning Saint Paul's admonition had reached by the beginning of the fifth century. With that we leave it, and pass on to a separate study of Saint Augustine himself and his followers.

