

## **The Power of Kings: Monarchy and Religion in Europe, 1589-1715**

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**Reviewer:**

Robin Briggs

Paul Kliber Monod has written an ambitious and very welcome book, which seeks to investigate the relationship between Christianity and kingship across the whole of Christian Europe in the 'long' seventeenth century from 1589 to 1715. This is certainly a brave enterprise, calling as it does for a working knowledge of several languages and the strikingly diverse histories of many countries. It is courageous in another way too, because anyone who takes such a broad approach must be vulnerable to hostile criticisms from legions of outraged specialists. That is one reason to praise the book, for at a time when scholarly myopia often seems more of a threat than ever such synoptic essays are peculiarly valuable. More than that, this is in many respects an excellent book; economically presented, well-argued, provocative in the best sense. There is a pleasing and constructive determination to bring together elements taken from intellectual, cultural, religious and political history, so that here too boundaries are constantly being crossed to positive effect. The central thesis is both plausible and important, suggesting as it does that the ways in which monarchs claimed to act as mediators between the heavenly and earthly worlds underwent a crucial change. Sacred kingship was supplanted by rational rulership, within the context of a religion which laid much greater stress on individual moral responsibility. Representations and rituals altered accordingly, as did theories of sovereignty, while the state itself accumulated both new powers and new problems.

That is a very bald summary of a complex argument, whereas the book looks to make proper allowance for the innumerable cross-currents and regional variations. Monod subdivides the whole period into five subsections, each roughly twenty to thirty years long. Within these cells he employs a kind of collage technique, discussing key episodes or developments state by state (although not in an unvarying order). The coverage includes not only the kingdoms of Western Europe, but Scandinavia, Poland and Russia. Inevitably this is a highly selective survey in terms of each national history, although a high proportion of the best-known events or crises of the century find a place somewhere. There is some degree of trade-off involved; this mode of presentation is lively and attractive, ensures that the discussion is always related to real events, and suggests that there were identifiable phases within the broader scheme. The price may be a certain loss of analytical power, for however compressed the descriptions may be, they still tend to absorb

most of the space, while comparisons are often less rigorous than one might wish. I felt that these chapters would have benefited from more elaborate framing devices, which might have included proper introductory and concluding sections. The problem becomes more serious when the conclusion to the whole book fails to match the excellent introductory chapter; I hope it is not just my own obtuseness which leaves me wishing for a considerably firmer attempt on Monod's part to pull all his threads together. If there is a problem it is certainly not with the writing, which is clear, stylish, and wholly free of jargon or pretentiousness.

When it comes to the main argument, on the other hand, I am in some respects happier with Monod's end than with his beginning. I am wholly persuaded that a new type of relationship between monarchs and religion became possible through the far-reaching evolution of European Christianity in the post-Reformation era, as much as through parallel changes in the state. This makes a pleasing extension to the Weberian story of how religion repeatedly served as the midwife to rationalism. The picture could be filled out on many fronts, not least through a much fuller investigation of the origins and nature of the forces which were transforming many aspects of belief and practice. It is not meant as a criticism to say that in some respects what we have here is a sketch map - a book of this kind is arguably most helpful when it invites others to start filling in the gaps. What may be more debatable is the whole notion of sacred monarchy, which by implication is seen as characteristic of the pre-1589 era. Monod himself admits that only England and France could be advanced as full examples, in terms of characteristics firmly attached to their rulers, although the Emperor Charles V and his son Philip II have more individualistic claims. The reader will look in vain for any clear definition of the term, which suggests a more general problem than a mere failure on the author's part. While historians undoubtedly need constructs resembling Weberian 'ideal types', these are notoriously slippery creations, which have an awkward way of taking on a life of their own. In this case there does seem to be a danger of reifying a thoroughly untidy situation into an implausibly neat one.

My own judgement is that there was no coherent ideology of sacred monarchy in fifteenth or sixteenth-century Europe, rather that elements of sacrality were present at various levels without forming a system. The rituals, ceremonies and public declarations rested on a kind of intellectual bricolage, like so much else in later medieval thought, and historians should resist the temptation to select elements from them in order to construct their own anachronistic systems. The extraordinary mixture of pagan, classical and Christian themes in each royal myth points up this heterogeneity. It is not wholly surprising that a powerful French monarch like Francis I, surrounded by claims about a saintly royal bloodline leading the second Chosen People, seems to have found remarkably little need to use them. A king who possessed all the characteristics of an alpha male could treat his authority as if it emanated directly from himself, leaving the fictions generated by his tame intellectuals as mere decoration. Much the same could be said of the Emperor Charles V; here there was a distinct touch of the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions in some of the myths surrounding the Habsburgs, yet it is hard to see that Charles himself had much time for them. The fact that Charles and his son Philip II undoubtedly believed in their divinely approved mission to fight against Islam and the protestant heresy may even help account for their more casual approach to issues about their domestic authority.

One must surely question how far the theories elaborated around princes had any impact on political reality; could later medieval grandees have uttered Shakespearean meditations on the king's two bodies, or equated their favourite sport of rebellion with a sin against God? The sixteenth century does begin to look rather different, as educational, religious and intellectual changes altered the whole context of political thought and conduct. My suggestion for rescuing much of Monod's argument, while putting a rather different spin on it, is that the first instinct of later sixteenth-century monarchs in difficulties - or perhaps their councillors - was indeed to play up their own sacrality, through a much more elaborate development of traditional themes. The classic case is that of the late Valois kings Charles IX and Henri III, as the work of Denis Crouzet in particular has brought out. The attempt to build a fantasy world through which the king could somehow recreate the authority he had lost in the real one proved an inevitable fiasco; in France it led through the Massacre of St Bartholomew to the League, the branding of Henri III as a devil-worshipper and murderer, then his assassination. Elizabeth I of England may have been an incomparably more successful monarch,

yet she too had to deal with a religiously divided country, then the eternal problem of her own gender. Her cunningly constructed myth necessarily evaded these problems, and therefore sits awkwardly with the tropes of sacred monarchy. One may also doubt whether it had much political or religious weight, in comparison with her more pragmatic skills in compromise and prevarication.

My argument is therefore that late medieval rulers were happy to incorporate the sacred into the bundle of claims which reinforced their power and status, one of whose strengths was precisely its vagueness and adaptability. Attempts to turn sacred kingship into an actual style of rule, on the other hand, are probably best seen as signs of panic or weakness; one reason why new forms evolved to replace it was precisely because it proved such a broken reed. Henri IV of France, for example, exploited the royal touch to demonstrate his legitimacy, but the main thrust of his policy and public statements was to associate the crown with rationality, the preservation of order, and national hostility to Spain. The simultaneous development of Bodin's theory of sovereignty fits very well with this shift. If 1589 is therefore a very appropriate date at which to begin the story, it may also be a much sharper break than Monod indicates, marking the abrupt end of an ill-starred experiment with sacred monarchy in one major state. Sixty years later the execution of Charles I would mark a similar watershed in British history, despite the considerable posthumous success of the cult of the royal martyr. The difficulty we all have is in deciding just where the crucial shifts occur, when even traumatic events have to be placed within the massive continuities of a period when change was generally regarded as a thoroughly bad thing, and innovations did best if disguised as a return to the past.

On the whole I think that Monod succeeds in conveying the immensely disruptive force of the reformation and counter-reformation movements, to which monarchs had no choice but to respond. Whether he has carried the analysis far enough is another matter, while some particular elements may be underplayed, such as the strong apocalyptic and eschatological influences on the thought of many zealots, which might even lead some of them to exult in 'times of shaking'. To engage in a rather outrageous reviewer's gimmick of having it both ways, I must add that when he does highlight this element in connection with Frederick V of the Palatinate and his Bohemian adventure of 1618-20 I think he has been led astray by some of the wilder speculations of the late Frances Yates, subsequently pretty much exploded by numerous critics. More generally there is another major problem in determining the extent to which extreme statements of religious positions represent broader opinion. For example, Monod perceives an outright clash between the French *dévo*t movement and the policies of Cardinal Richelieu, which involves him in some drastic simplifications of highly complex issues and relationships. Others - including this reviewer - would see Richelieu as having been remarkably successful in retaining the support of most Catholic reformers in France, and doubt whether either popular or noble revolt drew major inspiration or strength from this direction. One of the Cardinal's greatest skills lay in his manipulation of public opinion; in this context there does seem to be some error of perspective in devoting more attention to Rubens's canvases glorifying Marie de' Medici than to the crucial debates in the 1620s and 30s over *raison d'état*, and to the propaganda offensive of which the latter were part. It can well be argued that such key policy issues as alliances with protestant states and toleration for the Huguenots had deeply unsettling implications for the Most Christian King. Opponents, many of them thoroughly opportunistic, deployed a whole range of what were essentially analogical claims, which implied that the political and religious worlds should operate as a harmonious whole. Ministerial writers were forced to draw distinctions which relied on analytical reasoning, and bore a very close resemblance to the casuistry of the Jesuits.

This is one of a number of instances in which Monod's treatment of the central French case leaves me dissatisfied or unconvinced, yet where by following somewhat different lines of reasoning one can arrive at rather similar conclusions. The pattern of change is less linear than he implies, for trends may even go into reverse; there are certainly some very powerful cross-currents at work. While he does include a similar cautious statement in his own final remarks, the selectivity of his presentation risks giving a different impression. When it comes to Louis XIV there is little to complain about in what he says; the problem is rather with the omissions. Although Monod makes effective use of one of my own favourite documents, the journal kept by the priest Alexandre Dubois, he gives only the briefest consideration to developments within

the catholic reform and their interaction with the state. The very high level of symbiosis achieved over the period 1660-1700 in a drive to impose social and religious discipline on the people must be set against the relatively minor issue of the suppression of the Company of the Holy Sacrament. If Archbishop Fénelon deployed familiar *dévot* arguments in his 1693 letter criticizing royal policy, he also masterminded the disastrous anti-Jansenist bull *Unigenitus* twenty years later, which attacked many of the values he had once seemed to advocate. The church-state alliance ultimately threatened to produce a strange caricature of a confessional state, within which both the royal government and the catholic hierarchy had trapped themselves with an impossibly narrow definition of orthodoxy. The treatment of *Unigenitus* is a major weakness, so sketchy that the reader gets no impression of how important the crisis was at the time, nor of its immense significance for the future.

These remarks have concentrated on France, but I see similar problems with the book's handling of other states, where several alternative narratives could be provided in almost every case. In isolating one aspect of so complex a situation - whose scale of difficulty is most imperfectly suggested by this review - Monod has therefore not written a truly balanced study of the relations between monarchy and religion in seventeenth-century Europe. That would of course be a formidable task for even one country over a shorter period, so there is no prospect that any single volume will achieve such a feat. What he has achieved is however considerably more than these perhaps querulous comments might indicate. This is in many ways a book to think and argue with; to say that its central thesis is flawed or incomplete is not at all the same as saying that it is wrong. As I indicated at the start, Monod has put his finger on what is patently a crucial seventeenth-century development, then marshalled an impressive amount of evidence around his theme, while leaving space for others to develop the more elaborate analyses and explanations the topic ultimately demands.

As a parting shot, one possible line for development might be derived from my concerns about the applicability of the 'sacred monarchy' concept in the earlier period. This argument would emphasize the post-Renaissance ambition, on many fronts, to create structures in what had previously been inchoate or fragmented styles of thought. One aspect of this earlier situation had been a remarkably confused boundary between sacred and profane, whose relatively easy co-existence depended on a lack of differentiation. This flexibility was further aided by the habit of associating the sacred with specific times and places, at the expense of continuities. Religious reformers within all denominations displayed great impatience with such ways of thinking and behaving, however inconsistent their own attempts at greater logic may really have been. Rationality was as much internal to religious reform as it was to political ideas about the state, although the two did not mesh at all well on many occasions. The reformers sought to alter key understandings about the self and the relationship of the earthly world to the divine purpose, in order to eliminate the corruption of true religion; in the process they were drawn to redefine the sacred so that it covered virtually every aspect of life. In retrospect this was an impossibly ambitious dream, which carried the seeds of its own failure and of intense conflicts. Once the sacred was effectively redefined, sacred monarchy would have had to move far beyond its relatively feeble and spasmodic medieval manifestations if it was to prove an effective mode of rulership. In this light religious change posed huge problems for rulers, since it set standards which were incompatible with any realistic form of everyday rule, while inspiring groups of zealots who would be dissatisfied with anything less. If we locate much of the dynamic within the religious and intellectual sphere in this way, then the story told by Monod acquires new resonances. Above all I would claim that it is given a much clearer causal pattern. One of the problems I find with the numerous intelligent and interesting historians of ritual and ceremony on whose work he draws is that of the implicit causal links; why and how are changes made, and do they really matter? Of course these are matters which historians are likely to debate for decades to come, and my criticisms are meant as a friendly response to the very considerable stimulus Paul Monod should have given to that debate.

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[2]

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