

## A History of Medieval Political Thought, 300-1450

**Review Number:**

33

**Publish date:**

Saturday, 1 November, 1997

**Author:**

Joseph Canning

**ISBN:**

9780415013499

**Date of Publication:**

1996

**Price:**

£65.00

**Pages:**

272pp.

**Publisher:**

Routledge

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.routledge.com/books/A-History-of-Medieval-Political-Thought-isbn9780415013499>

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

Janet Nelson

Joseph Canning's preface acknowledges a debt to his research supervisor Walter Ullmann, whose Penguin *History of Political Thought: the Middle Ages*, published in 1965 (revised edition 1970) has remained a standard introduction for anglophone readers. A new short guide is timely, and the ex-student's will bid fair to replace the master's. Like Ullmann's, this book is admirably clear in presentation and exposition. It judiciously summarises a good deal of the research done over the past thirty years, and has an up-to-date bibliography, including much in Germ. an. Specialists will be grateful too for end-note citations of texts in the original Latin. The book's division into four well-defined chronological chapters of virtually equal length provides a solid structure: the first chapter goes from Late Antiquity to the eighth century; the second covers the Carolingian and post-Carolingian periods; the third opens with a clear account of the Investiture Contest and traces church-state conflicts through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as well as discussing the impact on political ideas of 'the revived legacy of antiquity' in law and philosophy; the fourth pursues church-state conflicts, and also conflict within the church, in the late Middle Ages, specifically through their exposition in the writings of jurists. Lines of substantial continuity are picked out and followed up consistently. Thus ten lucid pages in Chapter 1 on the Code of Justinian provide a reference-point for the discussion in Chapters 3 and 4 of the revived study and application of the Code in the central and later Middle Ages; and evolving ideas of papal government are dealt with successively in all four chapters. This is, in one important sense, to go with the grain of the subject: ideas do have a life of their own, as one writer copies, modifies and refines another's work, takes up the old terminological tools, while putting them to new uses.

Yet if anachronism is, as Lucien Febvre said, historians' cardinal sin, it is one most seductively besetting for

the historian of ideas. Canning chides (fairly gently) Ullmann himself for sometimes having read early medieval texts through later medieval spectacles, with distorting results. Readers are firmly warned that passages from Justinian's Code, or the letters of Gregory I, were extrapolated from their original context in later centuries, and assigned rather different meanings from what their original authors intended. Canning stresses at the outset the need to treat thought in historical context, to view ideas 'against the background of the societies, institutions, conflicts and intellectual milieux in which they were produced and with which they were concerned'. To historians of ideas, this is a congenial if familiar mission statement.

A comparison of Canning's work with Ullmann's not only provides a useful reviewer's entrée but seems at first to fit Canning's own agenda. In Chapter 1, he repeatedly sets out Ullmann's interpretation on a particular point, then proceeds to qualify, or even dissent from, it: the notion of Caesaropapism is rejected on the grounds that the Byzantine emperor was never a priest (pp. 13-14—though the potentially misleading expression 'priest-king' continues to be used from time to time by Canning himself); a homogeneous 'Germanic kingship' is discarded (following P.D. King) as 'a myth' (p. 16); the claim that earlier medieval governmental power was conceived unilineally, as 'descending' from on high, is challenged on the grounds that it privileges the question of origin (where does power come from?) and underplays that of purpose (what is power for?) (p. 19); the account of the ruler's tutorial function as straightforwardly 'theocratic' is attacked as partial (p. 21); the centrality of legislation to theocracy is seriously qualified by a counter-emphasis on the role of the 'people' in the application of legal custom (pp. 23-24); the reading of Leo I's 'plenitude of power' in a jurisdictional sense is rejected as anachronistic (p. 32).

Some features of the book's structure too mark a break with Ullmann's. Beginning Chapter 1 in the fourth century rather than the mid-fifth allows Canning to appreciate the importance of Constantine's reign, and to set Justinian's ideology of Christian Empire in its full Late Antique context. It also means the inclusion of Augustine (pp. 39-43), and this provides the basis for consideration of 'Augustinisme politique' in the Carolingian period. Though he accords no recognition to the work of Peter Brown (Beryl Smalley ed., *Trends in Medieval Political Thought* (1965), including indispensable papers by Brown and others, is quite the most surprising omission from his Bibliography), Canning writes with benefit of *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought* (1991) edited by J.H. Burns, and makes good use of the sections by Donald Nicol on Byzantium, and by P. D. King on the barbarian kingdoms: the notes to Canning's Chapter 1 contain seven references to *The Cambridge History*. Chapter 2 is clearly seen by Canning himself as an important and distinctive feature of his book: the period from the eighth century to the eleventh was, he writes (p. 44), 'of crucial significance because it witnessed the consolidation of characteristic medieval ideas about both the nature of organised society and its structures of authority and power. Many of these concepts ... were to remain basic for the remainder of the Middle Ages'. Such an appraisal contrasts with that implicit in Ullmann's 1965 book and in the text and source-books of John Morrall, Ewart Lewis and Brian Tierney, all of similar vintage and all consigning the earlier medieval period to relative, or total, neglect.

Yet if Canning's emphasis on the Carolingian period is in some ways welcome, it must be said that a close reading of Chapter 2 suggests an incomplete account of the period's importance (the influence of Augustine is underestimated, particularly in relation to Hincmar of Rheims, and the notes to this chapter, in striking contrast to Chapter 1's, reflect a lack of any substantial reference to *The Cambridge History*) and an uncomfortable juxtaposition of interpretations rather than a synthesis. The problem here is not that ninth-century people themselves entertained diverse, even contradictory, ideas: in fact, a more or less coherent, and certainly usable, set of principles of government can be elicited from such texts as Hincmar of Rheims' Querzy Letter of 858 and *De divortio* of 860 (both unmentioned by Canning) and the *De ordine palatii* (mentioned by Canning only in passing in n. 53 to p. 63), as well as from coronation *ordines* (whose usefulness as evidence is well noted). Canning's problem stems, I think, from his reluctance to rethink radically Ullmann's notions of theocratic and feudal kingship, set out most forcefully in *Principles of Government and Politics in the Middle Ages* (1961), which was the calque for the 1965 text-book. Ullmann's own discovery, as it were, of the Carolingians' importance for the formation of theocratic monarchy (from 800, empire as well as kingship is relevant) came in the later 1960s, and was unveiled in *The Carolingian Renaissance and the Idea of Kingship* (1969). If research since then, as Canning rightly

stresses, has highlighted the role of consent in Carolingian government, this does not mean that Carolingian kingship should be seen, instead, as feudal. Canning's difficulties over this are evident. On p. 60, he struggles to identify the origins of fidelity (a clearer distinction between the royal *comitatus* and the aristocratic assembly would have helped). On p. 61, the discussion of whether the Carolingian regime was feudal ends on a note of uncertainty (Susan Reynolds' *Fiefs and Vassals* (1994), referred to fleetingly in n. 91 to p. 163 in the context of the academic law of fiefs, but by no means fully done justice to, really ought to have been taken on board in this context as well). Through out this section, the term 'signorial', introduced on p. 60 as a synonym for aristocratic, and used elsewhere apparently as a synonym for feudal, rephrases the problem without resolving it. We arrive at a similar impasse to that reached in Chapter 1 (pp. 23-4), in the context of barbarian codes, where Canning, after remarking, '...the king gives them legal force, yet they remain in a profound sense the people's law', concludes: 'At a deep level there is co-operation between ruler and people. This can be seen as an ambiguity or a discrepancy within this conception of monarchy; but to view it this way is really to impose too rigid an interpretative structure on the complexity of medieval ideas of rulership and to complain when apparent inconsistencies result... [I]f applied too rigorously it [i.e. 'the theocratic thesis' has the defect that it is ... too simple. The problems involved in the theocratic ruler's relationship to existing law only received overt and detailed attention far later in the Middle Ages with the development of scientific jurisprudence when difficulties were clearly perceived'. The appeal to 'complexity' (are medieval political ideas peculiar in this respect?), and the last sentence's *non-sequitur*, suggest that Canning has washed his hands of the problem as far as the earlier Middle Ages are concerned. Yet it is precisely in that earlier-medieval context that the idea of consent and—neglected by Canning in this chapter—the closely related ideas of community and representation need close attention, preferably with reference to a number of works by G. Althoff, T. Bisson, O.-G. Oexle, E. Peters and S. White, and most of all to Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities* (1984) (all absentees from Canning's Bibliography).

To say that such ideas were 'not nearly so noticeable in the sources' as theocratic ones, and 'remained predominantly at the level of word and action rather than written record' is to beg the question of what count as 'sources'. 'Before the mid-eleventh century the raw materials for political ideas in the west were relatively restricted', Canning asserts (p. 84). Even on a narrow definition of such materials, there is more than he allows. He never mentions the Theodosian Code, for instance, whose importance to earlier medieval legal and political thinking parallels that of Justinian's Code for the later period. Cicero's political writings, and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, were known and used by writers from the ninth century onwards. But among the 'raw materials' for political ideas are, surely, records and reflections of the lived experience of political activity. Of that, there is a very great deal of evidence in a wide range of documentary and narrative and literary texts, the works not of legal professionals (this remains true even after Canning's scientific jurisprudential watershed c. 1100) but, directly or indirectly, of men, and occasionally women, knowledgeable in public business and affairs of the realm, in disputing and in dispute-settlement, in mediation and arbitration, and in such serious entertainments as reading, or listening to, tales of the past in song or history. Nor was intellectual endeavour hermetically sealed off from all this 'real life': Hincmar produced his most penetrating political analysis in considering King Lothar's divorce, and King Alfred's version of Boethius' *Consolation* embodied reflections on his own exercise of power (*anweald*) over praying-men, fighting-men and working-men. Given the abundance and variety of materials, it is questionable at this point whether 'the importance of legal *and especially juristic* sources my stress] was paramount' in all or even most political debate and thinking in the Middle Ages. This is not to deny such sources' importance, even for the earlier period and especially for the later, nor to underestimate Canning's expertise in expounding them: but his avowed intention (p. XI) to provide 'elucidation of political assumptions, attitudes and mentalities' would have been best served had he cast his evidential net as wide as possible. In the case of Chapter 2, why exclude *Beowulf*, Dhuoda's *Manual*; the letters of Einhard or Filbert of Charters; the historical writings of Region, Richer, Thietmar; and unassuming charter-records of dispute-settlement (including some involving peasants)?

The point about range of evidence can be made in spades for the period from the mid-eleventh century covered in Chapters 3 and 4. It is a period not only much better documented than the earlier Middle Ages in terms of treatises explicitly concerned with political ideas, but also offering a far wider range of other

relevant texts, and increasingly, now, and not only in England, in vernacular languages as well as in Latin. Furthermore, the later medieval period is Canning's own research area. Unfortunately, his chronological even-handedness has entailed a self-denying ordinance: devoting only half his book to the most evidence-rich period, Canning has had to be much more selective here, drastically paring down his treatment of such congenial themes as sovereignty and corporation theory. Even so, might room not have been found for Magna Carta, or for *The Song of Lewes* (Jean Dunbabin comments illuminatingly on this in *The Cambridge History*), or for Aquinas's Advice-Letter to the Duchess of Brabant about the right to tax? If Christine de Pisan's absence may not surprise all Canning's academic readership, Fortescue's undoubtedly will. So too, surely, will the absence of any reference to Marc Bloch's *The Royal Touch* (1924, English translation 1973), or to Georges Duby's *The Three Orders* (1978, English translation 1980), or to anything by Alain Boureau. More disappointing—since the history of thought is a matter of themes as well as individual writers and texts—is the lack of direct and sustained discussion of: secular representative institutions; counsel; office-holding; public opinion; the legitimacy or otherwise of taxation; the king's two bodies; the genesis and utility of the term 'sovereignty'; force as a constituent of power.

The scope of the second half of this book seems, sadly, to be narrow by design. Canning has opted for a delineation of his subject that may be less accurately called traditional than Ullmannesque. The texts chosen for more detailed discussion are largely those Ullmann chose, and though new scholarship is often mentioned, the readings offered seldom diverge from Ullmann's. It's true that more recent views of Innocent III as pastoral carer are set against Ullmann's picture of the arch-hierocrat (p. 123), but where is there any mention of Innocent's activities as territorial prince confronting representative assemblies in central-Italian towns? Some aspects of ideas about the state and sovereignty are certainly dealt with effectively in these chapters, and the section on conciliarism is notably good, but all is generally presented along tracks laid by Ullmann. When Canning lays such stress on juristic sources, when he writes (p. xi) that '... [B]ecause of the role of the church, ecclesiological questions assumed a political significance which they would have lacked in a more secular age', when he hails the twelfth-century growth of legal science as bringing 'a permanent development in the language of political thought' (p. 114), or uses the repeated (and insidiously teleological) motif-metaphor of seeds being sown, or evokes the mysterious sonorities of the organological, we hear his master's voice.

Ullmann's influence on the way medieval political thought is approached and conceived of, that is, on the form as well as the substance of a whole academic sub-discipline, remains pervasive in the anglophone world even now, a generation after his main works were published. Whether or not that influence is beneficial, and in some respects it certainly has been, it needs, in the late 1990s, to be reappraised, not just in parts—Canning does indeed tackle some parts—but as a whole. For if ever a scholar produced a body of work that hangs together, it was Ullmann. The one critic to have paid Ullmann the compliment, a genuine one, of confronting his whole *oeuvre* has been Frank Oakley, in a paper published nearly a quarter of a century ago in *Past and Present* 60 (1973). The important challenge that paper represented has simply not been taken up, even by those best able to do so. There was a total silence on Oakley's paper in *The Cambridge History*, including the two chapters which were Canning's very substantial contributions to it; and now Canning is silent still. Yet Oakley's critique had and has extensive implications for the way historians 'read' and periodise medieval political ideas. Oakley argued that the rediscovery of Aristotle in the central Middle Ages, far from destroying 'traditional' theocratic modes of thought, permitted them to be restated and reaffirmed, not least because Aristotelian 'naturalism' in fact accommodated the supernatural. Oakley's re-reading, further, suggested the need to modify traditional periodisation, and particularly to reconsider the twelfth/thirteenth-century Great Divide in which earlier notions of a sacred and mystical cosmology allegedly yielded to a secular, rational and legal one, or in Canning's words (p. 110), 'purely religious and oral categories' gave way to 'a physical explanation of nature', but also an essentially monarchist (theocratic) political ideal came to be superseded by a constitutionalist one. Interestingly, revisionist periodising looks more needful now than it did in the '70s, thanks to work on sources hitherto largely neglected in the context of political ideas: on the one hand by the contributors to Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre's edited collection, *The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe* (1986), who insist that earlier medieval modes of legal and political thinking were no less, or more, rational than later

analogues; on the other hand by Philippe Buc, who showed in *L'ambiguité du livre. Prince, pouvoir et peuple dans les Commentaires de la Bible au moyen âge* (1994) (another absentee from Canning's bibliography) that early medieval Bible commentators were often critical of kings and emphatic on original human equality, while later medieval commentators firmly defended majesty, a shift which reflected the changing relationship between princes and subjects. If Canning in stressing the theocratic aspect of earlier medieval kingship underplays ideas of collective action (which are quite distinct from the individual obligations of man to lord), he also underplays the re-evaluation of late medieval secular monarchy. To be sure, he is right about the significance of the advent of professional lawyers, but even in the late Middle Ages lawyers were not the only political thinkers, and when they formulated political ideas they generally responded to demands from the powers that were.

All historians learn these days that the past is another country; and many great medievalists have insisted that we fully register the strangeness of the medieval world. If the Middle Ages look too familiar, we fear a lapse into our cardinal sin.... In the end, though, it should be possible to make that world, and the workings of power within it, intelligible to, say, a student of modern political thought, or a political scientist wishing to learn something s/he can relate to, and compare with, other ideologies and systems. For such a non-expert or non-insider, Canning's book may make the Middle Ages look stranger, odder, more baffling, than they need or should. For this is the effect not only of Canning's Ullmannesque focus on 'legal and especially juristic sources', but of his Ullmannesque prioritising of church-state relations, and his insistence that from the Carolingian period on, 'a central and defining problem for the rest of medieval political thought [was] the relationship between temporal and spiritual power, and in particular that between the papacy and the empire', and, further, that '[i]t was the prominence of this question which above all was to single out the political thought of the Middle Ages as being different from that of subsequent periods' (p. 74). Of course these were important issues; and, yes, they generated political thinking because—and Canning could have said this louder and more clearly—they were essentially struggles about power and property. But in towns and villages, in castles and courts, in counsels and councils, power and property were discussed, negotiated and argued over: the idiom was in part distinctively of its time (privileges might, for instance, be credited to half mythical kings; saints might be invoked as protectors) and place (the king might be Athelstan, or Charlemagne; the saint, a national or an urban totem whose power was literally on site), but many substantive issues were such as to be recognisably political *tout court*. Without succumbing to anachronism, students of medieval political thought can read, and 'read', evidence of claims about rights, affirmations of identities, beliefs about community, ideals of original equality, assertions about the responsibilities that go with power, critiques of bad rulership, justifications of resistance, demands for representation jostling with only apparently contradictory requests to be represented, calls for justice, and last but not least assumptions about gender and patriarchy, which are more or less (and in some cases all too) familiar.

What, then, if anything, is distinctive, or in Canning's phrase 'specifically medieval' about medieval political ideas? In his Conclusion, Canning offers, in effect, three traits. Of these, theocratic monarchy only half-qualifies, given its hellenistic and late-Roman roots and early modern derivatives; and Susan Reynolds (*Ideas and Solidarities of the Medieval Laity* (1995), but already in *Kingdoms and Communities*) has cogently questioned the contribution of corporation theory to the development of ideas of the state as an abstract entity. We are left with constitutionalism, and ideas of individual and collective rights. Here Canning, and Ullmann before him (and before him, McIlwain, and before him, the good old brothers Carlyle) surely have, and had, a point of very great importance. It needed amplifying, and setting in social and political contexts that were secular, lay and pervaded by custom. Canning has spent long with ecclesiastics and jurists. But those men had lay patrons, and secular governments as paymasters, and every patron and paymaster too had to answer to a constituency, a public, with political ideas and priorities and, in the last resort, some power, of its own. Canning has not spent long enough with courtiers, counsellors, guildsmen, citizens, knowledgeable neighbours. That is why his book, for all its virtues of concision and clarity, may leave a new generation of readers asking for more.

#### **Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/33#comment-0>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/313>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>