

# Kings, Popes, and Princes: A Struggle for Power

## 1. Murder in the Cathedral

On 29th December 1170, Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, was killed by four knights from the court of King Henry II of England. His violent death shocked people all over Europe. What had happened in Canterbury, and why was Becket murdered?

Henry had become king in 1154 after a long period of civil war and loss of royal power. England was only one part of his empire; he also ruled the larger part of France. On his continuous travels he found that many measures were necessary to re-establish order and royal power in England:

- castles that had been illegally built by the barons were demolished;
- all the royal estates with their income, if taken illegally, had to be returned;
- the barons no longer sent soldiers in case of war, but paid a tax instead with which the king was able to hire soldiers;
- sheriffs were given the responsibility to keep the law and collect taxes in their shires;
- the law was enforced by setting up courts which ensured a fair trial based on evidence; fines were paid directly to the royal treasury.

King Henry II found a good helper and friend in Thomas Becket who became his chancellor\*. Becket had been educated in civil and church law, had been sent on several important missions abroad and proved to be an expert in collecting taxes from all landowners, both laymen and clergy\*. The two men became close friends; Henry even sent his son to be educated in Becket's household.

Henry planned to do away with more privileges of the Church. Traditionally clergymen who had committed a crime were put on trial in the courts of the Church. Although serious crimes like murder were punished by excommunication\*, there was no death penalty like in the secular courts. Henry wanted these criminals to be handed over to an ordinary court. So when the old archbishop of Canterbury died in 1162, it seemed a brilliant idea to have his supporter and chancellor Thomas Becket elected as the new archbishop.

Becket resigned from the office of chancellor – but, to everybody's surprise, he became a very stern archbishop and priest who lived like a monk and strongly opposed Henry's plans. Yet Henry succeeded in making the archbishops and bishops sign a document which established that convicted clerks were to be handed over to the king's courts.

Becket fled to France and from then on opposed the king in many ways. Although he was allowed to return to Canterbury, all attempts at making peace failed. When Henry heard that Becket had even excommunicated the Archbishop of York for complying with more of the king's requests, Henry became so angry that he is said to have exclaimed, "Who will rid me of this troublesome priest?" Four of his knights immediately left the court for Canterbury and, as we know from the report of an eyewitness, brutally killed Becket, who had not tried to escape, right in front of an altar after a heated battle of words.

This famous report may raise some questions as to Becket's motives, to the knights' intentions and the king's reaction. In any case, the pope declared Thomas a saint three years after his death; pilgrims started to arrive and pray at his shrine. Henry showed his repentance by walking barefoot to Canterbury to pray at the site of the murder. The church courts continued to administer justice in England. So who won in the end?



Image 1: Earliest known portrayal of Thomas Becket's murder in Canterbury Cathedral (illuminated manuscript, 13th c)



Image 2: Canterbury Cathedral: West Front (14th c), Nave (14th c) and Central Tower (15th c); Trinity Chapel to the east added to put up Becket's shrine (1220)

“Murder in the Cathedral” was one of the spectacular clashes in the struggle for power between secular\* rulers and the Church in the Middle Ages. On the continent people in France, Italy, and the German Empire had witnessed similar tensions between their rulers and the Church for more than a century.

Why was it so difficult to reconcile the interests of rulers and the Church with its head, the Pope in Rome? In order to understand how these two powers had developed, we will have to go back to their beginnings. You may already have come across many of the facts, but now you will find out how they combined and influenced each other, why they clashed, and, even more important, how they still influence churches and states in our time.

## 2. State and Church in the Roman Empire

When in 313 A.D. the Roman Emperor Constantine\* decided to recognize the Christian faith and to grant free worship to the members of the many Christian communities which had to assemble secretly under Constantine’s predecessors, the number of Christians grew rapidly. The Christian God came to be considered the protector of the empire; the bishop of Rome was even given an imperial palace, the Lateran, for his residence. New churches were built, and of course the Christian Church needed more administration: priests were put in charge of parishes, and bishops were responsible for the bigger cities: in fact Church administration adopted the structures of the late Roman Empire; it was obvious that the bishop of Rome was destined to play an important role.

One of the reasons for Constantine’s legalizing Christianity was his wish to avoid conflicts between the religious groups in his empire. So when Church assemblies started discussing Christian principles, the emperor called a first council\* in Nicea\* in present-day Turkey in 325 which he also presided over and where he made sure that all the differences were settled. From the new eastern capital, Constantinople\*, the Roman emperors managed to keep up their power in the following centuries, whereas in the western part of the empire, invasions of Germanic tribes had weakened the central power: the last Western Roman emperor was deposed in 476, and a number of new Germanic kingdoms were established in Western Europe. In these times of uncertain rule and crumbling defences, the bishops kept up judicial proceedings, tax collection, the administration of their dioceses\*, the defence of their cities – and, of course, the bishop of Rome held an outstanding place among them. Christians would be reminded that Christ had told St. Peter, the first Roman bishop, “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church. ... I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16). An imperial decree\* of 445 made it clear that all western bishops were to submit to the pope’s jurisdiction, “pope” being a title which was supposed to stress the fact that the Roman bishop was the “papa,” the father, of the Western Church.

## 3. The Development of Papacy

However, words were one thing – and conditions in Italy and Rome quite another! The Roman aristocracy competed with each other to make one of their family members pope and be in charge of the church property. The East Roman Emperor in Constantinople, now called “Byzantium”\*, wanted to reconquer Italy, and Arab rulers controlled the south of Italy and Sicily. The Germanic kingdoms which had formed (the Franks in Germany and France, the Longobards in Northern and Central Italy) also tried to establish their power – so the pope was in quite a difficult situation when in 751 he decided to apply for help from the Frankish king Pepin\*. Pepin’s soldiers were to defend the pope’s territory and position; in return the pope promised to crown the Frankish king;

later popes even conferred the title of “Emperor of the Romans” on the Frankish king. The bishop of Rome had been able to keep up his predominant position in the Western Church, and the German emperors won prestige by being anointed\* and blessed by God’s own vicar\* on earth. The kings of France and England were crowned by the most important archbishops in their countries, of Reims and of Canterbury respectively, as the pope’s direct representatives.

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#### 4. From Roman Emperors to Medieval Kings

The various Germanic kingdoms which had been established on Western Roman soil after 476 A.D. were all headed by kings, i.e. “men of noble birth” – but how did they make sure other noblemen and subjects recognized their status and submitted to their power? In his coronation oath in 1066, King William the Conqueror\* swore to “maintain the Church of God and all Christian people in true peace; to prohibit all orders of men from committing injustice and oppression, and to enjoin the observance of equity and mercy in all judgments.”

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One of the means of carrying out these tasks was the habit of kings to appoint bishops and abbots, to issue church laws and to influence church assemblies. Faithful clergymen were also essential for ruling a country: they were usually given a broad education in languages, arts, science, and theology in monastery schools – a very important point at a time when most noblemen had little or no education. It was not just charisma\* and effective administration, however, which secured a king’s power: he also needed means of guaranteeing his military strength.

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#### 5. The Cry for Church Reforms

At first the two powers, pope and king, seemed to be getting on quite well; great kings like Charlemagne (768 – 814)\* and later Otto the Great (936-964) were crowned emperor, and in return helped the popes to defend the early Papal State\*, the patrimonium Petri\* round the city of Rome and other territories. In France and England, the Church tried to strengthen its position by giving support to the emerging central powers. But although the pope was recognized as the head of the Christian Church in the West, the Church itself experienced a long period of corruption and decay: popes were at the mercy of the different aristocratic groups in Rome who all tried to have a member of their family elected in order to gain influence and economic power. Bishops (like Becket) were often appointed by the king and not by the pope and clergy; they depended on their feudal princes\*. Monasteries which had been centres of learning and religious faith fell under the influence of the local lords; discipline was not enforced and the original Benedictine rule\* of poverty, obedience and celibacy\* was no longer followed; parish priests married and even passed their offices on to their sons. Ecclesiastical\* appointments became attractive because of the income they offered; they could be bought by the most unsuitable candidates.

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By the beginning of the 10th century there were quite a lot of churchmen who decided that reforms were absolutely necessary: the abbey of Cluny in Burgundy\*, in eastern France, was founded in 910 and given very strict rules which were to be enforced by the abbot. It was to be free of interventions from laymen and secular princes and obedient to the pope. Monastic life was dedicated to worship, prayer, and productive work. From Cluny the reform spread to the

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Image 3: The papal States in 1050



Image 4: Cluny Abbey (only a small part of the original buildings remains)

more than 1100 new monasteries all over Europe, from Portugal to Poland; their monks became councillors to kings and even popes.

Thus the idea that all the church had to be reformed took hold and became a powerful movement, although reform could mean different things to different people, according to their position. Emperor Henry III\* made sure he appointed reformist bishops and abbots in Germany; when he travelled to Rome for his coronation in 1046, he found three candidates all insisting they had been elected pope! Henry deposed all three of them and had his own reformist candidate elected. This helped the reform, but it was certainly not in accordance with canonical\* law which said that no clerical office could be filled by laymen; people who were not clergymen were not allowed to “invest” bishops with the signs of their spiritual power, the episcopal\* ring and staff. The demand for more reforms than only a strict prohibition of “lay investiture” increased: priests were sworn to celibacy; church offices were no longer to be bought with money; and, even more importantly, in 1059 a decree determined that future popes were to be elected by cardinals\* only, excluding any participation of the Roman aristocracy or the imperial government.

## **6. The Big Controversy: Pope versus Emperor**

These were enough issues for dispute between the reformed Church and its future popes on the one hand and the secular rulers on the other hand, but it took the “personal factor” – two stubborn and determined antagonists ready to fight for their convictions (young King Henry IV\* in Germany and the new Pope Gregory VII\*) – to turn them into a big earthquake which shook all of Europe at the time. A propaganda\* war of letters, decrees, treatises\*, and pamphlets exploded into rebellion, civil war, military occupation, and treason and changed the relationship between church and state so thoroughly that some of the consequences are still with us today. So, in the 1070s, the scene was set for fifty years of trouble long before the Canterbury murder!

## **7. The Compromise**

In England, an earlier archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm, had managed to maintain the pope’s position against the attempts of the English king to appoint his own bishops, although, while the Investiture Controversy\* raged in Germany, the pope was too busy fighting against the German emperor to insist on his rights in England. By the turn of the century the conflict had not been resolved, but the essential interests had become clearer: the Church did not want lay rulers to confer spiritual\* authority, whereas the kings had to be sure that bishops, who were also, secular rulers in their territories, acknowledged that their secular power was given to them by their kings. So a compromise was worked out along these lines: in England and France it was decided that the bishops would be elected by the Church, but the king would be allowed to refuse a candidate. If the king accepted him, the bishop would recognize him as his feudal lord and receive his feudal lands, but of course not his spiritual symbols, the staff and ring. In Germany it took a little longer, but, in 1122, a similar solution was established in the Concordat of Worms\* between king and pope.

## **8. Long-term Effects**

Although the problem itself was solved with a compromise, it left behind a very different Europe from that of a hundred years before: a reformed Church had asserted its principles, and the traditional unity of a king’s temporal\* and spiritual power had given way to a sharp contrast between the two powers which would shape the relationship between secular rulers and Church for many centuries to come.

The fact that 50 years later the English king became involved in a deadly quarrel with his archbishop shows that the balance of power between rulers and the Church continued to be a point of disagreement. In the end, the English kings managed to keep stricter control over the Church of England. When, in 1534, the pope did not give in to the king’s wish for a divorce, King Henry VIII made himself head of the Anglican Church, monasteries

were dissolved and their lands taken over by the state. Even today the Queen of England is still officially the head of the Church of England.

In Germany things developed quite differently: the kings continued to fight for their supremacy, especially in Italy, but at the same time they depended on the pope for their imperial coronation. So, while they were busy  
5 defending their rights in Germany and Italy, the princes and important towns in both countries managed to seize royal privileges and increase their independence from the central power during the king's absence. The dukes of Bavaria, Saxony, and Austria, the archbishops of Mainz, Cologne, and Trier, and other princes all managed to establish strong territorial states\*. Many historians today claim that the present-day structure of Germany is still shaped by this weakness of the central power; you can certainly find examples to support or contradict this view.

10 The influence of the pope and the Church had grown: people were made aware of religious issues, ecclesiastical law was written down and applied in law courts, and the administration of the Church was improved. This also helped the popes to achieve a stronger hold on the papal territories around Rome and in Italy: the Papal States\* became a political power. In several crusades, Christians willingly followed the pope's call to defend the Christian sites of veneration in Palestine.

15 In the 13th and 14th centuries, papal power diminished with the strengthening of national monarchies in Sicily, France, England, Germany and independent towns in Northern Italy. This time a dispute between Pope Boniface VIII and the King of France, not about investiture, but about the right to try a French bishop for treason, ended quite differently: again there were accusations of heresy\* and excommunication and a lot of propaganda, but this time the French  
20 king had the pope arrested and his successors, all Frenchmen, transferred to the French city of Avignon (1301) where the popes stayed under strict French control for more than seventy years.

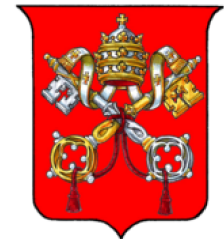


Image 5: Coat of arms of Vatican City State

The popes eventually returned to Rome, but church authority had suffered a decline: the Reformation\* in England, Scandinavia, and a large number of the German states rejected the authority of the  
25 pope and set up national or territorial churches. In the 19th century, when the wish for national unity, constitutional\* states, and the separation of State and Church led to the unification of Italy, the Papal States became part of Italy, and the secular power of the pope was confined to the city state of the Vatican in Rome. Even today the Vatican is an independent state with the pope as its head.

## 9. Church and State Today

Nowadays we take the separation of State and Church for granted. A democratic state guarantees human rights,  
30 the freedom of religion and tolerance of different faiths. But if you listen to the news, you will still discover traces of this historical struggle and points of conflict around you. Is it right to put up crosses in some classrooms and courtrooms in Germany? Why are religious private schools also funded by the state? Should religious dress items like headscarves, kippahs, monks' or nuns' habits be allowed in schools? Is it legal to have lessons of religious education in state schools? You can certainly think of more. The relationship between Church and State –  
35 not only an issue in Becket's time!

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