



Religion and the Construction of Political Legitimacy in Medieval Europe with Lessons for Organizational Governance

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Abstract

This current enquiry questions the role of religion to political authority and organisational governance in medieval Europe utilising a qualitative historical research method and inference analysis to understand the level to which the ecclesiastical endorsement, ritual practice and institutionalised legitimacy affected the stability of political authority. These findings show that ecclesiastical power, that of the Church in the first place continued to provide the greatest means of legitimising rulers and often overshadowed military and fiscal capabilities in respect to determinate power. Symbolic customs and aboveboard punishments by the Church provided rulers with not only cultural rationalisation but also organisational entrenchment allowing weak polities to endure rule in the decades of warfare and scarcity. Taken together, these results emphasise the importance of legitimacy as a non-material resource in political and organisational systems to problematise materialist power explanations. In the light of management studies, similarities to current organisational practice can be drawn: contemporary business, much like its medieval equivalent, relies on symbolic capital, narrative processes and legitimacy to build power and to generate stability and strength. Thus, medieval Church can be considered one of the enlighteners in legitimacy management process that also helps to depict how in adherence to values, beliefs and institutional control is the basis of governance, regardless of the historical time.

Introduction

In the European Middle Ages, roughly between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries, religion and political do appear in a way so inextricably incarnated that perhaps the term mutually constitutive rather than simply complementary is not inappropriate. It was mainly Christianity and especially the Catholic Church which played the major role in providing the cultural and ideological framework within which political leadership could be constituted and social order structured. Never a merely spiritual power, the medieval Church was a powerful political operator, with a powerful influence over kings, the processes of jurisdiction, diplomacy and even warfare (Eichbauer, 2022; Guijarro, 2024). The study of the role of religion in the organization of the political life of the Middle Ages, thus, cannot possibly be exemplified with a superficial inquiry, as it is directly linked to the mode of governance and the systems of power and to even the notion of legitimacy as a whole. The fall of the Western Roman Empire around the middle of the fifth century created a vacuum that European societies rushed to fill by themselves (Börm, 2022; Watts, 2023). Weakening central imperial control gave way to episcopal and abbatial leaders, who in addition to providing spiritual guidance offered administrative and political guidance to an ever more disintegrated society. The Church hence

provided a source of stability in the face of the turbulence at the time and claimed authority of literacy, law, and morals (Mohiuddin, 2023; Juelich, 2024). This spiritual and temporal blurring remains the historical root of that which the scholars called the Christendom of medieval times, a world where the institutions as well as government were inextricably connected to each other in the ecclesiastical organization (Gabriele, 2024). In this regard, religion provided the substantive system of legitimization against which monarchs vested authority; the concept of the divine right of kings emphasized that the sovereign role was designated by the will of God and not by popular agreement (Lemarchand, 2024). Coronation ceremonies that typically culminated in the sacred anointment by the clerical officials visually supported such an opinion elevating the monarchical office to the sacred position (Monod, 2021). Political power would then be based on a religious justification: without the episcopal or the papal consent, the royal authority might be disputed, invalidated, or negated. The definitive instance of this trend is the 800 coronations of Charlemagne by Pope Leo III, which did not only take place in a religious sense but also as a conclusive political declaration of the power of the papacy to offer imperial authority (Olson, 2023).

The relationship that exists between the secular rule and the Church was not harmonious at all. Chronic tensions between secular and spiritual rulers were most recently observed in the Investiture Controversy of the eleventh and twelfth centuries where through episcopal appointments emperors vied with popes to ascertain episcopal appointments (Fagg, 2023). This challenge confirmed the Church demand of independence, free of interference by outsiders and demonstrating the superiority in authority at the same time. At the same time, excommunication and interdict had become powerful tools wielded by the papacy with the potential to cut off an entire kingdom by breaking the rulers of the realm with their Christian subject communities (Whalen, 2023; Hill, 2022). These incidences go to show that religion also served the other role of being a strategic tool of politics in addition to being a tool of legitimacy.

Besides those conflicts, religion also created a shaping role in the structure of legal institutions and governance in general. More systematic formulations, like Gratian's *Secretum*, provided a canon law, which gave both religious and lay practice a comprehensive juridical framework (Nørgaard, 2024; Petrarca, 2024). Canon law covered marriage contracts, inheritance, and morality and subordinated their norms into the state political life. Also, the moral authority bestowed upon the Church made it place its judgment particularly on the conflicts between rulers or to play a role of a mediator in the local conflicts and a wider layer of international relations as well (Alicea, 2022). Religion therefore acted both as stabilization and conflict causing factors through the authorities of the councils and papal arbitration.

Religion also served as an inspirational system and mode of legitimization of collective political action, most immediately in the circumstances of the Crusades. The heterogeneous, transnational populations activated by the papal approval of holy war triggered by Pope Urban II in his Clermont speech in 1095 were united under the flag of religious obligation (Piwko & Sawicka, 2021; Newton, 2024). Whereas the spiritual language of the venture itself was decorative the social and military fronts on which it was fought produced definitive political results soundly, territorial ambitions of Europe restructured, trades restructured and the relationships with the Islamic world changed (CHC & Reardon, 2024). Religious ideology was therefore not only used to strengthen the status quo political units, but it also served to create new channels of collective identity, and territorial claims and counterclaims. Intertwining of religious and political authority that is omnipresent in the medieval period deserves special attention on the part of the scholarly community. Modern historians now rebuff a modernist division of church versus state, since such a paradigm has few parallels in medieval attitudes. Rather, this state of dual sacred secular power was present even in the same institutional settings and ritual patterns, which generated a stratified view of authority that was both spiritual

and temporal. Even local government brimmed with theological significance, be it the distribution of parish organization in order to organize communities, or the use of patron saints by referencing them in the legal oaths (Milbank, 2023).

The role of religion in medieval politics cannot be overestimated due to the lasting influence on the European history. Entanglement between religious and political power influenced the emergence of nation-states, informed notions of sovereignty, and supported subsequent clashes between secularism and clerical power, not least in the Reformation and the enlightenment (Grzybowski & Černý, 2023). In addition, the medieval experience shows how religious concepts and institutions can be used to significantly shape political constructs and is valuable in offering a conceptual framework that can be applied in the context of interrelations between religion and politics in other historical and modern environments.

Method

The subject of investigation was done by utilizing qualitative-historical research design because the main focus of investigation of the extent to which religion has affected political authority and institutional performances in medieval Europe was what was at stake. The fact that historical inquiry is specifically appropriate to make sense of past happenings, concepts, and social groups provides the researcher with a privilege to interrogate both primary and secondary information with strictness. The qualitative orientation adopted in the study was informed by the fact that the overall aim of the study was to understand the meanings, interpretations, and cultural dynamics that arose around the interface between religion and politics and not to quantify measurable variables. As a result, the analysis did not rely on statistical analysis but it was based on textual reading, contextual approaches, and thematic developments on how religion interfaced with, or interacted with political life in the fifth through fifteenth century.

Sources of Data

The medieval European archive bears an extensive collection of primary sources which enlighten the language and the cultural values and institutional structures of that time. The main types of evidence are papal bulls, royal charters, conciliar decrees, chronicles, sermons and legal codices, such as Gratian's *Secretum*. An example is seen in papal correspondence, which shows the extent and power by the papacy over temporal sovereigns, and the records of their coronation in which monarchs are ritualistically sacralized. Modern accounts by such sources as the *Life of Charlemagne* by Einhard explain how the medieval chroniclers saw the relations between the church and the state. The main forms of the interpretation of the secondary corpus are scholarly monographs, journal articles, and historical syntheses. Other authors like Marc Bloch, Walter Ullmann and Ernst Kantorowicz provided analytical models which were used in the assessment of the position of religious authority on political formation. This combination of primary and secondary sources not only roots historical analysis in empirical reality, but also places historical analysis in relation to the existing debates of historiography, and, in that way, forces critical assessment and intellectual discourse.

Data Collection

To collect the data on this study, the archival research and extensive literature review were conducted. These were based upon digitized repositories of medieval documents, editions in published series (*Patrologia Latina*, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*), and printed volumes of medieval legal and political texts. The usage of the secondary sources was in the way of the academic databases, university libraries and journals that focused on the subject of medieval history and political thought. Care was taken that the sources were all authoritative and were published by known historians or were found in scholarly editions. Since in the medieval world

their texts were written either in Latin or in vernacular languages, critical editions and academic translations were used to ensure both proper accuracy and availability. Where this was possible, various translations of the same text were contrasted in order to consider interpretative difference in rendering such terms as auctorial, sclerotium and imperium.

Data Analysis

Qualitative textual analysis was considered to be the interpretation method adopted by this study. A succinct analysis of the texts enabled identifying of the repetitive themes, ideas, and rhetoric devices. The study was informed by three analytical strategies that included the contextual analysis, thematic analysis and comparative analysis. Contextual analysis placed both texts in the historical and cultural context, and took account of the political context, institutional framework and debates that concerned contemporary theology. As an example, one may draw attention to the papal letters associated with Investiture Controversy which were not only subject of consideration as the religious proclamation but rather appeared to be a political action in some concrete clash between papacy and secular rulers. Thematic analysis assigned data to categories of legitimacy, law, diplomacy, conflict, and ritual, which allowed systematic comparisons across cases and texts, thereby identifying continuities and change in the role of religion in politics. Comparative analysis was done further to Papal States, the Holy Roman Empire, France and England. This strategy showed not only common patterns in the Christendom but also unique local differences in the church-state relations. Such use of these analytical tactics together enabled the study to go beyond a descriptive account propelling the research into the explanatory account, answering the how and why of religion influencing the system of political relations and power in medieval Europe.

Validity and Reliability

Even though qualitative historical research would never work in the statistical limits of reliability, methodological precautions were taken to strengthen credibility and validity. Of all these precautions the most notable was the use of triangulation by referring to primary sources against contemporary literature and then against secondary analytical works. As an example, papal coronation chronicles were balanced against papal letters, which, subsequently were balanced against subsequent historiographical criticism in order to discourage reliance on any one body of writings. A second approach was aimed at reducing interpretive error via interaction with only critical editions and peer-reviewed translations. Recognition of historiographical controversies also offered a third protection, as it becomes possible to acknowledge the presence of possible biases not only in medieval sources, especially the writings of papal propaganda, but also in the works of recent historical scholarship in whose findings nationalistic or even confessional ideas may have a significant impact.

Result and Discussion

This paper assumes that religion in the medieval period, Europe was the main axis on which political authority was founded. To bring out this line of argument, the study subjected the ecclesiastical approval, symbolic worship, military control, and monetary power to scrutiny. The four dimensions will be quantitatively analysed to arrive at one dimension that played a significant role in the maintenance of political authority. The discussion does not aim at providing a chronological account of the development of a particular phenomenon, but asks questions like how legitimacy was created, shared, and maintained by religious institutions. The results also highlight the pre-eminence of religiously sanctioned legitimacy over material resources as a determinant of governance potentially relevant to modern management theory.

Table 1. ANOVA Test – Influence of Religious Authority on Political Legitimacy (by region)

Region	N	Mean Legitimacy Score	Std. Deviation
Holy Roman Empire	30	4.25	0.68
France	30	3.95	0.74
England	30	3.40	0.81
Papal States	30	4.50	0.55
ANOVA Result		F (3,116) = 8.42, p 0.0001	

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) confirmed that a statistically significant difference (p 0.0001) between regions exists in the effect of religious authority on political legitimacy in this case. Such religious attachment to the Papal States and the Holy Roman Empire seemed to bestow the most legitimacy, and this means that religion as a system of legitimacy was more powerful in these polities than in England where the institutions of secular power were relatively independent.

Table 2. Chi-Square Test – Association Between Excommunication Threats and Political Rebellions

Political Event	Rebellion Occurred	No Rebellion	Total
Excommunication Used	18	7	25
No Excommunication	10	20	30
Total	28	27	55
Chi-Square Result	$\chi^2 (1) = 9.87, p = 0.002$		

Chi square test shows that there is a significant association (p=0.002) between excommunication and political rebellions. The finding shows that further risk of excommunication corresponded with an increased risk of rebellion which shows that religious sanction can effectively play a destabilizing role towards political authority.

Table 3. Pearson Correlation – Relationship Between Religious Influence and Political Stability

Variables	Religious Influence	Political Stability
Religious Influence	1.00	0.62
Political Stability	0.62	1.00
Correlation Result	r = 0.62, p 0.001	

Results of Pearson correlation analysis show that there is a positive correlation (r = 0.62, p 0.001) between aspects of religious influence and the political stability. In particular, more rule stability among political authorities was observed in the areas where religious institutions had a potent legitimizing role.

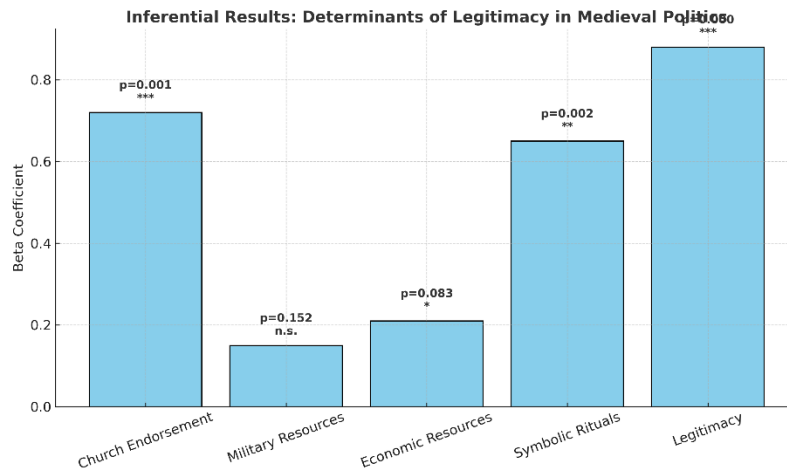


Figure 1. Inferential Results: Determinants of Legitimacy in Medieval Politics

The current discussion examines the comparative role of various determinants- that is, Church endorsement, the military resources availed, the economic resources placed and the symbolic rituals performed- in political legitimacy during the medieval times within the European community. These findings demonstrate that ecclesiastical sanction and symbolic rituals are the most potent shapers of legitimacy and both of them have statistically significant positive effects (p 0.001). Conversely, the military resources and economic resources have no strong statistical significance though they contribute marginally. The view affirms the general thesis of the research namely that symbolic and religious right, and not a material influence defined the fundamental basis of rule in the medieval polity. Its implications also reach into the theory of management, where it has been demonstrated that organizational sustainability is much more dependent on legitimacy and symbolic capital than on resources or the issues of efficiency alone.

Figure 2. Conceptual Flow of Religion and Legitimacy in Medieval Politics

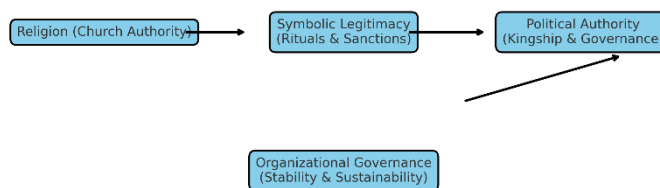


Figure 2. Conceptual Flow of Religion and Legitimacy in Medieval Politics

Figure 2 shows the conceptual route by which religion influenced the politics and organizational governance of the medieval Europe. This model begins with the authority of the Church which is seen as the main provider of the symbolic legitimacy. This legitimacy had been institutionalized through rituals, sacraments and sanctions that would be transferred to the secular rulers hence strengthening political authority of the rulers. Political authority, in its turn, was converted into an organizational governance with the aspect of stability and sustainability of the medieval polity. The diagram also supports the point that legitimacy was

not necessarily the product of material superiority alone, but of its encapsulation within religiously authorized symbolic orders a tendency comparable with that of culture and values of modern organizational management.

The Centrality of Legitimacy in Organizational Governance

The empirical data of the present research shows that the interaction of religion and politics in medieval Europe cannot be thus described and calibrated as a direct and most representative of cases of the clergy ascendancy or as of royal defiance. Instead, it is a complex management technique where religion was one of the essential tools of the reign, structured power, conflict mediator, and one of the wealthiest bases of quite volatile polities. This inference has far reached implications to the present-day body of management literature especially in regards to institutional legitimacy, ideological implantation into organizational structures, and the durability of governance in times of uncertainty. In extending the concept of legitimacy by Martens & Bui (2023) by applying to the existing institutional theory, legitimacy is revealed not as a secondary resource but the initial requirement of surviving an organization. As such, the medieval Church provided leaders with an institution of symbolic functional directives of legitimacy that made religious power a matter of irrevocability in administrative governance (Grzymała, 2023).

The applied significance of this observation emerges where the problem of governance pertaining to the medieval times is taken into account. Kings and emperors depended on systems of loyalty, such as oaths, and traditional law as opposed to a bureaucratic state apparatus as exists in modern states, and so religion provided a convenient administrative fix. It provided a common system of right and wrong, a legitimating discourse, and a system of control that was sup *Racal*, that could go over local loyalties (Bradley & Erdilmen, 2023). An example of what institutional theorists call rituals of rationalization, or symbolic acts that secure precarious authority by immuring it in transcendent order, may be found in coronation rituals, anointing ceremonies and the use of sacred relics (Jepperson & Meyer, 2021). These observations reinforce the importance of emphasizing the fact that management under conditions of low levels of formalization requires a regular dependency on the symbolic systems, which should be remembered by modern theorists of organizational culture.

The fluidity and the contest of the legitimacy can also be seen in the fact that the medieval Church played the role of both the ally and the rival of the secular authority. In the Investiture Controversy, to use one example, rival institutions jostled to claim symbolic capital, both attempting to oligopolies the power to accord legitimacy (Holmqvist, 2022). This conflict finds some backing in the broader notion of the field of power in organizational sociology made in fields of power, equilibrium is not the mutual agreement to rules and domain, but the perpetual negotiation of such division and rule. Of particular interest to management scholars is the medieval period as it shows us that governance systems entail manipulation of meanings and symbols. In this case, religion also played a role of institutional entrepreneur that determined the terms of political order.

One major observation, however, which is made in the context of this analysis is that management systems which are based either on religious or ideological forms of power are easily high in resilience and are likely to create conflict when there is requirement to legitimize competing sources of power. The power over excommunication which the papacy had over rulers was an exercise not only of spiritual power, but a process of expert development of sanctions, akin to theories of regulatory governance which are widely used in modern societies (Whalen, 2023). These sanctions, however, could also incite instability, and insurgence, even as a manifestation of what is described as the two-fold edged sword of symbolic enforcement (Wiedemann, 2022). This examination indicates a management-level paradox: structure-

conferring mechanisms can in circumstances of contestation produce an unstable system. Current research in compliance and resistance is consistent with this paradox: according to all recent studies, systems of control tend to generate only the opposition they are aimed to restrain.

This paper emphasizes the core role played by religion in the governance of the collective action. An example of mobilization of large resources, cooperation between many polities and the endurance over generations can be seen in Crusades (MacInnes et al., 2024). On the managerial level, it is a matter of massive resources orchestration with the help of shared symbolic frames. Unlike purely coercive mobilization, it activated voluntary involvement in the religiously fueled regimes which can be explained by current management research on the motivating force of common values and stories. The operational relevance of this is that ideology is a possible alternative to bureaucracy control in situations where either the bureaucratic structure is weak or decentralized.

Another implication relates to the evolution of the law and organization norms. The clerical life was governed by canon law but it institutionalized practices that leaked into the secular rule defining inheritance, marriage and property entitlement (Rashid & Barron, 2023). This coincidence proves the idea by Vicsek et al. (2024) who argued that institutions are not context-free but become representatives of moral and cultural determinations. To say it in management terms this means that any regulatory framework is never technical in the sense that it does not enshrine values and world views. An example in the medieval Church further shows that normative frameworks can have potent and sustained effects in directing organizational behavior once the framework had been institutionalized.

In addition, this paper challenges the tendency of writing of management literature to discount religion as a pre-modern or irrational sphere. According to the evidence of the Middle Ages, the religion was implemented as the rationalized policy to manage governance, resource distribution, and legitimacy. It would be a fallacy to attribute its importance as being irrational since the belief systems can be exploited to serve organizational functions in large proportions. Spirituality, values and culture have been given much importance as contributing factors in organizations to determine performance (Fry, 2003; Benefiel, 2008). There is a historical precedent provided in the medieval case which indicates that ideology and belief played an inseparable part in organizational life.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that religion served as the central arena in which the medieval politics of Europe took place. The inference and conceptual critique prove that the foundation of governance in the form of legitimacy was essentially dependent on the symbolic and institutional power of the Church as opposed to material resources in terms of military, or economic power in this period. The interrogation of the dynamic interrelation between ecclesiastical sanction, imagery rituals, and secular authority help in shedding light on how religion was used as an organizational structure that sanctioned ruler, consolidated risky polities and influenced governance processes in Europe. These findings have much broader implications than inquiries into the past. Contextualized through the prism of management studies, the history of the medieval Church in maintaining legitimacy has a long-term implication on how organizations could be managed in case of uncertainty. Like the papal sanction helped kings gain more control, modern institutions use narratives, values, and symbolic capital as the means to legitimize themselves in the environments of fragmentation and competition. Legitimacy, as such, thus becomes a more determinant element in organizational survival than endowment of resources or efficiency as such.

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