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Not the American Ideal

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HIST 121 – Pope

Here in the United States, one of the most honored concepts in the history of the nation is the separation of church and state. However, in medieval times this was unheard of. Both the ecclesiastical and secular structures became inexplicably intertwined. Two figures that demonstrate this are Wilfrid of Ripon, an English bishop in the late seventh century and Gerald of Aurillac, a count in France in the late ninth century. The life of each person was strongly influenced by both the church and state, and this shows us that there was no clear-cut separation between the two in the late first millennium.

The life of Wilfrid of Ripon shows many connections to the secular world for this bishop. Around 660 CE, King Alhfrith gave Wilfrid “for his own soul’s good...the monastery at Ripon and thirty hides of land to go with it” (Bede 113). This is the first strong connection between the church and state in the Life of Wilfrid written by Eddius Stephanus. From the gift of the monastery and being its first abbot, Wilfrid is almost automatically bound to the secular government. In the Germanic tradition of gift-giving, he gave a small portion of his wealth in exchange for services. In this case the service is praying for the soul of Alhfrith, and this commits Wilfrid to the government.

Another example of the gift-giving format comes at the appointment of Chad, by King Oswiu, to Wilfrid’s see after Wilfrid had been gone for a very long time on his trip to Rome (Bede 120). This power to appoint, or give the gift of appointment, also binds the appointee to the state. In this case, Chad was bound to Oswiu for the appointment to abbot, much in the way that Wilfrid was bound to Alhfrith for the monastery.

One other demonstration of the connection of church and state occurs along with the appointment of Chad. When Wilfrid returns from his trip to Rome, he was upset to see another placed in his see (Bede 121). This is not the approach one would expect from a strong Christian,

but more of what would be expected from a secular leader. This shows yet another bond between the two leadership structures of the time.

The impact of the state on the life of Wilfrid went beyond the gift-giving, and involved relationships with the noble leaders of the time as well. One such relationship was with King Ecgrith of Northumbria. Stephanus tells us that “while he [Ecgrith] was on good terms with the bishop [Wilfrid]...he enlarged his kingdom by many victories; but when they quarreled...the king’s triumphs ceased” (Bede 126). This demonstrates how Wilfrid was strongly influential in the secular government, perhaps not directly, but in a way nonetheless. Even if this was not truly the cause of the change in fortunes of Ecgrith, it appeared so to the followers of Wilfrid. This in itself would undermine the faith of the followers of Ecgrith, and that shows a tremendous amount of secular influence for a member of the church.

Another situation that demonstrates this is the recalling of Wilfrid from exile by King Aldfrith, successor to Ecgrith. Stephanus writes that Aldfrith “respectfully called Wilfrid back from exile, in obedience to [Archbishop] Theodore” (Bede 152). This shows a tremendous amount of influence on the part of Theodore. The fact that he could convince Aldfrith to reinstate Wilfrid shows that the members of the church had great authority, at least in situations concerning their own.

From the observations of the Life of Wilfrid, it is easy to see that the state had much to do with the matters of the church, and vice versa. Thus far only the view of the church has been taken. Through the events of the life of Gerald of Aurillac the influences of both church and state can be seen clearly.

Much of the influence of the church on the life of Gerald can be seen not through specific events but characteristics that were uncommon of rulers during the time. During his childhood,

as Saint Odo of Cluny writes, he became strongly interested in the studies of the church despite his excellence in military exercises (Medieval Record 168). This shows that Gerald may have had aspirations to be a monk, had he not been forced into a position of secular power following the death of his parents (Medieval Record 168).

Another action of Gerald was instructing his armies to fight with the backs of their swords and their spears reversed (Medieval Record 169). This shows his following both the Peace of God and the Truce of God to their main intentions: stop killing, specifically Christians. This was rather unheard of among the power-hungry nobles of the time. For years it mattered not to many nobles who they killed, as long as they got their wealth as we see with the attacking of the Muslims once the Peace of God goes through (Notes, 10/9/98). This reflects more of the monastic view because Gerald “fights” almost like an unarmed man with his armies.

Gerald also provided for much charity and assistance toward the poor and the wronged. One example of this is the countryman who was coaxed into a group of robbers, whose eyes were put out by Gerald’s men. Once Gerald learned of this great mistake that was made, he made his best effort to correct the error the best that he could by sending the man a large sum of money (Medieval Record 170). This was uncommon among nobles to do such a thing. Many would not think of the poor but notice that they had not been hurt by the occurrence and move on with their rule. Gerald, however, had a conscience and could not do as such. He needed to correct the sin his men had placed on his soul, much in the way that a Catholic would go to a confessional to ask forgiveness for their sins. It is these mannerisms that make up Gerald’s spirit of rule that connects him to the church.

The actions of Gerald also demonstrates a new phenomenon which occurred in the two-hundred years between the lives of Wilfrid and himself. This phenomenon is the internalization

of Christianity into society. Through the development of towns, society changed from being a shame society to a guilt society over the time period (Notes 10/16/98). This means people taking more of the religion upon themselves, which is obvious in the actions of Gerald. With more nobles and people of the secular community becoming responsible for themselves religiously, the church and state become all the more intertwined.

By looking at the lives of two prominent figures in their respective times, it can be seen that the church and state were inseparable over this time span. Whether it was the church influencing the secular rule, or vice versa, there was no doubt a strong connection there. It is this connection that characterizes the rule of the age, and is one of the defining points of both in their long history.