

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND
ECCLESIASTICAL GOVERNANCE

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There is a standard story about religious authority and ecclesiastical governance in early modern Europe. It runs somewhat like this:

In medieval Europe religious authority lay in the hands of clerics. Clerics were regarded as superior to the laity, and they were governed by the papacy in Rome. When there were disagreements about the faith, the papacy had the last word. Dissenters were condemned as heretics and handed over to lay governments for punishment. Orthodoxy was ruthlessly enforced and there was no religious liberty.

That changed during the Renaissance and Reformation. Lay people began to grow dissatisfied with the enforcement of orthodoxy and claimed a growing share of religious authority for themselves. When Martin Luther proposed a new kind of theology, their dissatisfaction erupted into outright rebellion. After about a century of violent religious wars, the papacy had to admit defeat.

The outcome was settled more or less around the time of the Peace of Westphalia (1648). Priests and bishops continued to exist. But they were divided into different confessions and the papacy lost the ability to impose its will by force. Education, persuasion, and enlightenment took the place of the Inquisition and the stake, and religious liberty was enshrined as a natural right. That was a great step forward in the history of humanity's progress from ignorance and oppression.

The problem with this story is that it does not explain what happened to religious authority during the Renaissance and Reformation. It assumes that medieval people somehow knew what we call religious liberty, and that the difference between them and us is simply this: they did not have it, and we do. It tells us why they did not have religious liberty (because the clergy wanted to exercise control over their faith) and how we managed to gain it for ourselves (because the monopoly of the papacy over religion was broken up and the Church was separated from the state). But it does not explain how religious authority changed when it was handed over to the laity. It rather conceals a transformation in the criteria by which we judge what counts as faith and what as knowledge. It thereby reassures us that we can trust

our understanding of concepts like “religion,” “authority,” “Church,” and “state” by projecting them back onto the past.

There are other ways in which the standard story can be criticized: it is incomplete and it embodies an idea of progress no longer as convincing as it was a hundred or two hundred years ago. Historians are busily unearthing a cornucopia of details to fill in the blank spots. They have been doing so almost since the professional study of history came into its own in the nineteenth century, with works like Ranke's *History of the Reformation in Germany* and Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, two classics of modern historiography not coincidentally devoted to the Renaissance and Reformation. They are still debating whether or not some kind of progress has in fact occurred; if so, to what extent; if not, what it is lacking. They are shaking off the national and confessional hostilities that used to burden them. Social history, cultural history, anthropology, and the study of what has been called “confessionalization” have established much common ground.¹ Today, our understanding of religious authority and ecclesiastical governance in early modern Europe is therefore detailed, rich, and subtle beyond what Ranke or Burckhardt could have imagined.

But telling the story in more detail and exercising greater care in calling its outcome good or bad is not enough. The problem facing historians today lies neither in the details nor in their evaluation. It lies in the lack of an alternative that can be sketched as briefly as the standard story but does not presuppose what ought to be explained. Before we can explain how religious authority changed in the Renaissance and Reformation, we therefore need to take a closer look at how it operated during the Middle Ages.

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

Religious authority in medieval Europe was shaped by three main factors. First, knowledge was based on writing; second, most writing was in Latin; and third, the ability to read and write was limited to clerics. It is misleading to view medieval Europe as a place where knowledge rested on memory and oral tradition. Memory and oral tradition mattered more than today, but not as much as in societies where there is no written literature at all (like those of hunters and gatherers). Not only was there writing in medieval Europe, but writing was scripture – and scripture was not mere letters on the page, but *Scripture*, the Bible, the sacred Word of God. It is equally misleading to believe that clerics were ordained priests or consecrated bishops. Clerics came in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Many of them were simply students, not unlike Chaucer's clerk, and some of them were indistinguishable from the laity. They were literati in the elementary sense of knowing how to read and write in Latin. But they were never more than a small sector of society. Their literacy was a privilege that distinguished them sharply from the great majority of the population. Medieval society was hierarchical in many ways. But the most obvious way was the subordination of the illiterate laity to the literate clergy.

Medieval society was therefore marked by a characteristic tension. On the one hand, writing was viewed as a source of truth. On the other hand, writing was accessible only to a small group of people. Ordinarily this is considered a great deficit.

That is not altogether wrong. There is an obvious sense in which the hierarchical organization of medieval society kept ordinary people in thrall to priests and knights. This is the same sense in which ordinary people were being kept in thrall to priests and knights in all of those large-scale agro-literate societies, as they have been called, that were the predominant form of social organization across the globe from about the fourth millennium BCE until the nineteenth century, when the Industrial Revolution, capitalism, and massive urbanization changed the most basic rules of the games that humankind has played since its emergence from prehistory.² But simply to equate hierarchy with oppression is to misunderstand the role that writing plays in authenticating truth, both in modern, literate societies and in societies most of whose members were illiterate. Perhaps more important, it is to ignore the conceptual foundations of oppression in egalitarian societies.

An analogy may help to clarify this point. It is taken from the activity of measuring – not coincidentally an activity crucial to modern science. Assume you use a ruler to measure the length of your foot. How do you know your measurement is true? The answer is, of course, “from observation” – namely, the observation made in placing the ruler next to the foot and noting the marks on the ruler that correspond to the length of the foot. Up to a point that answer is enough. But a further question can be asked: “How do you know your ruler is reliable?” Usually that question need not be asked. But it is always possible, and sometimes it must be answered, especially when it concerns disputes about the measurement of something that matters to society at large. The standard way of answering that question is to compare your ruler to the standard meter bar kept at the International Bureau of Weights and Measures in Sèvres, near Paris.³

Now it might seem that this answer, too, depends on observation – the observation made when you put your ruler next to the standard meter bar. But in this case observation is not enough, for if it were you might go on to ask a further question: “How do you know the standard meter bar itself is reliable?” That question, however, is nonsensical.⁴ The standard meter bar is reliable by definition. The reason has nothing to do with lengths or observations. The reason is that an agreement has been reached to use this object as a means of last resort with which to settle disputes about the accuracy of measurements of lengths. That agreement makes it the standard meter bar. The actual length is not the point. The agreement is. So long as the agreement holds, no matter how long the bar may be, its length is that of one meter.

The measurement of lengths – or, more precisely, the authentication of the truth of measurements of length by means of the standard meter bar – furnishes an instructive instance of a kind of truth that rests neither on reason nor on observation, but on a consensus without which neither reason nor observation could begin to do their work. In medieval Europe a similar consensus governed the use of writing. Writing was something other than a mere means of communication or a depository of knowledge. It functioned like a ruler by which one’s views were measured. The clergy held the ruler and used it to measure the views of the laity. Sometimes there were disputes about the reliability of the ruler. In order to resolve such disputes, there had to be agreement on a standard with which the reliability of the ruler could be judged. That standard was the Catholic faith as declared by general councils and the papacy.

In the age before printing was invented, writings were copied by hand. They differed from case to case. Even the Bible existed in different versions. But there was only One Holy Catholic Church and only one pope in Rome. The pope derived his authority directly from an unbroken chain of apostolic succession that went straight back to St Peter. He looked like any other bishop. But his authority was unique in the same sense in which the authority of the standard meter bar is unique. It rested on a consensus to use his word as a means of last resort with which to judge the reliability of all other words. His word was true by definition, just as the standard meter bar by definition is one meter long. The question whether or not his word was actually true was nonsense, quite like the nonsense of asking whether the standard meter bar is actually one meter long. He was that spiritual man of whom St Paul had written: "he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man" (1 Corinthians 2:15). Canon law concluded: "the first see shall not be judged by anyone."⁵ And one of the most distinguished experts on canon law declared: "so long as he does not go against the faith the pope can do and say whatever he pleases. He can even deprive someone of his rights, for there is no one who may ask him: 'Why are you doing this?' . . . His will stands in the place of reason, and whatever pleases him has the force of law."⁶

Viewed in this way, the hierarchical organization of the medieval world makes better sense than can be grasped so long as the use of writing is thought to consist entirely of communication, and knowledge to stem entirely from reason and observation. The certification of the truth by means of writing and the authentication of the truth by the papacy met the same basic need as the measurement of lengths by means of rulers and the authentication of the standard meter bar by the International Bureau of Weights and Measures: it assured the integrity of a system of reference and meaning. The papacy's authority did not rest on the truth of its pronouncements, but on a consensus that its pronouncements settled disputes about the standards with which the truth was ascertained. Just as the surreptitious substitution of some other meter bar for the true standard meter bar must be prevented in order to maintain the integrity of the system of measuring lengths, the substitution of false popes needed to be prevented in order to maintain the integrity of the system of ascertaining the truth. Without the papacy's ability to guarantee the unity of the faith, writing could not be trusted to fulfill its function as a ruler with which all truths were measured. Communication would have broken down in irresolvable disputes and society would have fallen apart.

The idea of religious liberty could therefore not have made much sense to medieval people. Demanding a right for every person to hold whatever religious beliefs seem right to them would have threatened their ability to distinguish true from false. They had to consider the demand for religious liberty meaningless or dangerous in the same sense in which we would find it meaningless or dangerous if someone were to protest against the tyranny of the standard meter bar and claim that every person has an inalienable right to determine how long the meter ought to be. We recognize that our measuring devices need to conform to standards in order to fulfill their purpose. We sanction the punishment of people who intentionally use false measuring devices. And we do not regard the choice of the standard meter bar as a natural right. In the same way the people of medieval Europe believed that statements

about the truth had to conform to writing, and that the truth of writing was guaranteed by its conformity to the official declarations of the Church. The authority of the Church was universal in the same sense in which the authority of the standard meter bar is universal: it rested on a consensus of society as a whole without which society could not have existed. That does not mean that each and every person was forced to hold the same religious views. Quite the contrary – the variety of different ideas about religion that flourished throughout the Middle Ages and the freedom with which those ideas could be explored were almost certainly greater than in the modern age. Conformity is not the same as identity. A wooden stick about a meter long and a precision tool calibrated to measure a thousandth of a millimeter can both serve the purposes of measuring, so long as they conform to the same standard meter. A shepherd in the Pyrenees, a local parish priest, and a Dominican professor of theology could all proclaim ideas about the truth. By no means were their views identical nor did they need to be. But the freedom with which they were allowed to state their different views depended on their consent to the principle that all claims on the truth were ultimately subject to the judgment of the papacy. Heresy did not consist of holding erroneous views or disagreeing with the pope, any more than using badly calibrated rulers threatens the system of measurement. Heresy consisted of the heretic's refusal to bow to the authority of the Church.⁷

HOW RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY CHANGED

The question is, of course, why did that change? What turned religious hierarchy and conformity to the papacy from an apparently useful means of guaranteeing truth into a form of religious oppression? The answer turns on the spread of literacy. Schools and universities were founded in growing numbers throughout the later Middle Ages. The use of paper made from rags reduced the cost of books below what it had been so long as writing surfaces were being made from skins of animals. And the invention of printing with moveable type in the fifteenth century furnished the people of Europe with an efficient and unprecedented means of multiplying copies of the same text. More schools, cheap paper, and printed books meant that the laity learned how to read and write. Soon it learned to read and write for its own purposes, not only in Latin but also in the various European vernaculars. Illiterate merchants became obsolete and an increasing share of secular business was carried out in writing. As a result the difference between the clergy and the laity lost its hierarchical significance. What had been a crucial marker in the organization of a hierarchical society became a distinction without a difference and a source of unjustifiable inequity.

In their general outline these changes are well known. But in order to appreciate their significance it is not enough to know that writing spread. The point is that the spread of writing led to a change in the criterion of truth. While writing was the prerogative of a small sector of society, the criterion of truth consisted of conformity to the Church as represented by councils and the pope. The chief problem for the maintenance of religious authority was not how to make sure that everyone shared the same beliefs – impractical to the point of impossibility in a society as highly

differentiated and lacking in modern means of communication as medieval Europe was – but rather how to make sure that everyone acknowledged the authority of the papacy to act as a judge for all. Different degrees of conformity to the papally sanctioned truth were thought to be not only tolerable but a legitimate expression of the hierarchical dispensation of the truth. Medieval orthodoxy required submission to the pope as the ultimate arbiter of truth, but not much else besides. What the believer actually thought was somewhat beside the point, just as it is somewhat beside the point how accurate your ruler really is, so long as you do not dispute the standard meter bar.

That changed when writing became a common possession of society and printing put the same texts into the hands of every reader.⁸ The difference between the clergy and the laity was watered down and the criterion of truth shifted from conformity to the Church toward the sense expressed in writing. Now orthodoxy meant having the same understanding of the faith as every other member of the Church, not merely following the lead of the papacy. Truth could no longer be conceived in terms of conformity, and mere submission to authority – no matter how sincere – lost its ability to certify orthodoxy. The papacy was forced to vacate the office of religious standards, and identity of sense ascended to its throne.

Three periods in the history of religious authority in early modern Europe can therefore be distinguished. The differences between these periods do not turn on the spread of literacy as such, but on the effects the spread of literacy had on the consensus of society. In the first period the shift away from conformity to the lettered by the illiterate toward mastery of writing's sense by all got underway and gathered speed. But it did not yet pose an explicit threat to the clergy's exclusive right to judge religious truth in the established way. This period is commonly known as the Renaissance. During the second period, the traditional reliance on conformity to the Church came under direct assault from people claiming that religion required all believers to grasp the sense of Scripture for themselves. This period is commonly known as the Reformation. The third period was marked by a proliferation of conflicting views on what the sense of Scripture was, along with a prolonged attempt to solve those conflicts by force. This period is commonly known as the Age of Religious War. It ended when agreement was reached on a new method of exercising religious authority. Roughly speaking, that happened at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Let me describe these periods in more detail.

THE RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance is often seen as a movement of cultural innovation that was centered in Italy and took its inspiration from classical antiquity. The very term "Renaissance" ("rebirth") stresses the degree to which contemporaries understood themselves to be witnessing the return of something that had existed once before. That view has much to recommend it. In painting, architecture, thought, and letters the models of classical antiquity gained a new prominence. At the same time, the models elaborated in the high Middle Ages – Gothic architecture and scholastic theology, for example – came in for critical attention.

The most important point, however, is the degree to which the turn to classical antiquity advanced a shift in the criterion of truth. The Renaissance began in Italy because in the Italian city-states the use of writing had for a long time spread much further beyond the limits of the clergy than elsewhere in Europe, and the border dividing the clergy from the laity had long been more porous than further north. The more thoroughly the clergy in Italy came to be integrated into lay society and the more successfully the laity managed the literate methods of the clergy, the less they were able to rely on conformity to clerically sanctioned interpretations of Scripture as a foundation for religious authority.

Classical antiquity offered a ready-made alternative. The distinction between clergy and laity that loomed so large in medieval Europe did not exist in ancient city-states as such. Of course there had been priests and temples. But ancient politics was carried out on the principle that all citizens were equal members of the polity. Regardless of whether they ruled themselves in free republics or were subject to an emperor, citizens were not divided into clergy and laity. In liberty as well as under tyranny citizens enjoyed equality. Classical antiquity had also produced a significant body of literature of which so much survived that it could fruitfully be mined for guidance in the quest for a consensus on the truth when truth could no longer be equated with conformity to the clergy. It helped that the clergy based much of its own authority on ancient writings. Classical antiquity thus seemed to offer a solution to the problem posed by the erosion of the line dividing the clergy from the laity.

The fourteenth-century humanist Petrarch was one of the first and greatest minds to advance that line of thought. When Petrarch drew a new theory of virtue from reading the works of Cicero, something quite different from mere reverence for ancient models was at stake. The point was that the virtue on which Cicero had written was one and the same for every human being. That does not mean that Cicero had not distinguished between different kinds of virtue. There were four virtues – wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice – on the list of cardinal virtues alone. It rather meant that wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice did not vary according to one's standing in society, especially not according to one's membership in the clergy or the laity. From Cicero's perspective it made no sense to say that wisdom was peculiar to the clergy, and courage to the knights, much less that justice ought to be meted out in different ways (by Roman law, canon law, or local custom) and in different courts (temporal or spiritual) depending on whether one belonged to the clergy or the laity. Petrarch agreed. Each and every member of the polity ought to be wise, courageous, moderate, and just. If some were not as virtuous as others, that could no longer be interpreted as a legitimate manifestation of the hierarchical gradations of a society composed of different ranks and orders where the virtues of clerics and monks ranged at the top and those of peasants at the bottom. It rather amounted to a failure to live up to standards that were the same for all. Thus Petrarch replaced a hierarchy of virtues that corresponded to the ranks and orders of a hierarchical society with an identical morality for all.

Something similar may be said about the humanist movement that swept Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Humanists valued language above all else. They taught the laity how to express themselves clearly, elegantly, and persuasively – in speaking as well as in writing, in Latin as well as in the vernacular – and

they did so by drawing on the models of classical antiquity. Following the definition of Paul Oskar Kristeller, humanism may therefore be defined as an educational movement giving pride of place to the study of classical grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy.⁹ Much ink has been spilled over Kristeller's definition of humanism. According to Hans Baron, humanism had a definite content, quite apart from the classical forms in which that content was expressed: it taught republican virtue.¹⁰

From the perspective taken here, the difference between Kristeller and Baron looks like a false dilemma. Humanism's turn to classical forms of expression amounted in and of itself to a substantial change. Each of the five disciplines whose study it encouraged put the laity in a position of equality with the clergy by eroding the hierarchical distinction between the lettered and the illiterate, regardless of whether the outcome was a republic of virtue or a princely tyranny. Grammar allowed the citizen to read and write correctly; rhetoric allowed him to convince his fellows of whatever truth he had grasped; in poetry he spoke about the self in search of meaning; in history he wrote about the relationship between himself and the community; and in moral philosophy he studied how to settle on a proper course of action without conforming to any superior authority or taking his guidance from the clergy. Humanism advanced a shift in religious authority (to that extent Baron was right), not by endorsing any particular ideas of right or wrong (to that extent Kristeller was right), but by changing the criteria by which all such ideas were judged.

A few lines from Petrarch's letters will show how closely the use of language, the practice of virtue, and the assumption of religious authority lay side by side during the Renaissance:

I urge and admonish that we correct not only our life and conduct, which is the primary concern of virtue, but our language usage as well. This we will do by the cultivation of eloquence. . . . How much help eloquence can be to the progress of human life can be learned both in the works of many writers and from the example of daily experiences. How many people have we known in our time who were not affected at all by past examples of proper speech, but then, as if awakened, suddenly turned from a most wicked way of life to the greatest modesty through the spoken word of others! [. . .] Make for yourself a refuge within your mind where you may hide, rejoice, rest without interruption, and live together with Christ, who through the sacred priesthood made you in your youth His confidant and table companion. You will ask, "and with what skills do I do that?" It is virtue alone that is powerful enough to accomplish it all; through her you will be able to rejoice and to live happily wherever you are.¹¹

By turning to classical antiquity, Italians thus took a large step forward toward a new understanding of religious authority. But in their view the turn to classical antiquity and the movement to educate the laity did not conflict with the authority of the Church. They rather helped to improve the Church and to extend its reach by spreading the use of letters from the clergy to the laity. A good many of their numbers were clerics themselves, studied canon law, and worked for the papacy, including not

only Petrarch but also Leon Battista Alberti, often taken as the embodiment of Renaissance man himself. One of the greatest of them all, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, even ascended to the papacy as Pope Pius II.

From the perspective of the history of religious authority, the Renaissance therefore needs to be viewed as part and parcel of the great movements to reform the Church that reverberated throughout late medieval history. Historians who assume that Church history must be distinguished from the history of the state find it difficult to agree with that point. But that is an anachronistic imposition of modern ideas on late medieval times. The Italian Renaissance and late medieval Church reform did not merely happen at the same time. They went hand in hand and they belong in the same chapter. Both were replete with criticisms of corruption in Church government, both sought to improve the Church by improving letters, and neither meant to overthrow established forms of ecclesiastical governance. When the conciliar movement tried to subject the papacy to the control of general councils it did not do so in order to abandon the distinction between the clergy and the laity, but, quite the contrary, in order to renew the laity's allegiance to the clergy. It is no mere coincidence that the clerics assembled at the Council of Constance burned Jan Huss as a heretic at the stake. It rather shows how closely the conciliar movement was tied to the cause of maintaining the authority of the Church. The Renaissance peaked at the same time as the great councils met in Constance (1414–18), Basel (1431–49), and Florence-Ferrara (1438–45) in order to reform the Church. The same councils played a crucial role in advancing the cause of humanism by spreading books and manuscripts of ancient learning to the participants. From Petrarch to Erasmus, Renaissance, Church reform, and humanism were closely intertwined.

THE REFORMATION

That changed during the Reformation. The Reformation shifted the center of gravity in the historical development of early modern Europe from Italy to Germany and turned what had been a reasonably happy alliance between Renaissance and Church reform into a frontal assault on the established structure of the Church. In Germany the laity was less familiar with writing than elsewhere in Europe and not as closely integrated with the clergy as in Italy. This was in part because the local vernacular differed from Latin more sharply than was the case in Romance-speaking Italy, France, and Spain, or even in England where the Norman Conquest had turned French at least temporarily into the language of government. It was also because the German clergy, thanks to its disproportionately noble origins and dioceses that were the size of middling states, was far more highly raised above the laity. In Italy the laity's comparatively thorough command of writing and its close integration with the clergy had allowed the shift from hierarchical conformity to individual mastery of sense to proceed in small increments, without major disruptions. In Germany, the same shift was compressed into a smaller span of time and faced with greater obstacles. That gave it the force of an explosion.

The explosion took symbolic shape in the person and theology of Martin Luther. His story – from the indulgence controversy in 1517 and the great tracts of 1520

(*Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and On Christian Liberty*) to his confrontation with Emperor Charles V in Worms, translation of the Bible while in hiding on the Wartburg, marriage to the former nun Katharina von Bora, and opposition to the rebelling peasants – is so familiar that it need hardly be repeated here. But two points particularly telling for the nature of religious authority deserve to be spelled out.

One is the clarity with which Luther treated the sense of Scripture as the sole foundation of religious authority. He rejected religious authority of any other kind with uncompromising candor. He detested the confusion of religious authority with conformity to the Church. He had nothing but contempt for the imitation of Christ as it had flourished in the later Middle Ages. And he heaped scorn on a distinction that had been close to the heart of medieval religiosity; namely, between commands and counsels of perfection.¹²

Conformity to the Church and resemblance to Christ could be imagined in different degrees. A common medieval teaching had therefore been that not all Christians needed to follow Christ's commands to the letter. When Christ said to the rich man, "if thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor" (Matthew 19:21), that was not really a command. It was merely a counsel of perfection. Monks followed it by giving up their private property when they entered the monastery. Mendicant friars like St Francis vowed even stricter poverty than monks. Monks and friars therefore resembled Christ more closely than did the laity, who kept their property for themselves. They approached perfection. But precisely because they approached perfection, their way of life was not obligatory for all Christians.

From Luther's point of view that was a travesty of Christian teaching. Christians were not obliged to make themselves resemble Christ at all. Christ was God, and no human could be like God. Imitation was useless at best and blasphemous at worst. If Christ had wanted Christians to imitate his conduct, Luther thought, all Christians ought to have practiced the art of preaching, assembled a cast of 12 Apostles, and died on the cross, for that was what Christ had done – and none of them should have been cobblers, tailors, husbands, ploughmen, princes, hangmen, or beadles, for Christ was an unmarried carpenter.¹³ True Christians did not imitate Christ. They understood his promises and they followed his commands without exception or condition. That did not mean that Christians were perfect. It meant the opposite: that no one achieved perfection in this life.

The freedom with which this view of the Gospel allowed Luther to put himself on the same footing as the papacy and challenge the authority of the Church remains breathtaking. "I have no quarrel with any man concerning his morality, but only concerning the Word of truth," he wrote to Pope Leo X, not as a monk at the bottom of the hierarchy ought to have written to its ruler but as one reader to another, simply concerned to grasp the sense of Scripture. "In all things else I will yield to any man whatsoever: to give up or deny the Word I have neither the power nor the will."¹⁴ The obligation of a Christian was not to follow the papacy but to grasp the sense of the Gospel Christ had preached and to believe his promises. Salvation depended on the Word. Here the shift from conformity to the Church toward identity of sense was made complete, and authentication of the truth by the papacy was replaced with

authentication of the truth by Scripture. Scripture, in Calvin's deservedly famous phrase, was "self-authenticated."¹⁵

The second point worth stressing is the clarity with which Luther recognized that the sense of Scripture could not be used as a criterion of truth unless hierarchy was replaced with dichotomy. In hierarchy there can be many different ranks and orders that are related to each other by the degree to which they resemble the example set at the top. That degree can infinitely vary. The obligation to master a certain sense, however, admits only two possibilities: either you have mastered it or you have not. There is no in-between, no middle ground, and there is certainly no possibility for anything like a hierarchy of truths ascending to heaven step by step, much less a hierarchy of social orders resembling the hierarchy of truth.

Dichotomies therefore proliferate in Luther's thought. Take the distinction that he drew in *Christian Liberty* between the inner and the outer man.¹⁶ The inner man enjoys freedom from the law because he lives by faith. The outer man must serve his neighbor and obey the government. Thus every Christian is at one and the same time a sovereign lord and abject slave. But it is neither possible nor safe to confuse the dichotomy between inner and outer (lord and slave) with the higher and lower elements of hierarchy. The question is, of course, how the life of the inner man is to be reconciled with that of the outer man. But the answer to that question is a mystery that will not be revealed until the final resurrection. In this life, all Christians are both inner and outer, saint and sinner, *simul iustus et peccator*.

Or take the parallel dichotomy between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world.¹⁷ No Christian may resist evil. That is one of Christ's commands; all Christians must follow it without exception. But they must follow it only where their own interest is at stake, and their own interest lies solely in the kingdom of God. Meanwhile they live with their neighbors in the kingdom of the world. Where their neighbors are concerned, they may resist evil. Indeed, they are commanded to resist it for the love of neighbor – of course not on their own initiative (which no one could safely take without risking to confuse the love of neighbor with the love of self), but only at the command of their God-given rulers. "For you attend to yourself and what is yours in one way, and to your neighbor and what is his in another. As to you and yours, you keep to the Gospel and suffer injustice as a true Christian. But where the next man and what is his are concerned, you act in accordance with the [command to] love and you tolerate no injustice against him."¹⁸ That is the reason why God ordained the sword and gave it to rulers over the kingdom of the world. So long as those rulers and their soldiers kill for the sake of peace, and not for their own advantage, their killing does not conflict with the command not to resist evil at all. On the contrary, their killing is a work of love.

Dichotomies between self and other, inner and outer, the Christian and the Christian's neighbor, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world thus allowed Luther to replace hierarchy (built on conformity to a shared standard) with equality (built on identity of sense). In terms of hierarchy Christians had been asked to explain how closely their conduct resembled the conduct of Christ. The answer resulted in hierarchical distinctions between different forms of conduct with different degrees of merit, depending on how closely they approached perfection. In Luther's terms Christians were asked in whose name their conduct – any kind of conduct – was

carried out: their own name or the name of Christ? There were no degrees of merit; there were only two possibilities. No Christian was to resist evil in his own name; all Christians were to resist it for the love of God and neighbor. As Calvin put it:

There is a twofold government in man: one aspect is spiritual, whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God; the second is political, whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men. These are usually called the “spiritual” and the “temporal” jurisdiction (not improper terms) by which is meant that the former sort of government pertains to the life of the soul, while the latter has to do with the concerns of the present life. . . . There are in man, so to speak, two worlds, over which different kings and different laws have authority. Through this distinction it comes about that we are not to misapply to the political order the gospel teaching on spiritual freedom, as if Christians were less subject, as concerns outward government, to human laws, because their consciences have been set free in God’s sight; as if they were released from all bodily servitude because they are free according to the spirit.¹⁹

Soldiers, priests, cobblers, married and unmarried folk could all be equally good Christians, no matter what they did in the present life. The question was not what they did, but the sake for which they were doing it. Depending on that sake, they were full members of the society of right-minded people, or banished from it entirely.

THE AGE OF RELIGIOUS WARS

In a few startling phrases, Luther once advocated religious liberty as clearly as could be desired: “No ruler ought to prevent anyone from teaching or believing what he pleases, whether it is the Gospel or lies. It is enough if he prevents the teaching of sedition and rebellion.”²⁰ But Luther could say so only because he did not reckon with the possibility that reasonable people might come to different conclusions about the sense of Scripture. Nothing would have been more repugnant to him than to abandon Scripture as the ground on which all Christians were to take their stand in public no less than private. He was convinced that Scripture had a single sense, and that its sense was clear to all believers. He never wavered from that conviction, even though it caused an irreparable breach with Zwingli and divided him bitterly from the peasants who thought he would support them in their rebellion against their rulers. He stood his ground on Scripture with the same uncompromising certainty that he was in the right as members of the medieval Church had stood their ground on the rock of St Peter. And so did his opponents.

The third period in the history of religious authority in early modern Europe was therefore marked by persistent religious wars. Different interpretations of Scripture’s sense were propounded in increasing numbers and no single interpretation won general agreement. Lutherans, Zwinglians, Calvinists, Hutterites, Mennonites, Socinians, and others spread the Gospel in mutually exclusive ways while Catholics were sharpening their own interpretation of the sense of Scripture at the Council of

Trent and devising new means, such as the Jesuits, the Roman Inquisition, the so-called second scholasticism, and missions abroad, in order to keep Catholicism pure, spread its reach, and recover regions lost to Protestants in the great struggle known as the Counter-Reformation. None could agree with any of the others, yet all, including Catholics, insisted with increasing fervor on orthodoxy.

From the Schmalkaldic War in the late 1540s – or even the Peasants War of 1524–5 – via the French wars of religion in the second half of the sixteenth century, and Philip II's great Armada of 1588 down to the English Civil War (1642–8) and the Thirty Years War (1618–48), the inhabitants of Europe found themselves locked in bloody struggles to make one kind of sense prevail over the others. They only stopped when it was clear to all that none were able to prevail. Exhaustion convinced them to admit that Scripture could no longer serve as a criterion of truth. And peace did not return until they had agreed on sovereignty as the new criterion.

Accordingly the nature and exercise of religious authority were reconfigured in ways that proved enormously successful until the havoc wrought by sovereign states in the twentieth century led to growing doubts about their legitimacy. A line was drawn that had never been drawn like this before: the line between the private and the public realm. In itself that line was not a new invention. It figures prominently in antiquity and Roman law. It figures even more prominently in the distinction the medieval Church had drawn between the sacramental power priests exercised by virtue of their ordination (*potestas ordinis*) over the conscience of Christians in the privacy of the confessional (*forum internum*) and the power of jurisdiction (*potestas iurisdictionis*) the papacy exercised by virtue of its plenitude of power (*plenitudo potestatis*) over the whole Church in the public domain (*forum externum*). What was new was the use of that distinction to confine religious authority completely to the private sphere. Henceforth religious authority was going to be grounded in the self, subject solely to individual choice, and wholly removed from the enforcement of laws in the public realm.

That does not mean that religion disappeared from the public sphere, that governments no longer took an interest in questions of faith, or that religious liberty was instantly granted to all. By social habit, if nothing else, but usually as a matter of public policy as well, adherence to one or another religious faith continued to have momentous consequences, both advantageous and disabling, for different sectors of the citizenry. All states had more or less explicit affiliations with one or another kind of church; the Peace of Westphalia gave territorial rulers a formal right to choose the faith to be observed within the borders of their lands (the so-called *ius reformandi*); dissenters suffered serious disabilities; atheism was universally condemned; and Jews were never admitted to full and equal membership in the community.

And yet the middle of the seventeenth century marked a watershed in the history of religious authority.²¹ For the first time, religious faith was ruled out as a criterion with which to distinguish members of the community from outsiders. It no longer made a difference to the organization of society whether religious faith was authenticated by the papacy or by mastery of the sense of Scripture. A new consensus relegated both kinds of authentication to the private sphere and severed them from laws and law enforcement. Hierarchy gave way to two kinds of sovereignty: the sovereignty of states and rulers in public and the sovereignty of individuals in private.

And social order came to be founded on dichotomies like self and other, domestic and foreign, peace and war, private and public, religious and secular, moral and legal. These are the means by which Europe emerged from a great civil war over the nature and exercise of religious authority and laid the conceptual foundations on which the modern world was built.

CONCLUSION: A SINGLE STORY CAN BE TOLD

A single story can therefore perhaps be told about the history of religious authority in early modern Europe without casting that story as progress from ignorance and oppression to reason and liberty. That story could plausibly begin with the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and end with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

The Fourth Lateran Council met in 1215 under the presidency of Pope Innocent III. It is properly remembered as the greatest council of the high medieval Church, and the canons that it laid down may be regarded as the single most important body of legislative work completed in high medieval Europe.²² The canons began with a formal declaration of the doctrine of the Trinity, and they included the dogma of transubstantiation. They condemned alternative positions as heretical and laid down inquisitorial procedures by which the spread of heresies was to be brought under control. Bishops were obliged to investigate their flock, even where no formal charges of heresy had been brought. Secular governments were sworn on pain of losing their authority to assist the Church in seeking out and punishing heretics. All adult Christians were ordered on pain of excommunication to confess their sins and take communion at least once per year. A crusade against the infidels was planned. And temporal rulers who had crossed the papacy, such as the counts of Toulouse, the barons of England, and the enemies of Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, were subjected to ecclesiastical discipline. At the Fourth Lateran Council the Catholic faith as declared by the papacy served Europe as a universal standard by which all forms of conduct could be judged, to which all Christians could be expected to conform, and to which recalcitrants could be made to conform by force.

About four centuries later, from 1643 to 1648, the Congress of Westphalia assembled close to 150 diplomatic representatives from Germany, Sweden, France, Spain, and many other states to meet in separate gatherings in Münster and Osnabrück. Three different interpretations of the sense of Scripture – Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist – were given equal standing. The freedom of every person's conscience (*conscientia libera*) was explicitly endorsed. People whose faith differed from that of their territorial ruler were assured that they would be "tolerated" (*patienter tolerantur*) and given a formal right to emigrate without damage to life, property, or reputation. Conflicting religious parties were prohibited from using force to make their views prevail and the Church was denied the right to exercise any jurisdiction over the clauses of the Peace.²³ The papacy protested and annulled what it regarded as a peace with heretics. But its annulment went unheeded and for a century or more it was condemned to political insignificance.²⁴ Henceforth

individual persons were aiming to become sovereign rulers over their own bodies and minds, as John Stuart Mill was going to put it later on,²⁵ and questions of public order, including questions of religion whenever religion threatened the peace, were going to be decided by sovereign rulers enforcing the law at home and defending the territory of their state by military force.

The history that unfolded between the Fourth Lateran Council and the Congress of Westphalia consisted of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Age of Religious War. The meaning of those phases for the nature of religious authority can be summed up like this. The Renaissance developed new criteria of religious authority by moving from conformity to the Catholic faith, as authenticated by the papacy, to grasping the sense of Scripture, but it did not assault the established order of the Church. During the Reformation, the sense of Scripture escaped from the control of the Church and was deployed in opposition to its established structures. Scripture still served to underwrite public authority, but the distinction between clergy and laity lost its hierarchical significance. The Age of Religious War offered conclusive proof that the shift from conformity to sense made peace impossible to keep unless the exercise of public authority was founded on something other than religion, regardless of whether religion was authenticated by the papacy in Rome or by the self-authentication of Scripture. Religious authority was therefore limited to the private sphere, and the maintenance of public order was turned over to sovereign rulers. Thus religious liberty became an inalienable individual right on the condition that private individuals would keep their religion to themselves, surrender the use of force to sovereign states, and use no other grounds on which to make demands upon the public sphere than reason and observation.

NOTES

- 1 John W. O'Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000) is good on the historiography.
- 2 Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
- 3 I simplify greatly, but the principle is the same, regardless of whether the standard used to authenticate the reliability of instruments of measurement consists of a metal bar, the wavelength of a specified color of light, or any other thing. For details, see http://www.bipm.org/en/si/history-si/evolution_metre.html (accessed July 8, 2005).
- 4 For a deservedly famous demonstration of the reasons why it is nonsensical, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, section 50, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), pp. 24–5.
- 5 “Prima sedes non iudicabitur a quoquam.” Gratian, *Decretum*, D.21 c. 7, in *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, ed. E. Friedberg (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1879), vol. 1, col. 71.
- 6 William Durant the Elder, *Speculum iudiciale*, 1.1, De legato 6.52, quoted from Constantin Fasolt, *Council and Hierarchy: The Political Thought of William Durant the Younger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 67. Note the explicit exception for a heretical pope.
- 7 “A heretic, by canonical definition, was one whose views were ‘chosen by human perception, contrary to holy scripture, publicly avowed and obstinately defended.’” R. I.

- Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 68, with reference to Gratian, *Decretum*, C.24 q.3 cc.27–31, in *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, vol. 1, cols. 997–8.
- 8 Anthony Grafton, Adrian Johns, and Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, “AHR Forum: How Revolutionary Was the Print Revolution?” *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 84–128.
 - 9 Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought, 1: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 3–23.
 - 10 Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, 2nd edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).
 - 11 Petrarch, *Letters on Familiar Matters*, quoted from *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization*, vol. 5: *The Renaissance*, eds Eric Cochrane and Julius Kirshner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 32, 33, 45.
 - 12 Martin Luther, “On Secular Authority,” in *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, trans. Harro Höpfl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 4, 8.
 - 13 Luther, “On Secular Authority,” pp. 18–19.
 - 14 Luther, “Letter to Pope Leo X,” in *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization*, vol. 5: *The Renaissance*, p. 327.
 - 15 “Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. 1, chap. 7, sec. 5, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), vol. 1, p. 80.
 - 16 Martin Luther, *Christian Liberty*, trans. W. A. Lambert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), pp. 7–8, 21–2, and *passim*.
 - 17 Luther, “On Secular Authority,” pp. 8–14 and *passim*.
 - 18 Luther, “On Secular Authority,” p. 15 (brackets in the original).
 - 19 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. 3, chap. 19, sec. 15, vol. 1, p. 847.
 - 20 Luther, “To the Princes and Lords,” in *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization*, vol. 5: *The Renaissance*, p. 340.
 - 21 For a good explanation of this periodization, see Theodore K. Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
 - 22 Raymonde Foreville, *Latran I, II, III et Latran IV* (Paris: Editions de l’Orante, 1965).
 - 23 *Instrumentum pacis Osnabrugense*, art. V, paras. 1–2, 34–7, 48; art. VII, para. 1, in Karl Zeumer, ed., *Quellensammlung zur Geschichte der Deutschen Reichsverfassung in Mittelalter und Neuzeit*, 2nd edn (Tübingen: Mohr, 1913), pp. 403, 410, 412, 415–16.
 - 24 Konrad Repgen, “Der päpstliche Protest gegen den Westfälischen Frieden und die Friedenspolitik Urbans VIII.” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 75 (1956): 94–122.
 - 25 “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 69.

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