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Christianity and Conservatism: Theology of the French Counterrevolution

(Thesis Summary)

1. Aim and subject

The aim of the present study is to assess the role of Christianity in the formation of conservative political thought by exploring the main theological principles underlying French counterrevolutionary theory. Since the most common supposition seems to hold that these theological principles are essentially medieval in origin, the specific objective of the study is to examine how the theological conceptions of the counterrevolution relate to their relevant counterparts in the middle ages. A deeper understanding of the relationship between early French conservatism and medieval Christian theology may also provide new insight into the more complex problem of conservative politics and its religious foundations, including such questions as secularization and religious uniformity, religious coercion and violence, or even millenarism and utopianism.

2. Research background

Some of the French counterrevolutionaries were extensively discussed by nineteenth century authors such as Saint-Beuve, Quinet, Faguet, Barbey d'Aurevilly, or twentieth century authors like Laski, Mannheim, Viereck, Berlin, Nisbet and others. These discussions, however, have focused on the problem of political traditionalism, or arch-conservatism in a larger context, without a closer examination of the whole *oeuvres*. Even after the past few decades of more detailed philological scholarship on Maistre or Bonald by Richard Lebrun, Owen Bradley, David Klinck and Christopher Blum, or in a few cases on Ballanche or Lamennais by Arthur McCalla, Michael Reardon and Louis Le Guillou, we are left without a comparative analysis of the theological presuppositions that underlie the various forms of counterrevolutionary thought. While terms like 'medievalism' and 'scholasticism' keep on appearing in handbooks and encyclopedias, only sporadic attempts have been made to explore the connections between the theology of the counterrevolution and the theology of the middle ages.

3. Method

Since the first wave of French counterrevolutionary thought reached its peak during the Bourbon Restoration, I selected five of the most significant authors who flourished between 1814 and 1830: Joseph de Maistre, Louis-Ambroise de Bonald, René Chateaubriand, Pierre-Simon Ballanche and Felicité de Lamennais. In order to evaluate their work in entirety, it was necessary to extend the scope of the study to a longer period ranging from the French Revolution to the end of the July Monarchy, i.e. from 1789 to 1848.

While some of the most important works are now available in English, Hungarian translations are still rare and fragmentary, so I chose to present each author individually, with a considerable amount of quotations, adding a short biographical sketch and bibliography as well, before turning to the more significant part of comparative analysis.

As none of the above authors provide us with a fully-fledged theological system, I start out with an examination of their political writings, proceeding step by step towards a theological understanding of their theories. By the term “theology” I refer to a rational and argumentative study of religion, and do not include in the definition that it should be systematic, professional or official, as in the present case none of these criteria is easily applicable. Nevertheless, my hypothesis is that a more or less coherent theological background can be reconstructed in the case of every individual author; at the same time, their obvious differences cannot obscure the fact that some important features common to all authors can also be detected.

It is these same features that make a comparison with the corresponding medieval concepts possible. My treatment of the middle ages does not attempt to recapitulate the fullness of medieval theology even in regard to political theory: its sole intention is to highlight those aspects that most closely resemble those of the counterrevolution. Knowing that the influence of medieval theology on political theory was more often indirect than direct, it seems appropriate to discuss it in the context of Roman law, canon law and feudal customary law.

The last chapter can properly be called historical: a description of how medieval or scholastic theology was handed down to the post-revolutionary era. Adding some biographical details of what the counterrevolutionary authors actually knew about the middle ages, either by their early education or by later studies, may serve as a link between the statement that connecting counterrevolutionary theology to medieval antecedents is highly problematic, and the explanatory hypothesis that medieval tradition itself became less and less known in later centuries.

4. Results

The most important feature of counterrevolutionary theory is the conviction that the realms of the political and the religious are virtually inseparable. Even those authors who begin their discussion of the French Revolution with a political analysis, tend to move towards a theological understanding of the events. Maistre calls the revolution “satanic” at the very outset of his *Considerations*, Bonald admits that his *Theory of political power* is incomplete without a theory of religious authority, while Chateaubriand’s first treatise on revolutions is soon followed by his *Genius of Christianity*. The mingling of political and religious motives is even more obvious in the case of Ballanche, who treats the political as a part of the religious in his early work *On Sentiment*, and Lamennais, who tackles the whole problem of enlightenment and revolution in the context of religious indifferentism, well before his great *Essay on Indifference*. Their later works (especially Maistre’s *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, Ballanche’s *Palingenesis* or Lamennais’s *Outline of a Philosophy*) make it all the more evident that political considerations, according to them, should not just rest on scattered theological presuppositions, but on a large-scale synthesis.

Although the highly divergent nature of these conceptions is undeniable, there are at least two points on which they seem to agree: the first is the metaphysical assumption that authority by its very definition cannot be divided; the second is the epistemological claim that authority can only be known through tradition, and not by individual reasoning. The problem of authority naturally leads to a theory of sovereignty, which in the final analysis proves to be religious in nature, represented either by the pope, as stated by Maistre, by a sacred king, according to Bonald, or by some common religious moral law as in the case of Chateaubriand. Ballanche’s ideas can be attached either to Bonald’s sacred kingship or Chateaubriand’s historically evolving religious principles, and even Lamennais maintains the primacy of religious authority, only to move it from the papacy to the conscience or rather consensus of the peoples. Even more evident is their common adherence to tradition as the only source of religious and political knowledge, handed down by history as ‘experimental politics’ (Maistre), by language (Bonald), by common moral sentiments (Chateaubriand), by an organic evolution of society (Ballanche), or by a combination of the latter (Lamennais).

As for the middle ages, we can say that neither absolute authority nor history played such an eminent role in medieval theological arguments on the nature of politics as the counterrevolutionaries seem to suppose. The term ‘sovereignty’ itself is of relatively late origin: most of the papalist claims did not go so far as to treat the pope’s fullness of power as

actually unlimited, while not even the most extreme secular claims (like those of Marsilius of Padua) tried to go beyond a conciliar theory of ecclesiastical authority. Conciliarism is at least as much of a medieval concept as any other, and turning to the question of royal or imperial rulership, we also find various conceptions of priestly kingship, limited government and mixed regimen, or even antecedents of social contract theory and popular sovereignty.

Reconstructing a unique normative tradition in the middle ages in regard of sovereignty seems to be as difficult as defining a general medieval concept of history. What seems to be common in the various forms of theological, philosophical or historiographical approaches is the conviction that time itself does not provide humankind with new principles, only with new factual knowledge, a logical explication of dogmatic and metaphysical truths, or a collection of examples for political conduct. A genuine theology of history, like that of Joachim of Fiore inevitably leads to utopianism if not heresy, which the counterrevolutionaries are seemingly totally unaware of.

A brief overview of the fate of Catholic theological tradition from the middle ages to the nineteenth century clearly shows that their ignorance was by no means an accident. As early as the fourteenth century, Aquinas' *Summa* was reduced to the length of a confessors' handbook, later *Summae* – especially in Italy – kept focusing on moral theology for centuries to come, and while in Spain a second scholasticism would arise, in France it was only patristic exegesis and a sort of Catholic skepticism that combated Protestantism. There is an almost universal agreement among scholars that between 1700 and 1850 not only scholastic theology was extinct in Europe, but Catholic philosophy as a whole. The personal records of counterrevolutionary authors only confirm that they had some knowledge of the Church Fathers as well as modern apologists like Bossuet or Fénelon, but even in Catholic institutions like the Jesuit or Oratorian colleges, they learned more about Montesquieu, Rousseau and the *Encyclopedia* than medieval theology. It is worth noting that even in their later works they either jump from Augustine to Bossuet, as Maistre does, or neglect scholasticism as fruitless, like Bonald; Chateaubriand knows no significant medieval theologian after Bernard of Clairvaux, Ballanche thinks that he is better than Dante, and Lamennais complains about the dry and lifeless scholastic theology taught in seminars (of which he never attended any).

5. Conclusion

The French counterrevolutionaries' concept of Christianity and conservation cannot be attributed to the middle ages. The origins of their theology go back to the seventeenth century, supported either by certain elements of Cartesian innatism or some sort of philosophy of history, derived mainly from Bossuet. Their idea of a primitive revelation and their corresponding language philosophy can even properly be called novel in its own right. Their political theory, on the other hand, is a further development of the doctrine of absolute sovereignty first elaborated by Bodin, and put into practice during the reign of Louis XIV.

Mainstream medieval theology has always been ahistorical and universal; its conception of churchly and secular power has always been circumscribed not unlimited as counterrevolutionaries presumed. Conservatism, with its reliance on history and sovereignty inevitably moved towards a theology whose God was immanent in the world, almost exactly in the same way as the evolutionary principles of the enlightenment and the revolution.

The failure of the counterrevolution is not due to atavism; it is more likely explained as the failure of a rival modernism that did not have as clear tenets as the revolution did. If there is any lesson to be learned from its failure, it is that without a sound theological background, all conservative enterprise is bound to fail; while from a religious point of view, it becomes evident that rethinking church-state relations, secularization and the like is not the task of political theory, at least for the time being, but of the clarification of basic theological principles.

6. References

Published literature related to the present topic:

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