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Medieval Political Thought Political Science YouTube Lecture Handouts

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Medieval Political Thought

Which Period is Considered as Medieval in the Study of Political Study

Medieval philosophy is the philosophy produced in Western Europe during the middle ages. There is no consensus, even among medievalists, as to when this period begins or ends; however, it is conventional — and probably neither fully correct nor incorrect — to begin with Augustine (354 – 430) , and note that the influence of medieval philosophy continued past even the birth of Descartes (1596 – 1650) .

Major Political Philosophers of Medieval Period

- **The Bible**
- **Fathers of the Church**
- **Augustine**
- **Thomas of Aquinas**

The Bible: Political Ideas

Political ideas conveyed by the Bible include the following:

- **The human race is normally ruled by kings or emperors. There are very few traces of republican institutions in the Bible. (There is one exception: 1 Machabees 8: 14 – 16 is an admiring description of Roman republican government.)**
- **Kings are very often wicked tyrants and enemies of God. The peoples often share the vices of their rulers.**
- **The kingship of King David is a model (though David also often sinned) .**
- **Subjects must obey rulers, even the wicked. It is wrong to rebel, and especially to make any attack on the person of the ruler — see 2 Samuel 1: 14 – 16.**
- **But obedience to rulers is always limited by obedience to the commands of God.**

Fathers of the Church

The Fathers passed down to the middle ages the idea that certain key social institutions were not part of God's original plan for mankind, namely the institutions of coercive government, slavery and property.

Augustine

- The work of Augustine's most likely to be known to modern students of political thought is *The City of God*.
- Two cities, the city of God and the earthly city, are distinguished by two loves, love of God and (misdirected) love of self, and by two destinies, heaven, and hell. Augustine's most famous contribution to theology was the doctrine of predestination, a position that only became pronounced later in life.
- Augustine emphasizes that both rulers and those who do military service in obedience to rulers must avoid hatred, greed and other dispositions incompatible with love. Although scattered across different texts, thanks in part to the success of the *Decretum*, Augustine offered later writers a Christianized version of the Roman theory of the just war.

Thomas Aquinas

Literary Works

- **On Kingship, to the King of Cyprus**
- **Summa theologiae**
- **On natural law and other kinds of law Thomas again follows not Aristotle but the tradition of civil and canon law going back to the Roman Stoics.**
- **He distinguishes divine law (eternal and positive) from human law, and among human laws, he distinguishes natural law from the law of nations and civil law.**
- **The best form of government, according to Thomas, is a mixed government combining elements of democracy, aristocracy, and kingship.**
- **On war, Thomas is an exponent of a version of the "just war" theory Augustine took from the ancient Romans. For a war to be just, it must be commanded by someone in authority, there must be a just cause, and it must be carried on without disproportionate violence.**

Important Questions

- Just war theory propounded by?
 - Thomas Aquinas
- Bible was a strong foundation for the political thinkers of medieval times?
 - No, the thinkers of medieval times were much more guided by contemporary activities.

- Thomas Aquinas proposed which form of government?
 - He proposed a mixed form of government, which consists of democracy, aristocracy, and kingship.

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