

MODULE 3

HISTORY 102H: INTERPRETING THE EUROPEAN PAST

John of Salisbury *Policraticus* (written in 1159)

4.1. Between a tyrant and a prince there is this single or chief difference, that the latter obeys the law and rules the people by its dictates, accounting himself as but their servant. It is by virtue of the law that he makes good his claim to the foremost and chief place in the management of the affairs of the commonwealth...; whereas private men are held responsible only for their private affairs, on the prince fall the burdens of the whole community. Wherefore deservedly there is conferred on him...the power of all his subjects, ...that he may be sufficient unto himself in seeking and bringing about the advantage of each individually, and of all; and to the end that the state of the human commonwealth may be ordered in the best possible manner.... Wherein we indeed but follow nature, the best guide of life; for nature has gathered together all the senses of her microcosm or little world, which is man, into the head, and has subjected all the members in obedience to it in such wise that they will all function properly so long as they follow the guidance of the head, and the head remains sane.

Therefore the prince stands on a pinnacle which is exalted and made splendid with all the great and high privileges which he deems necessary for himself. And rightly so, because nothing is more advantageous to the people than that the needs of the prince should be fully satisfied; since it is impossible that his will should be found opposed to justice. Therefore, according to the usual definition, the prince is the public power, and a kind of likeness on earth of the divine majesty....

And this I do not think could be, except as a result of the will of God. For all power is from the Lord God, and has been with Him always, and is from everlasting. The power which the prince has is therefore from God, for the power of God is never lost, nor severed from Him, but He merely exercises it through a subordinate hand, making all things teach His mercy or justice. "Who, therefore, resists the ruling power, resists the ordinance of God," [Romans 13:2] in whose hand is the authority of conferring that power, and when He so desires, of withdrawing it again, or diminishing it.

For it is not the ruler's own act when his will is turned to cruelty against his subjects, but it is rather the dispensation of God for His good pleasure to punish or chasten them. Thus during the Hunnish persecution, Attila, on being asked by the reverend bishop of a certain city who he was, replied, "I am Attila, the scourge of God." Whereupon it is written that the bishop adored him as representing the divine majesty.... If good men thus regard power as worthy of veneration even when it comes as a plague upon the elect, who should not venerate that power which is instituted by God for the punishment of evil-doers and for the reward of good men...?

...For the authority of the prince depends upon the authority of justice and law; and truly it is a greater thing than imperial power for the prince to place his government under the laws, so as to deem himself entitled to do nothing which is at variance with the equity of justice.

4.2. Princes should not deem that it detracts from their princely dignity to believe that the enactments of their own justice are not to be preferred to the justice of God, whose justice is an everlasting justice, and His law is equity. Now equity, as the learned jurists define it, is a certain fitness of things which compares all things rationally, ...being impartially disposed toward all persons, and allotting to each that which belongs to him. Of this equity the interpreter is the law... [A]ll law is, as it were, a discovery, and a gift from God, a precept of wise men, the corrector of excesses of the will, the bond which knits together the fabric of the state, and the banisher of crime; and it is therefore fitting that all men should live according to it who lead their lives in a corporate political body....

4.3. This sword, then, the prince receives from the hand of the Church, although she herself has no sword of blood at all. Nevertheless she has this sword, but she uses it by the hand of the prince, upon whom she confers the power of bodily coercion, retaining to herself authority over spiritual things.... The prince is, then...a minister of the priestly power, and one who exercises that side of the sacred offices which seems unworthy of the hands of the priesthood....

But if one who has been appointed prince has performed duly and faithfully the ministry which he has undertaken, great honor and reverence are to be shown to him as the head excels in honor all the members of the body. Now he performs his ministry faithfully when he is mindful of his true status and remembers that...he owes his life not to himself and his own private ends, but to others, and allots it to them accordingly, with duly ordered charity and affection....

And so let him be both father and husband to his subjects...; let him desire to be loved rather than feared, and show himself to them as such a man that they will out of devotion prefer his life to their own, and regard his preservation and safety as a kind of public life; and then all things will prosper well for him, and a small bodyguard will, in case of need, prevail by their loyalty against innumerable adversaries. For love is strong as death; and the wedge [a military formation] which is held together by strands of love is not easily broken....

8.17 A tyrant, then, as the philosophers have described him, is one who oppresses the people by rulership based upon force, while he who rules in accordance with the laws is a prince. Law is the gift of God, the model of equity, a standard of justice, a likeness of the divine will.... [If] the law is assailed by force or by fraud, and, as it were, either wrecked by the fury of the lion or undermined by the wiles of the serpent..., it is plain that it is the grace of God which is being assailed, and that it is God himself who in a sense is challenged to battle. The prince fights for the laws and the liberty of the people; the tyrant thinks nothing done unless he brings the laws to nothing and reduces the people to slavery.

Hence the prince is a kind of likeness of divinity; and the tyrant, on the contrary, a likeness of the boldness of the Adversary, even of the wickedness of Lucifer.... The prince, as the likeness of the Deity, is to be loved, worshipped and cherished; the tyrant, the likeness of wickedness, is generally to be even killed. The origin of tyranny is iniquity, and springing from a poisonous root, it is a tree which grows and sprouts into a baleful pestilent growth, and to which the axe must by all means be laid. For if iniquity and injustice, banishing charity, had not brought about tyranny, firm concord and perpetual peace would have possessed the peoples of the earth forever, and no one would think of enlarging his boundaries. Then kingdoms would be as friendly and peaceful...as the separate families in a well-ordered state, ... or perhaps...there would be no kingdoms at all, since it is clear from the ancient historians that in the beginning these were founded by iniquity as presumptuous encroachments against the Lord...

Therefore respect for the right and the just is either not sufficiently present or else is wholly wanting from the face of tyrants; and...they desire for themselves power to do all things....

For the commonwealth of the ungodly has also its head and members, and strives to correspond, as it were, to the civil institutions of a legitimate commonwealth. The tyrant who is its head is the likeness of the devil; its soul consists of heretical, schismatic, and sacrilegious priests, and...prefects of religion who wage war on the law of the Lord; its heart of unrighteous counsellors is like a senate of iniquity; its eyes, ears, tongue, and unarmed hand are unjust judges, laws and officials; its armed hand consists of soldiers of violence...; its feet are those who in the humbler walks of life go against the precepts of the Lord and His lawful institutions....

8.18 I do not, however, deny that tyrants are the ministers of God, who by His just judgment has willed them to be in the place of highest authority in one sphere or the other...to the end that by their means the wicked may be punished, and the good chastened and exercised. For the sins of a people cause a hypocrite to reign over them, and, as the Book of Kings bears witness, tyrants were brought into power over the people of Israel by the failings of the priests.