Faith and Power: Religion's Role in European Politics

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Introduction

Religion has been one of Europe’s most durable engines of political imagination and institutional innovation. Long before parliaments matured and parties organized, churches and their critics taught rulers and subjects to argue about law, legitimacy, and liberty. This book explores how Christianity, the Reformation, and successive waves of secularization shaped European governance and conflict from late antiquity to the present. It treats belief not as an ornament to power but as a set of ideas, rituals, and authorities that structured political choices, constrained violence, and legitimated the expansion—or curbing—of the state.

The approach is deliberately dual: theological change and social consequence. On one side stand doctrines—about grace, conscience, sacraments, or sovereignty—that molded political language. On the other side stand social realities—parishes and monasteries, printing presses and schools, tax rolls and armies—that translated creeds into everyday governance. The concept of confessionalization anchors this analysis: in early modern Europe, states and churches co-produced disciplined communities by synchronizing catechisms, courts, and coercion. Far from a purely spiritual process, confessionalization forged bureaucratic capacities, redefined citizenship, and sharpened boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

Yet religion’s political role was never uniform. Catholic monarchies and Reformed republics, Lutheran kingdoms and Orthodox empires, radical dissenters and cautious Erastians all curated distinct settlements of church and state. The Reformation splintered Christendom, but it also invited experiments in sovereignty—from princely supervision of clergy to city councils policing morals—while nurturing new ideals of conscience and public reason. The ensuing conflicts, from communal uprisings to continent-spanning wars, were fought as much over jurisdiction and taxation as over dogma, showing how belief systems and material interests intertwined.

Secularization did not simply erase faith from public life; it reallocated spiritual authority, privatized certain practices, and recoded religious arguments into the languages of rights, science, and nationhood. Enlightenment skepticism promoted pluralism and toleration, but it also enabled states to domesticate churches through concordats, cultural campaigns, and schooling. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christian democracy, social Catholicism, and Protestant social thought supplied programmatic answers to industrialization and mass politics, even as totalitarian regimes tested the limits of religious autonomy and resistance.

The story extends into our own century. Postwar integration drew on memories of Christian humanism and on ecumenical efforts to reconcile a fractured continent.

Meanwhile, uneven secularization, new migrations, and the public presence of Islam have reopened fundamental questions about belonging, law, and neutrality. Populist movements often mobilize religious heritage as cultural identity, while courts arbitrate the boundaries of expression, equality, and historical tradition. Across these arenas, religion remains a vocabulary of legitimacy and dissent, not merely a vestige of the past.

This book is organized to move from formation to fragmentation, from reform to reconstruction, and from secularization to pluralism. Each chapter blends political narrative with institutional and intellectual history: how canon law shaped governance, how sermons and pamphlets reframed authority, how treaties and concordats redistributed power, and how everyday religious practices—confession, processions, schooling—disciplined or democratized communities. Readers will encounter emperors and popes, jurists and reformers, but also printers, guilds, migrants, and voters whose choices embedded faith within Europe’s political architecture.

By balancing theology with social consequence, the chapters aim to clarify why belief has mattered so persistently to policy-making, law, and legitimacy. The argument is not that religion determines politics, but that it furnishes repertoires—symbols, institutions, and norms—through which Europeans have governed, contested, and imagined their common life. Understanding those repertoires is essential for grasping Europe’s past and for navigating its contested present.

CHAPTER ONE: From Empire to Christendom: The Late Antique Transformation

When the Roman Empire began to absorb Christianity, nobody quite knew what the finished product would look like. The emperors were not following a blueprint. There was no manual for converting a vast, polyglot Mediterranean state into something governed by the principles of a Galilean preacher executed under Tiberius. What happened over the fourth and fifth centuries was improvisational, messy, and often violent — a slow collision between an old political order built on conquest and civic loyalty and a new one built on bishops, creeds, and the unsettling idea that the emperor might owe obedience to God, or at least to God's appointed spokesmen on earth. That collision remade Europe.

To understand how it happened, it helps to recall what the Mediterranean world looked like before Constantine. Rome was tolerant in the casual, pragmatic way that empires can afford to be when they have many peoples to manage. Local gods were generally welcome. The imperial cult, periodic persecutions of Christians aside, was less a test of sincere belief than a loyalty oath wrapped in ceremony. A citizen of Alexandria or Carthage could worship Isis, attend a philosophical lecture on Plato, and visit a synagogue without anyone in charge seeing a contradiction. Christianity was different, though, not because it was monotheistic — plenty of people respected one high god above a crowd of lesser spirits — but because it was exclusive. Christians refused to sprinkle a pinch of incense at the emperor's altar, and that refusal made them look disloyal in a way that a devotee of Isis or Mithras never did.

The persecutions came and went in waves, depending on the emperor and the province. Some were ferocious — the campaigns of Decius in the mid-third century and Diocletian at the century's end were systematic efforts to root out the church and force compliance with traditional cult. Others were half-hearted or brief. What the persecutions revealed was that Christianity had grown too large, too networked, and too institutionally mature to be easily snuffed out. By 300, the church had bishops in most major cities, a network of correspondence stretching from Britain to Mesopotamia, scriptures circulating in multiple languages, and a social-welfare apparatus — care for widows, orphans, prisoners, and the sick — that the state itself could barely match. Persecution, paradoxically, had given the church organizational discipline and a martyrology that bound communities together across vast distances.

Then came Constantine. The traditional story, polished by court panegyrists and later by church historians, has him seeing a cross of light in the sky before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 and hearing the words "In this sign, conquer." Modern historians,

less interested in what Constantine saw in the sky and more interested in what he did afterward, note that his conversion — if it was a single dramatic moment — did not make him an ordinary Christian. He was baptized only on his deathbed, decades later, perhaps mindful of the forgiveness available for sins postponed until the last hour. But what matters politically is not the state of Constantine's soul; it is what the empire did with his decision.

The Edict of Milan in 313, which he issued jointly with his eastern co-emperor Licinius, restored confiscated church property and guaranteed freedom of worship to Christians. It did not ban paganism, nor did it make Christianity the official religion. What it did was remove the legal disabilities under which Christians had labored and give the church access to wealth, land, and the protection of the imperial courts. Constantine began subsidizing the construction of basilicas, granting tax exemptions to clergy, and intervening personally in ecclesiastical disputes — most spectacularly at the Council of Nicaea in 325, which he convened to settle the Arian controversy over the relationship between the Father and the Son. The precedent was fateful: an emperor presiding over — not merely permitting — a council of bishops, wielding political authority to enforce theological agreement.

The bishops of the fourth century were not sure whether to be grateful or alarmed. On one hand, imperial patronage meant magnificent new churches, legal protections, and an end to sporadic violence. On the other, it meant that the emperor now had opinions on matters of doctrine, and those opinions could not always be ignored. Athanasius of Alexandria, one of the most combative and resourceful bishops of the age, was exiled five times by various emperors who found his theological positions inconvenient. The relationship between throne and altar was, from the beginning, a negotiation, not a settled arrangement.

Under Constantius II, Constantine's son and successor in the east, the court's theological sympathies shifted toward Arianism, which held that the Son was a created being, subordinate to the Father. Arianism found favor not because the emperor was a deep thinker but because it aligned with the preferences of key military officers and court officials. Pro-Nicene bishops — those who held that the Son was of one substance with the Father — found themselves marginalized, exiled, or browbeaten. The pattern would repeat: whenever emperors took theology seriously, which was not always, they tended to use it as an instrument of political cohesion and loyalty.

Theodosius I, who came to power in 379 and ruled both east and west by 391, escalated the entanglement dramatically. The Edict of Thessalonica in 380, issued jointly with the western emperors Gratian and Valentinian II, declared Nicene Christianity the official faith of the empire and ordered that all peoples should follow it. "We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians," the decree read, while "all other" were to be branded with "the infamous name of heretics" and suffer both divine punishment and imperial punishment. Here, in a single

sentence, was the template for medieval Christendom: one faith, one empire, one set of consequences for dissent.

Theodosius did not stop with decrees. In 391 and 392, a series of laws prohibited pagan sacrifices, closed temples, and restricted the practice of traditional Roman religion. The Serapeum of Alexandria, one of the most famous temples in the Mediterranean world, was destroyed in 391 after a mob of Christians, including monks from the desert monasteries, stormed it. The emperor did not order the destruction personally, but his laws had created the atmosphere in which it became not only permissible but heroic. The line between state policy and popular violence blurred in ways that would persist for centuries.

Yet the empire did not become a theocracy overnight. Roman law continued largely unchanged in its procedural mechanics. Senators still deliberated, bureaucrats still collected taxes, and the army still fought on the frontiers. What changed was the framework of legitimacy. Emperors no longer derived their authority solely from military acumen, senatorial favor, or dynastic inheritance. Increasingly, they were expected to be defenders of the true faith — a role that would later pass, in different forms, to Frankish kings, Holy Roman Emperors, and Russian tsars. The title "pontifex maximus," once held by pagan emperors as head of the state religious college, was quietly retired or transferred to the bishop of Rome, an indicator of where sacred authority was migrating even if the political details remained tangled.

Augustine of Hippo, writing as the western empire was collapsing around him, provided the most influential intellectual framework for thinking about the relationship between political power and Christian belief. "The City of God," composed between 413 and 426 in response to the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410, argued that human history was a contest between two cities: the City of God, oriented toward love of the divine, and the earthly city, oriented toward love of self. Neither city could be identified perfectly with any earthly institution — not the church, not the empire — but the framework gave Christians a way to think about politics that did not require them either to worship the emperor or to reject all political authority as demonic. Augustine's thought would echo through centuries of European political theology, providing justifications for both papal supremacy and princely sovereignty, depending on who was reading him and which bits they chose to emphasize.

While Augustine was writing in North Africa, the western empire was fragmenting into Germanic successor kingdoms. The Visigoths in Spain and southern Gaul, the Ostrogoths in Italy, the Franks in Gaul, the Burgundians and Vandals and Angles and Saxons — all of them were originally pagan, and all of them converted to Christianity within a few generations. But the manner and timing of their conversions mattered enormously for the political order that succeeded Rome.

The classic pattern was set by Clovis I, king of the Franks, who was baptized into

Nicene Christianity around 496, reportedly after a vow made before a critical battle against the Alamanni. Whether or not the battlefield miracle story is literally true, the political consequences are clear. By aligning himself with the orthodox bishops of Gaul rather than with the Arian clergy who dominated among the other Germanic kingdoms, Clovis gained the support of a Gallo-Roman ecclesiastical establishment that still commanded loyalty, administered charity, and controlled significant urban wealth. The Frankish kingdom became Catholic, and Catholicism gave the Franks a legitimacy in the eyes of the former Roman population that purely military conquest could never have provided.

Other kingdoms followed different paths. The Visigoths, who had been Arian Christians since the fourth century, formally converted to Catholicism at the Third Council of Toledo in 589, a decision driven as much by the desire to unify a kingdom split between a Catholic Hispano-Roman majority and an Arian Gothic elite as by theological conviction. The Irish and the Anglo-Saxons were converted through monastic missionaries — figures like Columba, Aidan, and Augustine of Canterbury — whose work created a distinctive form of Christianity that would later clash with Roman practice over the dating of Easter and the shape of the tonsure. In each case, the choice of which Christianity to adopt was a political choice, shaping alliances, law, and the structure of royal authority.

The eastern half of the empire, which survived as what historians retrospectively called Byzantium, developed its own version of the emperor-patriarch relationship. The emperor in Constantinople claimed a kind of supervisory authority over the church — not the pope's claim to doctrinal supremacy, but a practical power to convene councils, appoint patriarchs, and enforce orthodoxy through imperial law. The title "equal to the apostles" was applied to emperors, reinforcing the idea that Christian kingship itself was a sacred office. Justinian I, who reigned from 527 to 565, tried to reunite the political and religious leadership of the Mediterranean world through military reconquest and a comprehensive codification of Roman law, the Corpus Iuris Civilis, which embedded Christian principles into the legal framework of the state. His ambitions exceeded his grasp — the western provinces were lost to Slavs, Lombards, and eventually the rising Frankish power — but his fusion of Christian orthodoxy and imperial legislation became a model for the Byzantine political tradition for nearly a millennium.

One of the most significant and least dramatic transformations of the period was the Christianization of law. Roman law had always been concerned with property, inheritance, contracts, and obligations. Christianity introduced new questions that the old juristic tradition had not anticipated: What was the legal status of the clergy? Could a man who had taken holy orders be compelled to serve in the army or pay certain taxes? What happened to a marriage if one spouse converted and the other did not? How should the church handle property given to it by the faithful? The answers, hammered out over centuries in imperial edicts, conciliar canons, and the

writings of church fathers, created a body of norms that would eventually become canon law — the subject of this book's third chapter. But in the late antique period, what mattered most was the principle itself: that the church was a legal entity within the empire, with its own courts, its own property, and its own jurisdiction, existing alongside and increasingly intertwined with the secular state.

Ritual and public ceremony also changed. The late Roman imperial court had always been a theater of power, with elaborate protocols of proskynesis, audience, and gift-giving designed to remind visitors of the emperor's majesty. Christianity did not abolish court ceremonial so much as overlay it with new symbols. The emperor appeared not only as the supreme civil magistrate but as a protector of the faith, commissioning churches, kissing the true cross, and processing with relics. In Constantinople, the construction of Hagia Sophia under Justinian — completed in 537 with a dome that seemed, in the words of the historian Procopius, to be "suspended from heaven by a golden chain" — became the architectural embodiment of a Christian empire in which God's throne and the emperor's throne were understood to complement each other. Whether ordinary people believed any of this in any straightforward way is doubtful, but the architecture, the law, and the rhetoric shaped expectations of what a legitimate political order should look and feel like.

The countryside told a different story, as it usually does. Away from the great cities, where bishops deliberated and emperors legislated, the Christianization of Europe proceeded at an uneven pace. In rural Gaul, Spain, and the Balkans, folk practices, local cults, and pre-Christian customs survived for generations, folded into Christian observance or persisting alongside it. Saints' cults replaced local deities with disconcerting ease; holy wells that had once honored water nymphs were rededicated to the Virgin Mary. The process was less a clean substitution than a palimpsest, in which new meanings were written over old ones without fully erasing them. For the political order, this mattered because it meant that the reach of Christian authority — of bishops, of canon law, of imperial edicts — was uneven and often partial, extending most effectively in towns and along trade routes, less so in remote valleys and forest clearings where the nearest priest might be a day's ride away.

Slavery, which had been a fundamental institution of the Roman economy, illustrates the tension between Christian teaching and Roman practice. The church did not formally condemn slavery in this period; popes and bishops owned slaves, and canon law regulated the conditions under which enslaved Christians could worship. But Christian moral language — the insistence on the spiritual equality of all souls before God, the valorization of humility and manumission as pious acts — introduced a slow corrosion into the institution. It would be many centuries before the contradiction between Christian universalism and human bondage became politically explosive, but the seed was planted in the very logic of a faith that preached the kinship of all people under one God and one church.

The fifth-century invasions are often narrated as a catastrophe — the fall of Rome, the end of civilization — and there is some truth in that. Urban populations declined, long-distance trade contracted, literacy rates dropped, and the complex administrative machinery of the late empire fragmented. But the church provided a degree of continuity that the secular state could not. Bishops frequently took on the roles of civic leaders: negotiating with barbarian kings, organizing food supplies, ransoming captives, maintaining what remained of public order. In many places, the episcopal office became the institutional bridge between the Roman and the post-Roman worlds. Gregory the Great, bishop of Rome from 590 to 604, administered church estates in southern Italy with the efficiency of a late Roman landlord, negotiated with Lombard invaders, organized missions to England, and wrote theological works that would shape Western Christianity for centuries. He was, in a very practical sense, governing — and his authority derived not from an army or a senate but from his office as pope and from the network of churches, monasteries, and dependent communities that answered to Rome.

By the end of the sixth century, the map of Europe had changed beyond recognition. The western Mediterranean was divided among Visigothic Spain, Frankish Gaul, Lombard Italy, and a patchwork of smaller kingdoms. Britain had become a collection of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic Christian kingdoms. North Africa, once one of the most Christianized regions of the empire, was conquered by Islam in the seventh century — a development that would, in time, profoundly reshape the political and religious geography of Europe. The eastern Mediterranean remained under Byzantine control, though much reduced in territory, its emperor still claiming to be the universal head of a Christian empire that spoke Greek and looked toward Constantinople.

What had emerged was not the Roman Empire restored but something new: Christendom. The word itself would come later — "Christenheit" in German, "chrétienté" in French — but the reality it described was already taking shape in the fifth and sixth centuries. It was a civilization defined not by political unity — there was none — but by a shared religious identity, a common set of institutions (bishoprics, monasteries, parish churches), and a loose sense that the Christian faith provided the moral and legal framework within which political life should be conducted. The precise relationship between secular power and spiritual authority remained undefined and contested. But the fact that both emperors and kings now felt compelled to justify their rule in Christian terms, and that bishops and popes understood themselves as participants in political governance, marked a transformation that would define European politics for the next thousand years.

The stones of old Roman temples, repurposed as churches, stood as quiet testimony to the change. So did the baptismal fonts installed in basilicas where Roman citizens had once worshipped Jupiter. The empire had not simply added a new god to its pantheon. It had accepted a faith that claimed supremacy over all other loyalties and

that, in doing so, demanded a renegotiation of the relationship between power and truth. That renegotiation — messy, incomplete, often bloody — was the precondition for everything that followed.

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