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[See table of contents](#)

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# THE AGE OF THE GREGORIAN REFORM AND THE INVESTITURE CONTROVERSY: NEW INTERPRETATION

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The eight decades from the middle of the 11th century to the end of the third decade of the 12th constitute one of the great turning-points in European history. It was one of those periods during which vitally important changes in all aspects of life occurred simultaneously and with such great rapidity that no contemporary could foresee the far-reaching consequences of many of these changes. Nor can the historian with all the advantage of hindsight and even after the most painstaking labours disentangle all the causal relationships which inaugurated great upheavals in political, economic, religious and intellectual life. Hence from this point of view alone, these eight medieval decades resemble the critical eras of the modern world: the first half of the 16th century, the second half of the 18th, and the first half of the 20th century. In all these crucial periods in the history of the West, the forces of change, for better or worse, frustrated so long, burst forth over the land like a flood, leaving behind the wrecked structure of an old order and the foundation of a changed pattern of social life. At most times Western men appear to be like sleepwalkers, accepting passively the social framework built up over the centuries that have gone before. But during these critical periods of change they appear more like daydreamers, pursuing an only partly defined ideal which now inspires their intellect, and with the novelty of now moving forward with eyes open instead of closed but still with only partial consciousness of the direction of their movement.

Such a period of fundamental and at the same time rapid change was the age of the Gregorian reforms and the investiture controversy. It was the period of enormous commercial expansion, of the well-known rise of urban communities, of the first expression of political influence on the part of the new burgher class. It was an age in which the first really successful medieval monarchy was created in Anglo-Norman England on the basis of the feudal institutions and administrative methods and personnel created by the energetic and far-seeing Norman dukes. It was an age in which the long separation of the new Western European civilization from the life of the Mediterranean world came to an end. This isolation, in existence since the 8th century, is now replaced by the political and economic penetration of the West European peoples into the Mediterranean basin to the detriment of the Moslems and Byzantines who had so long ruled the Mediterranean lands and controlled Medi-

terranean trade without a challenge from the north. It was an age of tremendous intellectual vitality which witnessed the most important contributions to the Latin Christian theology since Augustine, and the slow transformation of some of the cathedral schools of Northern France into the universities of the following centuries. It was an age of great vitality in legal thought in which Roman law came to be carefully studied for the first time since the German invasion of the 5th century and great strides were made in the codification of canon law.

But as in the eras of fundamental change in modern history these achievements must be given second place in importance by the historian in favor of an ideological struggle. Out of a far-reaching controversy on the nature of the right order to be established in the world the pattern of the civilization of the following centuries was to emerge. As I have written elsewhere, the period from 1050 to 1130 was dominated by an attempt at world-revolution which influenced in highly effective ways the other aspects of social change. It seems, in retrospect, that it was almost necessary for a revolutionary onslaught to shake to its foundations the order of the early middle ages in order that the new political, economic, and intellectual forces be given the opportunity to develop in the face of the old institutions and ideas.

## II<sup>1</sup>

My own interpretation of the investiture controversy is very much indebted to the work of the brilliant German historian Gerd Tellenbach, but it gives even more universal significance to the intellectual conflicts of the period than Tellenbach's study, published in 1936.

It has been characteristic of the history of the West that its destiny has been shaped by four world-revolutions in which previous tendencies culminated and from which new ideas and systems emerged. By a world-revolution I mean a widespread and thoroughgoing revolution in world-view, the emergence of a new ideology which rejects the results of several centuries of development, organized into the prevailing system, and calls for a new right order in the world. In modern history these world-revolutions are well known — the Protestant revolution of the sixteenth century, the liberal revolution of the eighteenth century, the Communist revolution of the twentieth. The investiture controversy constitutes the first of the great world-revolutions of western history, and its course follows the same pattern as the well-known revolutions of modern times.

Each of the world-revolutions has begun with some just complaint about moral wrongs in the prevailing political, social, or religious system.

<sup>1</sup> Section II of this paper is adopted, with several emendations and additions, from my book *Church, Kingship, and Lay Investiture in England 1089-1135* (Princeton, 1958), pp. 6-9.

In the case of the investiture controversy the leaders of the revolution, who have been called the Gregorian reformers, complained about the domination of the church by laymen and the involvement of the church in feudal obligations which had been the foundations of social order in Western Europe at least since the 9th century. This system had led to severe abuses, especially that of simony, which came to be defined in its most general sense as the interference of laymen with the right ordering of church offices and sacraments. In their condemnation of simony as heresy, the Gregorians had a perfectly valid complaint.

It has been characteristic of all the world-revolutions, however, that while each has begun by complaining about abuses in the prevailing world order, the ultimate aim of the revolutionary ideologists has been not the reform of the prevailing system, but rather its abolition and replacement by a new order. In the case of the investiture controversy, complete freedom of the church from control by the state, the negation of the sacramental character of kingship, and the domination of the papacy over secular rulers, constituted the ideal new order. It is not surprising to find that most of the important leaders of the reform movement came from precisely those parts of Western Europe where political authority was weakest and most decentralized — from Northern Italy and Lorraine. No churchman could develop enthusiasm for kingship in these regions.

As in the case of all other world-revolutions, the ideology of the Gregorians called forth violent opposition on the part of both vested interests and sincere theoretical defenders of the old order. After many acrimonious disputes and a flood of propaganda literature, bitter and protracted warfare resulted. The polarization of educated society into revolutionary and conservative left a large group of uncommitted moderates, including some of the best minds of the age, who could see right and wrong on both sides. Among these moderates was the greatest French churchman and canon lawyer of his day, Bishop Ivo of Chartres. The eminent and wise theologian and canonist Archbishop Lanfranc of Canterbury began as an uncommitted moderate but became more and more openly critical of the Gregorian reform movement in the last years of his life.

As in the case of all other world-revolutions, the ideologists of the investiture controversy were only partially successful in creating the new order. They succeeded in destroying the old system, but the new world was not the revolutionary utopia. Rather it was a reconstruction of the political and religious system which took into account both old and new elements and left room for the human limitations of greed and power. The church gained a large measure of freedom from secular control, and there was a noticeable improvement in the moral and intellectual level of the clergy. But the church itself, from the time of the investiture controversy, became more and more interested in secular affairs, and

the papacy of the high Middle Ages competed successfully for wealth and power with kings and emperors. The church itself became a great super-state governed by the papal administration.

As in the case of all other world-revolutions, the ideologists during the investiture controversy were themselves united only upon the most immediate and more limited aims of the revolution. As the revolution proceeded, the Gregorians divided into a moderate and a radical wing, each led by eminent cardinals. The radicals were headed by Humbert and Hildebrand, the later Gregory VII; the moderates by Peter Damiani. Cardinal Damiani was a former eremitic monk and a mystic from Northern Italy, a precursor of St. Bernard and St. Francis. Humbert was an extremely learned and highly fanatical monastic scholar from Lorraine. Gregory VII was a native Roman, conscious of all the hierocratic traditions of the early medieval papacy.

As in the modern world-revolutions, the radicals lost their leadership not to the moderates of their own group, whom they had earlier swept aside, but rather to the politicians, the practical statesmen, who called a halt to revolution and tried to reconstruct from the battered pieces of the old system and the achievements of the revolution a new and workable synthesis which would again make progress possible. This tendency is already evident during the pontificate of Urban II in the last decade of the eleventh century, and it became dominant in the papacy during the 1120's.

Like all world-revolutions, the investiture controversy never reached a final and complete solution. New ideas in a new generation made former issues less meaningful and the men of the new generation turned to other interests and new problems. Just as Voltaire and Hume could not understand why the men of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries should have fought over abstruse theological principles, likewise, in the 1130's, a canon of York Cathedral could not understand why Archbishop Anselm and King Henry I should have quarrelled over lay investiture two decades before.

The age of the investiture controversy may rightly be regarded as the turning-point in medieval civilization. It was the fulfilment of the early Middle Ages because in it the acceptance of the Christian religion by the Germanic peoples reached its final and decisive stage. On the other hand, the greater part of the religious and political system of the high Middle Ages emerged out of the events and ideas of the investiture controversy.

### III

It is the course of the investiture controversy in Germany from 1075 to 1122 which has received the most careful study by modern scholars and which therefore naturally dominates the textbook accounts of the

period. There are good reasons for emphasizing the German investiture controversy. Not only did the dispute on the issue of royal authority over the church go on for a half century in the German Empire and produce a mass of polemical literature of greatest importance for medieval political thought, but also, as German historians have again and again pointed out during the past fifty or sixty years, the investiture controversy was the great turning-point in medieval German history. Just when the slow and patient work at building up the power of the central authority in Germany against the dukes and other elements of localism and disintegration seemed to be completed in the 1070's, the papal deposition of the emperor and the papal summons to the German nobility to revolt undid most of the achievements of the energetic and shrewd Ottonian and Salian kings. It is true that some historians have claimed that the German monarchy in any case lacked the administrative institutions to perpetuate a powerful centralized government and that the work of the Ottonian and Salian dynasties was more a stupendous balancing act of the forces of localism, doomed to eventual disaster, than the creation of central monarchy on secure foundation. But the fact remains, whatever our judgments on the institution of the German Empire, that it was precisely the investiture controversy which unleashed the forces of localism and allowed them to become firmly entrenched in German life between 1075 and 1122. As a result, not all the ingenuity, popular appeal, hard work, and high ideals of the Hohenstaufen rulers of the 12th and 13th centuries could avail to rebuild the authority of the central power, thereby dooming Germany to the maze of petty principalities which controlled and ruined its political life for six centuries.

With all the attention devoted to the German development, the relatively short-lived investiture controversy in Anglo-Norman England has received very little study. Indeed it has frequently been dismissed as of no significance and even in our standard books on English history receives only a line or two. It has always been said that even the supposedly most important result of the English controversy, the Concordat of London of 1107, which provided the compromise for ending the investiture dispute and established the model for the very similar Concordat of Worms of 1122, has very little to do with the Anglo-Norman kingdom. The compromise principle was supposedly invented by Bishop Ivo of Chartres, the greatest canon lawyer of his day.

My own detailed study of the English investiture controversy has shown that these traditional views are vulnerable on many grounds, not the least of which is the falsity of the Ivo of Chartres thesis, and has revealed that many aspects of the English investiture controversy are of great significance for the pattern of development of the age of the Gregorian reforms. Indeed, in some ways, the English situation better helps us to understand the long-range significance of the investiture controversy than the German developments.

Not until the election of Anselm, the venerated theologian and abbot of Bec, as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1093 was any attempt made to alter fundamentally the Anglo-Norman church-state system created by William I and Lanfranc. After Lanfranc's death in 1089, William Rufus had continued and strengthened this system, whose essence was the domination of the royal authority over all aspects of ecclesiastical life by means of bringing the church within the feudal order. But Anselm was sympathetic to the Gregorian reform doctrines and he inevitably came into conflict with the King and his episcopal colleagues. After Anselm and his opponents had made clear their fundamental disagreements at the Rockingham assembly of 1095, the Archbishop appealed to Pope Urban II for support. But the Pope, who was conducting papal policy along other lines than Gregorian principles, refused to aid Anselm, even when the Archbishop went to Rome during his exile from England between 1097 and 1100.

After the accession of Henry I in 1100, and Anselm's return from the Continent, the King and Archbishop worked together harmoniously to reform the English Church, in a limited way, and to secure the throne for Henry. Although Anselm was at first reluctant to disturb this harmony by pressing the issue on lay investiture, as the radical Gregorian Pope Paschal II was demanding, by 1103 the investiture issue had come to the fore and the English investiture controversy was marked by the publication of polemical literature on both sides. The "Anonymous" tracts, of which several or all were written by Gerard of York, were the most important contribution from the royal side. Harkening back to Anglo-Saxon tradition, several of the "Anonymous" tracts affirm the theocratic nature of kingship and thereby attempt to validate royal investiture of ecclesiastics.

The English investiture controversy was brought to an end by the agreement of 1107, which embodied a compromise originating in royal circles. Bishop Ivo of Chartres had nothing to do with this compromise. His views on lay investiture differ profoundly from the principles of the Concordat of London of 1107. The most probable authors of the compromise, which allowed the king to retain homage of ecclesiastics while it prohibited lay investiture, were the chief royal counselor, the Norman Count Robert of Meulan and the King himself. Robert was anxious to be released from papal excommunication, while Henry wanted the Pope's acquiescence in his conquest of Normandy. Paschal II finally accepted the compromise because of vehement opposition to radical Gregorian doctrines in England, and also because he wished to obtain the King's support for Bohemond's crusade against Byzantium. By 1105, all the English higher clergy wanted to end the investiture controversy. Anselm, who had again been in exile since 1104, returned to England in 1107, and a complete reconciliation between King and Archbishop was achieved by the time of Anselm's death two years later.

Between 1109 and the end of his reign, Henry I completely restored royal control over the composition and life of the English Church. Reform ideals still lingered on, especially in canon law collections, and the famous case of Archbishop Thurstan of York demonstrated the possibility of papal intervention in the English Church arising out of the relation between Rome and the English higher clergy established during the investiture controversy. But Henry's authority was not effectively challenged by the papacy, especially when reforming ideals declined in the papal *curia* in the last decade of his reign.

#### IV

If now, in conclusion, we recollect that in Anglo-Norman England by the end of the 12th century there was to appear for the first time a centralized political organization which resembled the modern state in its emphasis on administrative bureaucracy, and in its success in subordinating other political forms to the royal exchequer and law-courts, we can understand the long-range significance of the English investiture controversy. In the case of Germany, the Gregorian revolutionaries were attacking what was still the early medieval kind of kingship which had been in existence in its full form since the reign of Charlemagne — a monarchy based primarily on the personal strength and prestige of the king, buttressed by the ideology of theocratic kingship. Only in Anglo-Norman England does there appear the new political order to which eventually belonged the future destiny of Western Europe — the bureaucratic state. It is true that William the Conqueror and his two sons took over the Anglo-Saxon theocratic kingship as an additional basis of royal authority. But their authority was built up predominantly on the kind of feudalism the Anglo-Norman kings created in England. Feudal institutions were used as foundations for the building up of administrative bureaucracy. The resulting political system would be close to absolutism by the beginning of the 13th century. Hence Henry I could afford to give up lay investiture with its implication of theocratic kingship. He gave it up with a great deal of reluctance which indicates the extent to which ideas of quasi-sacred kingship, so popular in the West since the 8th century, still dominated the mind of even the shrewdest western ruler. But in the end he did give it up and did so with impunity, working in the last two decades of his reign to strengthen those secular bases of monarchy which his grandson, Henry II, was to use with such overpowering effectiveness.

It is therefore no surprise to find that when Archbishop Thomas Becket attempted to resurrect the Gregorian ideology in the 1160's, he was greeted on all sides with hostility and suspicion and his views already sounded archaic not only to his countrymen but to the Pope himself. How often are the revolutionaries in the end primarily



responsible for the creation of an order whose principles are precisely the opposite of their original aims ! The Gregorians attacked theocratic kingship, an institution which, if responsible for many abuses, was also productive of many kings of great piety who were the friends and patrons of the church. Medieval kingship, now divested of its religious sanctions, had to find its authority in non-religious fields. Hence the ultimate effect of the Gregorian revolution was to encourage the creation of the secular state, the Great Leviathan, which already makes its appearance in 12th century England and which is, by the beginning of the 14th century, the victorious enemy of the church and the papacy.