

## Medieval Political Thought

### Features

Medieval Political Thought means the Political thought which originated in the medieval period. Medieval period means roughly from 5<sup>th</sup> century AD to 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. In the medieval period in Europe, two political thinkers were well known for their political philosophy. They were Thomas Aquinas (also known as St. Thomas Aquinas) and Dante Alighieri. In the medieval period in Europe, Christianity influenced the society. It influenced political thought also. There was no freedom of thinking. All thoughts and actions should be according to the teachings of the Church. Religion influenced normal secular life. In fact, it was not the religion which influenced the thoughts of people. But, it was the religious leaders who influenced people. They influenced the people for their own benefit, and for the benefit of the Church. They influenced people to protect the position and wealth of the Church. In the name of God and religion, they influenced the general public. They said that the Church will decide everything regarding their body as well as spirit. The Church wanted to influence all aspects of life of people. According to them everything including arts, literature and Political Thought should be according to the Bible. But the Holy Bible is not about arts or literature or Political Thought. Then the Church leaders said that they will guide the people according to the Bible. They interpreted the Bible to increase their wealth and power and to influence people. They guided the people according to their wishes, whims and fancies.

The Secularists were against this. They said that God had given the freedom to all people. It is the freedom to choose between good or bad. It should not be under the influence or fear of church people. Man must use his freedom to understand the truth. They said that God does not want the help of Church people. Secularists wanted freedom of thought. They said that the Church should look after only the matters of spirit. They said that the King should look after worldly matter. Thus, there were a conflict between the Secularists and the Church. The life of ordinary people became very bad. St. Thomas Aquinas and Dante Alighieri lived during this period of conflict between the Church and Secular people. They wanted to separate religion from politics.

The important features of the period can be summarised as follows:-

1. **Institution of Monarchy:** Monarchy was considered as the best form of government. Divine origin of kingship was generally accepted. King was considered as the agent of God on earth. A Monarch could be hereditary, elected or nominated by the grace of God.
2. **Spread of Universalism:** Universalism was preached during this period. People believed in the existence of a universal society. The fundamental feature of Universalism is the belief and faith in the spiritual salvation of human kind as a whole.
3. **Co-existence of Temporal and Spiritual Authorities:** Both temporal and spiritual authorities co-existed. Emperor was a worldly agent and the Pope was considered as a

spiritual agent. Both of them co-existed with certain level of competition as well as co-operation. Both were considered as un avoidable for the society.

4. **Scholasticism and the Study of Pre Christian Values:** Pre-Christian concepts like Aristotelianism were studied by scholars. The clout of Papacy increased considerably.
5. **Competition of Church and the Empire:** During this period, the Christian Church increased its influence in the society and it became something parallel to the Monarchy wielding almost equal powers if not more. The church considered themselves as superior and the Pope was considered as the representative of God on earth. He could use his power to excommunicate the king also. On the other side, the King considered himself as the representative of God on earth having power to rule.
6. **Source of Law:** In the middle ages, the Law was something personal and habitual. It was never national or territorial. Nobody knew the origin of law. Everybody accepted it as it is. Nobody questioned it. They were considered permanent and eternal.
7. **Absence of the Concept of Sovereignty:** There was no concept of Sovereignty in the middle ages. People followed the moral order. Church authority and the authority of the king co-existed. Both these checked each other. There were no concept of a sovereign authority which was supreme in internal or external matters.
8. **Feudalism:** The fundamental characteristics of the social order of the middle ages was Feudalism. It affected all the people or classes. Feudal lords owned large tracts of land which they gave to the tenants for cultivation. The terms and conditions were fixed by the Land lord according to his whims and fancies. Perhaps the only working class was the farmers and laborers. The brunt of economic production fell solely on the shoulders of the workers. The other classes remained exploitative in nature.
9. **Theory of Two Swords:** In the middle ages, the church fathers put forward a theory that the human life consists of a combination of spiritual and temporal aspects. The spiritual aspect should be looked after by the church. The king can look after only the temporal or worldly aspects. Out of these two, the spiritual aspects are superior in nature. The principal idea behind this concept is the biblical verses "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's". The church taught that the soul is superior to the body.