

# The ecclesiastic roots of the modern state

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**Anna Grzymala-Busse, a political scientist, argues that the medieval church played an important role in the foundation of the modern state. Yet this revival of an old argument runs into a number of obstacles.**

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Reviewed: Anna Grzymala-Busse, *Sacred Foundations. The religious and Medieval Roots of the European State*, Princeton University Press, 235 p.

## **The medieval church and the modern state: A well-traveled historiographic path**

The role of the Middle Ages in the formation of the modern European state is not a new topic. The traditional thesis, which holds that the state was born between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, due partly to war and taxes and partly to negotiation between rulers and society, has been qualified and the role of the Middle Ages in this process regularly reevaluated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Strayer's *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, published in 1970, was the precursor to this debate. Later, Jean-Philippe Genet led to research programs on the topic, in 1984 and 1993, at the CNRS and the European Science Foundation.

Anna Grzymala-Busse, however, focuses on a particular aspect of this genesis, emphasizing the role of the church and the papacy. In the first paragraphs of her introduction, she asserts: "The church heavily influenced European *state formation*: the process by which rulers amass and assert their authority over populations and territories [...] [M]onarchs adopted the distinctive administrative solutions and conceptual innovations of the popes [...] [W]hile there are many ways to build states, the European state has 'sacred foundations,' profoundly shaped by the deep involvement of religious authorities." The adjective "sacred," in this instance, must be understood as "religious" and specifically "ecclesiastic" – in other words, relating to the church as an institution.

In political science, this thesis seems to have found new favor. Grzymala-Busse draws notably on recent work by the Danish political scientist Jørgen Møller, who in 2022 published, with Jonathan Stavnskær Doucette, a book called *The Catholic Church and European State Formation, AD 1000-1500*. This, too, is a topic that historians have long considered. Medievalists have examined it on multiple occasions.<sup>2</sup> It is a shame that Grzymala-Busse is unfamiliar with these works in Italian, French, and German, as they might have served as a starting point to her thinking. Even so, *Sacred Foundations* provides an entry point to this topic for those who are unfamiliar with these studies.

## **Between rivalry and emulation: The Church's multifaceted influence on state formation**

The book proposes a chronological framework based on a fairly conventional four-part periodization. The first period (888-1054) is characterized by more or less direct control over the church by secular powers, notably the Holy Roman Empire. The second period (1054-1122), however, is marked rather by the church's release from secular tutelage, due to the Gregorian reforms. This emancipatory trend culminated in the thirteenth century (1198-1302), which secured the church's triumph. Finally, Grzymala-Busse describes a long fourteenth century (1302-1417) characterized by a revival of the power of secular sovereigns, who managed to impose their will on the popes.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *État et Église dans la genèse de l'État moderne*, edited by Jean-Philippe Genet and Bernard Vincent in 2004.

Grzymala-Busse shows the extent to which the rivalry between secular rulers and popes led to three crucial phenomena relating to the creation of the modern state: the differentiation between ecclesiastic and temporal authority, the perpetuation of the West's political fragmentation, and the development of the discourse of sovereignty. Grzymala-Busse adds to these classic analyses by showing that the papacy deliberately contributed to the West's fragmentation, particularly of the Holy Roman Empire, through the alliances it cultivated, the crusades it triggered, and the conflicts into which it was drawn.

After examining the logic of the conflicts between popes and secular rulers that led to the state's foundation, Grzymala-Busse concentrates on the mechanisms of emulation. Emulation became imitation when monarchies copied the "technologies of governance" (chancelries, chambers/treasuries, judicial authorities) established by the church. The book considers the transmission of these models throughout Europe through a meticulous chronological analysis (p. 80-81). At first, this diffusion was carried out by qualified ecclesiastic officials. Besides the cardinals, legates, and bishops who went from the papal court to royal courts, rulers called upon various specialists and experts trained by the church. Initially, it was these clerics who shaped western state structures, before they were passed onto lay experts trained in institutions founded by European rulers.

The birth and growth of universities is to a considerable extent the result of the desire of popes as well as secular rulers for competent administrators. Legal know-how was particularly valued in recruitment. The rediscovery of Roman law at the University of Bologna in the second half of the eleventh century spread throughout the West and provided secular rulers with new concepts and new arms on which to base their power and make the case for their rights in relation to the papacy. A few decades later, the papacy attempted to systematize canon law, which was unique to the church and suited to its claims, including in the temporal realm. In these developments, one clearly sees the origin and implementation of legal and norm-based approaches to conflict resolution.

Finally, Grzymala-Busse evaluates the role played by the church in the creations of western parliaments in the late Middle Ages. She first presents the model of representative institutions through synods, councils, and conclaves, which brought together church officials at different levels. These assemblies were ruled by a series of rules and fields of competency that, in the West, were often applied at the level of sovereign territories. By reinterpreting Roman law, the church also gave birth to such

concepts as individual consent, binding collective representation, and *universitas*, which at its origins referred to a self-regulating community. The practices and concepts were disseminated across Christendom by the clergy, particularly by prelates, and resulted conciliarist theory, which asserted that councils had greater authority than popes. The hour of glory of this idea was the Great Schism (1378-1417), when several popes contested one another's legitimacy. The papacy's immediate reaction to conciliarism, particularly in the intellectual realm, provided fledgling European states with the tools they needed to establish absolutism. In *Il sovrano pontefice. Un corpo e due anime: la monarchia papale nella prima età moderna* (The Sovereign Pontiff. One Body and Two Souls: Papal Monarchy in the Early Modern Period), published in 1982, Paolo Prodi emphasized how the church and especially the papal states served as a laboratory for the development of the modern state. While he pushes the chronology forward, since his argument focuses on the early modern period, which he defines as beginning in the second half of the fifteenth century, the topics he analyzes, such as law and the curial bureaucracy, largely overlap with *Sacred Foundations*. It is a shame that the latter does not address Prodi's theories, which had significant historiographical impact.

In her conclusion, Grzymala-Busse wisely qualifies her book's main thesis, noting that the modern European states rests on several factors. While the church played an important role in the process, it was hardly unique. Grzymala-Busse proposes the very interesting idea that we should reverse the view that holds that the state arose due to early modern wars. To the contrary, it was precisely because states were able, during the Middle Ages, to develop administrative and financial capacities that they could wage large scale wars in the early modern period.

## **The papacy and Europe's political fragmentation**

As Grzymala-Busse is not a historian by training, one should forgive her shortcomings in erudition. Her book does not draw on an analysis of historical sources, but rather on a close reading of recent work – mostly written in English – to which she applies the methods of the social sciences.<sup>3</sup> It is in this methodological contribution that her book's originality primarily lies, though it does raise a number of questions. For instance, her demonstration relies, in multiple instances, on statistical analyses

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<sup>3</sup> The book ends with a long appendix entitled "Data and Robustness Tests" devoted to its methods.

based on linear regressions using an ordinary least squares approach. This method supports one of the book's major claims<sup>4</sup>: that Europe's territorial fragmentation is "a result of deliberate church policy designed to neutralize the threat of the Holy Roman Empire [...] Popes used a variety of tactics to destabilize and to fragment the rules of monarchs they found hostile" (p. 177). The papacy pursued these tactics primarily through proxy wars, crusades, and geopolitical alliances. Yet the ordinary least squares approach seems ill-suited to the study of this particular field, as it does to other topics covered in *Sacred Foundations*. How should one define and count the "conflicts" in which the papacy participated during the High Middle Ages and the early modern period (p. 62)? How should one define and count borders during these periods? This project is a rule, from the standpoint of the topic's (evolving) definitions as well as from that of data collection. The raw numbers on which her argument is based are drawn from secondary sources with no pretense of being exhaustive. This kind of quantitative method applied to such long periods and such wide-ranging subjects seems hardly sustainable, especially at a time when, as Grzymala-Busse recognizes, the preservation of sources is random.

Beyond these methodological difficulties, it seems a bit of a stretch to turn a possible statistical correlation between the conflicts involving popes and territorial fragmentation into a systematic causal relationship. To say that the sovereign pontiffs often used the political strategy of *divide et impera* is a truism; but was this strategy a deliberate long-term effort directed against emperors? It is far from clear that it is papal policy over several centuries should be essentialized in this way, when policy could shift so dramatically with each new election to Saint Peter's throne.

Against Grzymala-Busse's thesis, one could argue that the popes strove for Christendom's unity throughout the Middle Ages, though from their perspective, this unity could only occur under a paper banner. The history of the medieval West consists to a considerable degree of a series of conflicts between popes and secular rulers, particularly emperors. These conflicts undoubtedly contributed to the West's political fragmentation. Yet the fact remains that the popes' ultimate goal was the unification of Christendom under a single authority, which might or might not be political, with universal aspirations. Given Europe's political map at the dawn of the early modern period and the related trend toward increasingly independent states, this project failed.

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<sup>4</sup> See chapter 2 and the beginning of the conclusion.

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