***MEDIEVAL POLITICAL THOUGHT- EUROPE***

From the standpoint of political thought, the medieval period has certain special features about political thought which need specific consideration. It is said that this period was un-political. Neither political theory nor any ideology developed in the middle Ages. Of course, various institutions and organizations were set up. But all these centred around religious dogmas and beliefs.

The church was the most dominating institution. All other institutions remained under its control. As a result, independ­ent thinking in the political arena could not flourish at all.

Hearnshaw holds different view so far as the unproductiveness in political thought of the Middle Ages. He says that although in this period there was no political theory, worthy of its name there was political thought. What is the difference between the two? In the words of Hearnshaw **“Political theory is the speculation of particular thinkers which may be remote from the actual facts of the time. Political thought is the immanent philosophy of a whole age which determines its actions and shapes its life.”** There was abundant political thought in the middle Ages.

The conflict between the church and the state; the relation of church to common people, learned persons, feudal landlords and students of educational institutions provided sufficient live materials for political thought.

Moreover, in the middle Ages, feudalism became one of the dominant forces and this was treated as part of political thought. So it cannot be said that the medieval period was barren or dead.

Rather, it was live and fresh. It was full of events and numerous institutions grew. All these moulded the nature of political thought.

Universalism is another feature of medieval political thought. Both in political and spiritual field’s universalism were strongly emphasized. The Romans inherited the Stoic philosophy of cosmopolitanism and the medieval period again inherited it from the Romans. The medieval thought assumed of a universal society in political matters and a universal ecclesiastical system.

The society was universal and one. On the one side there was the emperor for things temporal, and on the other side there was the Pope for things spiritual. The emperor was supposed to deal with the political issues.

Ultimately, he came under the full control of the church. Charle­magne worked hard to revive universalism in the temporal side and Hildebrand worked hard for the sake of universalism in ecclesiastical matters.

In the middle Ages there was no organized state, not even a state in any loose sense. Hildebrand and his followers advocated an ecclesiastical authority with supreme power. It meant that the emperor would act under the authority of the church.

**“The state is subordinated to the church as an instrument under the control of the church for the governance of the temporal things and for bringing of temporal relations and values under the absolute spiritual purpose of which the hierarchy is guardian.”**

Most of the feudal lords were powerful and some possessed sovereign power. The conflict between the church and the state motivated the feudal lords to capture power. Thus the middle Ages were deprived of the facility of a well-organized state system.

In the medieval period politics, economics, religion all were mingled together. The decision of the church on all issues of politics, economics and religion was final. Politics and economics came to be subordinated to religion or ethics and ethics was theology. The church fathers were supposed to lead a spiritual and austere life, but in practice they led a luxurious life.

They received wealth from the public in the form of donations. Towards the end of the middle Ages the churches were converted into great citadels of wealth. The feudal lords also had enough power to change the direction of politics and economics.

The emperor had to depend on them for money which they collected from the farmers and common people in the form of tax or revenue. In order to strengthen their financial position and political power, the church fathers frequently adopted various means which had no connection with ethics and religion.

They did not antagonize the feudal lords, because they were also important sources of the church’s wealth. Therefore, in the medieval period, both politics and economics failed to establish separate identity.

Hearnshaw has pointed out a parallelism between Platonism and medievalism. Plato subordinated politics and economics to the idealism, ethics and, above all, common good, and he placed the philosopher-king at the apex of society for the administration of ideal state and realisation of idealism, common good etc.

In the medieval period, church fathers subjected politics and economics to religion and morality as well as ethics and the church would be in overall charge of the state. “What can be more medieval than the system of persecution which Plato advocates in the Laws against all who deny the articles of his creed of natural religion?”

Another important feature of medieval political thought is the predominance of the law of nature. The fathers of church and medieval thinkers accepted the law of nature as sovereign in the society. But they did not adopt the law of nature in its original or Stoic form. Law of nature in its original form did not approve slavery or private property, but in the Middle Ages all these existed.

That is why the church modified it to suit its purposes and conditions of society. Law of nature to the Christian fathers was the revelation and commandment of God and the church was the only custodian and exponent. Thus, law of nature was made identical with the law of God.

The church thought that the law of nature or, as it was called, the law of God, had authorized it to supervise all the activities of parliament and king to regulate the terms and conditions of international treaties and the working of the royal administration. “For all these are under the law and the church has the knowledge of the law.”

The medieval thinkers propagated at stentorian voice the divinity of kingship. King was the representative of God on earth to rule men. His main function was to translate the spiritual aims of God into reality and church was the guardian of those aims. Failure of the king to perform the divine duty would invite excommu­nication.

Church would adopt all steps to excommunicate the king from the Christian society. Divine right theory was very popular in the middle Ages and it placed the monarchy at the mercy of the church.

It converted many kings into autocrat rulers. The kings used divinity as an instrument for demanding obedience from the people. But the divine right theory was made to co-exist with the social contract theory.

Although the power of the king came forth from God, people’s power over how he would rule was also accepted. People’s power was implied in the oath at his coronation. King’s function did not end in implementing the spiritual aims of God; he must also fulfil the objectives of the people.

The co-existence between the divine right theory and social contract theory was very popular in the Middle Ages. Hearnshaw says, “The Old Testament speaks of David making a covenant with his people; Roman law by the voice of Ulpian, ascribes the force of law to the will of the prince, because the people confers on him all its sovereignty and power”

The monarchy in the Middle Ages was limited by two forces—divine right theory and the social contract theory. But, in practice, most of the kings resorted to autocratic tactics and ultimately made them dictator.

In the opinion of Hearnshaw, the reconciliation between these two theories was a paradox. It was impossible that divinity and people’s will would co-exist. However, the medieval thinkers adopted it.

But this paradox will lose its potency if we enter into the depth of the medieval political thought and this is another feature. The medieval thinkers were imbued with the concept of liberalism. Three powerful limitations were placed upon the authority of the monarch.

One is divine right, second is social contract and the third is people’s will. People of Middle Ages spoke little about the sovereignty of the state, but they were vociferous about the limitations of the king’s power.

The gist of modern liberalism is the expansion of people’s power and limitation upon the state authority. We can unhesitatingly add that the medieval scholars expressed the liberal thought in the same line.

Slavery and property had special importance in the realm of political thought in the Middle Ages. There was a contradiction between slavery and property on the one hand and the law of nature on the other.

In the eye of the law of nature, all were equal and, naturally, the institution of slavery was required to be abolished and the ownership of private property should not be granted.

But the medieval thinkers interpreted the law of nature in relative terms and not in absolute terms. Slavery was the consequence of sin and the persons involved in sinful activities were penalized by God for their sin.

The real reason was that the medieval people could not raise themselves above the prevailing socio-economic conditions of society. Industry in the Middle Ages had no scope to flourish and since there was abundance of cheap labour, agriculture developed fully and this was the main source of income or livelihood of all sections of people. Serfdom was universal and personal slavery existed.

Church fathers had no intention to go against the prevailing social system. In the Middle Ages, property was not common, although, according to law of nature, it would have been common.

The church allowed private property on the ground that it was an instrument for the realisation of goodwill and for the common good of the society. Church also declared that no man would be allowed to possess more than what he needed to meet his day-to-day requirements.

Accumulation of property in the medieval period was prohibited. “By such principles private property was at once recognized, as under the conditions of the age was necessary, and yet accommodated to Christian principles, as was equally necessary, if the church was to be true to its mission of Christianizing human life.” But subsequently this compromise formula of church on the distribution of property was severely criticized by the true adherents of Christianity.

According to Gettel the political thought in the Middle Ages was “unhistorical, unscientific and uncritical”. We have several times noted that the church controlled the ideas and wisdom of this period with its uncritical, orthodox and theological outlook. Church fathers opposed scientific analysis and rational outlook.

Conclu­sions and dogmas were never tested by observations and experiences. People were forced to accept everything as wishes of God or emanating from invisible authority. Dissenting voice was either controlled or discouraged.

In the Middle Ages, church controlled the entire thought system and there was no scope for the development and free play of different thought and ideas. “The whole body of faith developed and handed down by the organized church was the basis of all knowledge, and this material was turned over and over by the narrow intellectual processes of scholas­ticism or accepted without rational demonstration by the contemplative introspec­tion of mysticism. Thought was enchained by a rigid orthodoxy and dissenting ideas were considered heresies to be ruthlessly hunted down.”

Church did not want development of independent political and other ideas; because it apprehended that it would enlighten the minds of common people and would create hindrance on the way of exploitation by the church.

The doctrine of two swords characterized the medieval political thought. It was assumed by the medieval thinkers that it was the wish of God that power and authority would be divided between Pope and emperor. This conception was based on an authoritative statement of Pope Gelasius I who once said “The true and perfect king and priest was Christ Himself… But Christ knowing the weakness of human nature and careful for the welfare of His people, separated the two offices, giving to each its peculiar functions and duties. Thus the Christian emperor needs the ecclesiastic for the attainment of eternal life and ecclesiastic depends upon the government of the emperor in temporal things.”

This observation of Gelasius I was very frequently quoted by church fathers in support of the two swords theory.

But in practice it was never the intention of the church to let it operate. In medieval conditions, the doctrine proved its un-workability. Both the church and the emperor were suspicious of each other and each brought charge of encroachment against the other.

In this way, the concept of dual authority surcharged the political atmosphere of the Middle Ages. Originally, the doctrine of two swords was floated in order to attain common good through the fulfilment of spiritual and temporal interests. But in medieval period it remained unfulfilled.