

2021

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Recommended Citation

North, Frances '24 (2021) "The Sword, The Staff, and Wise Leadership: Religious and Political Authority in Dante's "Purgatorio XVI";" *Furman Humanities Review*. Vol. 32 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/fhr/vol32/iss1/6>

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**THE SWORD, THE STAFF, AND
WISE LEADERSHIP:
RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY IN DANTE'S
*PURGATORIO XVI***

Frances North

Although often first associated with religious connotations, Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*—or in modern vernacular, *The Divine Comedy*—also advances a clear political agenda. Rather in the theme of the epic poets (and suitably so, considering that his first great poetic muse is none other than Dante's guide in the poem, the poet Virgil), Dante weaves a complex narrative discussion of the political and religious disarray he perceives in the world around him. Among his many other criticisms of secular politics, Dante addresses this issue in a critical depiction of local Florentine politics (representative of city) and Italian government (representative of state), and a celebration of imperial Rome (representative of Empire).¹ In his wider examination of the matter, however, he especially considers the proper relationship between temporal spiritual and political authority in *Purgatorio*, the second book in the *Commedia*. Likely responding to the political and ecclesiastical corruption caused by the politicization of religious offices in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Dante expresses strong (and sometimes controversial) opinions about the proper alignment of Church and State in medieval Europe. Dante was immersed in political thought that was influenced

¹ Dante uses the terms “empire” and “monarchy” interchangeably throughout both *De Monarchia* and *Commedia* to represent a singular, politically omnipotent governing power.

Furman Humanities Review

significantly by the Augustinian notion that the “city of God” (Church) is in constant and irreconcilable conflict with the “city of man” (government, or State). Conversely, Dante suggests that the *telos*—or end—of Church and State align such that both are essential for human fulfillment. While he clings to this theme throughout *Commedia*, his analogies of the cleft hooves and the two suns in *Purgatorio* XVI offer clear insight into his belief that a proper arrangement of ecclesiastical and imperial powers is necessary for their ideal teleological function. Read alongside Book III of his political treatise, *De Monarchia*, the two analogies reveal three defining characteristics of the proper relationship between political and religious authorities: first, that there is no structural hierarchy between the two powers; second, that each exists independent of the authority of the other; and third, that, as a result of the former points, the structural differentiation of political and ecclesiastical authorities facilitates the fulfillment of their similar teleological ends.

Purgatorio is the second installment of Dante’s three-part epic poem, *Commedia*. *Commedia* tracks the journey of Dante-the-Traveler (as opposed to Dante-the-Author) from ante-Hell in *Inferno* to the Beatific Vision in *Paradiso*, touching on themes such as justice, penitence, and redemption throughout. After emerging from the bottommost of the nine concentric circles of Hell in *Inferno*, Dante and his guide, Virgil, enter the gates of *Purgatorio* and begin ascending the mountain. Mt. Purgatory contains seven terraces arranged vertically, each of which represents a specific vice of which souls are purged through *contrapasso* (literally, “suffering the contrary”); simultaneously, these *contrapassi* cultivate the virtue which corresponds to the one being purged. The journey through *Purgatorio* is thus one of growth and redemption in addition to justice; it is a walk of spiritual maturation that prunes the soul to prepare it for the Beatific Vision in *Paradiso*—the event which, according to Dante, is the fulfillment of all human longings and needs. As such, *Purgatorio* provides a context for Dante’s discussion of the ground between

virtue and vice: whereas the souls in *Inferno* are already damned for eternity, and those in *Paradiso* have already reached perfection, the souls in *Purgatorio* are in the middle ground. It is the land of the imperfect on the way to perfection, a process which requires criticism and justice to reach redemption. Dante embraces this notion in the criticism of the political and religious landscape of fourteenth century Italy throughout *Purgatorio*.

Purgatorio is riddled with political significance from the beginning: within the first thirty lines of Canto 1 (and still in ante-purgatory) Dante encounters Cato, a Roman statesman and military leader known for choosing suicide over submission to tyranny.² Cato's placement at the beginning of *Purgatorio* is a clear political statement, since he rightfully belongs in the seventh circle of *Inferno* alongside the other souls who are damned for committing suicide. Although a highly debated matter, most commentators argue that his saving grace is his dedication to the virtuous *polis* (the Ancient Greek term for a city-state or nation). Cato is not saved, nor is he in a state of active purgation; but he is also not suffering. In placing Cato at the opening to *Purgatorio*, Dante insinuates that proper political dispositions do play a role human fulfillment but are not enough by themselves. The political nature of his introduction to *Purgatorio* frames his later criticism of the relationship between Church and State in *Purgatorio* XVI.

Dante sets the stage for his criticism of the relationship between political and religious authority in *Purgatorio* XVI with the setting in which he places the dialogue between Dante-the-traveler and Marco the Lombard at the beginning of the canto. Upon ascending the third terrace of Mt. Purgatory (the terrace of the wrathful), a harsh, impenetrable smog engulfs Dante in greater darkness than is found at any other point in the poem. Under this veil, he encounters Marco the Lombard, a Venetian nobleman whose political views were likely

² Alighieri, Dante. *Purgatorio: A New Verse Translation*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor, 2002), XVI.31-39.

Furman Humanities Review

sympathetic to Dante's own, and seeks his counsel while attempting to understand the root causes of earthly depravity. Robert Hollander argues that this unparalleled darkness represents the blinding nature of anger, an idea consistent with the theme of this specific terrace.³ Yet, the remarkable similarities between the description of the smog and the language that Marco later uses to discuss moral turpitude implies that the smog may also be a metaphor for the effects of temporal political and ecclesiastical corruption. Just as the "barren sky" is the source of the blinding darkness in the third terrace, so the barrenness of virtue shrouds the world in blinding darkness.⁴ Explaining the reason for this barrenness, Marco engages Dante the traveler in a brief discussion of the roles of free will, human culpability and innocence, and astrological influence while shrouded in the smog. Marco's ultimate conclusion is that "failed guidance / is the cause the world is steeped in vice, / and not [the] inner nature that has grown corrupt"—in other words, the world is blind because its leaders have failed, not because humanity has grown more decrepit. By the time he finishes explaining this, the smog has begun to dissipate.⁵ With this glimpse into the way Dante sees the world around him as further framework, he employs the analogies of the cleft hooves and the two suns to explain the corrupt relationship between temporal political and ecclesiastical authorities.

The conflict between papal and imperial authority first emerges in *Purgatorio* XVI when Marco offers the analogy of the cleft hooves. Discussing the importance of law for virtuous society, he argues that the civil law that already exists cannot be enforced effectively because "the shepherd who precedes / may chew his cud, but does not have cleft hooves."⁶ In his 1901 commentary on *Purgatorio*, H. F. Tozer explains that

³ Hollander, Robert. "Purgatorio XVI," *Commentaries on the Commedia Divinia*. New York: Anchor, 2004: 160.

⁴ *Purg.* XVI.1-12;58-66.

⁵ *Ibid.*, XVI.103-105.

⁶ *Ibid.*, XVI.99.

chewing the cud is allegory for acquiring wisdom through the contemplation, and contends that the cleft hooves refer to a separation of religious and political powers.⁷ While Tozer draws from the image of the beast stumbling in the mud in *Monarchia* II.127-9 (which also correlates with *Purgatorio* XVI.126-9) as evidence for his interpretation, he notes that reading the analogy as an allusion to Leviticus better clarifies its significance for the ideal relationship between Church and State. Leviticus 11 distinguishes ceremonially clean animals from ceremonially unclean animals. In verse 3, Moses establishes that only animals that both have “completely split hooves and chew the cud” are ceremonially clean.⁸ The allusion thus compares the ceremonial uncleanliness of a camel (which chews the cud but does not have split hooves) with the Pope—the wise shepherd of the Church who corrupts his office by lusting after political power. Given the understanding that consuming unclean animals defiled the consumer and alienated them from God, it seems that Dante alludes to Leviticus 11 in the analogy of the cleft hooves to suggest that the Pope’s failure to separate political and religious powers defiled the world and undermined its potential for good.

Where Dante complains about his current political and religious landscape in the analogy of the split hooves, he proposes an alternative balance of powers in the analogy of the two suns, which emphasizes the ideal arrangement of Church and State, and introduces its teleological significance. Shortly after attributing worldly vice to failed guidance, Marco states that, “Rome, which formed the world for good, / once had two suns that lit the one road / and the other, the world’s and that to God.”⁹ The two suns are the Pope and the emperor, who, ideally, ought to illuminate the paths to earthly and eternal

⁷ H.F. Tozer. “Purgatorio XVI,” *An English Commentary on Dante’s Divinia Commedia*. Ed. Andrew Shiflett (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1901): 99, <http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu/reader>.

⁸ Leviticus 11:1-8, NRSV.

⁹ *Purg.* XVI.105-108

Furman Humanities Review

happiness, respectively; they also identify Rome as the epitome of human government.¹⁰ Identifying Rome as the ultimate exemplar of government establishes it as the standard to which other governments ought to (and usually fail to) meet. The analogy of the sword and staff reaffirms this interpretation in the next tercet through direct reference to well-known symbols of imperial and pastoral power: the sword represents emperor, the staff the Pope. In addition to modifying the analogy of the two suns to clarify potential misinterpretations assigning it any significance other than the personification of religious and political powers, the analogy underlines the inevitable dysfunction that results from their unnatural combination: the “two, / forced to be together, must perforce go ill.”¹¹ The notable contrast between the association of the independent Roman ecclesiastical and political powers with light and the association of their overlap in medieval politics with the putrid smog hovering over *Purgatorio* XVI insinuates that the structural separation of Church and State is more conducive to clear vision—and therein, truth and virtue. In addition to signifying the need for structural differentiation between religious and political authorities, John S. Carroll argues that the analogy of the two suns indicates that man has “a twofold end in life” which correlates with the two temporal authorities: to discover happiness in the world (emperor), and to discover eternal life (Pope). According to Carroll, Dante evokes imperial Rome as the epitome of earthly religious and political power and the ultimate exemplar of political authority in his analogy of the two suns to emphasize the significance of separating political and religious power, and evinces the dual end of humanity.¹²

¹⁰ Hollander, “Purgatorio XVI,” 168

¹¹ *Purg.* XVI.109-11

¹² John S. Carroll, “Prisoners of Hope (Purgatorio),” *Expositions of Dante’s Divinia Commedia*. Ed. Robert Hollander with Andrew Shifflett. (London, Hodder and Soughton, 1904): 106-114, <http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu/reader>

While Dante ardently supports the separation of Church and State powers, he neglects systematic explanation of just what their proper alignment looks like in the *Commedia*. Instead, he reinforces and clarifies his arguments from *Commedia* in Book III of *De Monarchia*. Published sometime between his exile in 1302 and his death in 1321, *De Monarchia* divides the foundations of Dantean political theory in three categories: 1) the need for monarchy (Book I); 2) the ideal monarchy (Book II); and 3) the origins of monarchial authority (Book III).¹³ *Monarchia* III refutes what Dante believes are nine prominent misinterpretations of the relationship between ecclesiastical and political powers, with arguments employing Biblical, anagogical, historical, and logical evidence. In these, he underscores three fundamental principles about the structural relationship between political and religious authority: 1) there is no existential interdependence between the two entities; 2) there is no structural hierarchy between religious and political authorities in the world (III.5,6,11); and 3) the distinct, individualized powers of Pope and Emperor must be recognized and protected for their proper function. Dante particularly emphasizes dismantling ideas of Papal supremacy over the Emperor; that being said, he does not neglect scenarios of imperial supremacy over the Church or improper unifications of the two authorities.¹⁴ However, Dante scholar Claire E. Honess holds that *Monarchia* is also “a utopian meditation on what might have been, and a reflection on what – between 1310 and 1313 – had gone so badly wrong.”¹⁵ Read like this,

¹³ Craig Kallendorf. “Virgil, Dante, and Empire in Italian Thought, 1300-1500,” *Vergilius* 34 (1988): 49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41592351>.

¹⁴ Honess, “Divided City,” 130.

¹⁵ Claire E. Honess. “Divided City, Slavish Italy, Universal Empire.” In *Vertical Readings in Dante’s Comedy: Vol. 1*. Ed. George Corbett and Heather Webb. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers (2015): 141, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt17w8gx0.13>.

Furman Humanities Review

Monarchia III is not just a philosophical proof for distinguishing between religious and political authority but a systematic critique of the misconceptions corrupting political and religious authorities in medieval Europe (and particularly the Holy Roman Empire). This makes it a valuable key for unlocking the precise points which Dante intends to make in his analogies commentating on the relationship between Church and State in *Commedia*.

Dante founds his structural separation of political and religious authorities in the argument that both exist independently from the authority of the other. He introduces this concept in *Monarchia* III.4, “the argument from the sun and the moon,” where he explains that just as the moon does not receive all of its essence, strength, and function from the sun, but possesses movement and light of itself, so the empire does not derive its absolute existence, authority, or function from the Church.¹⁶ (Here one must remember that Dante did not have access to the principles of astrophysics that inform the modern understanding of the gravitational pull and light properties that propel and illuminate the moon.) Rather, ecclesiastical and political authorities can borrow from the “light” of the other “to fulfill their functions better and more potently.”¹⁷ While it may seem as if the “sun and moon” waters down Dante’s “two suns” into two entities with a clear hierarchy, his “argument from the election and deposition of Saul by Samuel” just two sections later in *Monarchia* (*Monarchia* III.6) reaffirms the structure outlined in “two suns.” *Monarchia* III.6 introduces Dante’s main premise for the independent existence of political and religious authority. Taken at face-value the example is straightforward: when Samuel dethroned Saul, it was not as a temporal religious figurehead (a vicar), but as a distinct envoy for God. As such, Samuel cannot be used as

¹⁶ Alighieri, Dante. *De Monarchia*, trans. Aurelia Henry (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company; The Riverside Press, Sept. 1904), III.4.9; III.3.11.

¹⁷ *Monarchia*, III.4.10

proof for Papal supremacy because he was not a Pope or anything resembling a Pope.¹⁸ But the greater philosophical significance of the example introduces a fact absolutely essential to the Dantean argument for separation of Church and State (and one later stated explicitly in *Monarchia* III.13)—namely, that neither religious nor political authorities can transfer power to an office that is not their own.

Most instances broaching the incommunicable nature of political and religious authorities in *Commedia* involve Dante criticizing the Church for attempting to seize or justify using power that it does not rightfully possess. The Donation of Constantine—purportedly a fourth-century document transferring Roman imperial authority from Constantine the Great to the Pope (proven to be a later forgery in the fifteenth century)—is a textbook example. In his article analyzing Dantean imperialism, Cary J. Nederman cites the approach to the Donation of Constantine in both *Monarchia* and *Commedia* as a key indication of Dante’s understanding of the separate origins—and thus, independent foundations—of political and religious authority. Dante invalidates the use of the Donation of Constantine as an authoritative proof of Papal supremacy over the empire because it “assumes two precepts that are impossible”: that Constantine could to surrender or transfer imperial authority, and that the Church could have accepted that power.¹⁹ Nederman cites the illegitimacy of the Donation of Constantine as evidence that imperial power remained “fully intact as . . . both territory and jurisdiction” in the seat it originally held in Rome, and later in Constantinople.²⁰ In turn, he uses this non-transferability to explain that Church authority does not depend on the Emperor, since the only way to establish this interrelationship would be to transgress the rights of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, III.6.2

¹⁹ Cary J. Nederman, “Dante’s Imperial Road Leads to . . . Constantinople?: The Internal Logic of the “Monarchia,” *Theoria* 62, no.143 (June 2015): 7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24720405>

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8

Furman Humanities Review

either imperial or ecclesiastical authority, and—as Dante says—“the usurping of a right does not establish a right.”²¹ While Nederman does not define clear boundaries for the rights of imperial and ecclesiastical powers, Dante at least offers detailed proof for the claim that temporal power is inherently oppositional to the nature (and therefore right) of ecclesiastical power in *Monarchia* III.²² Ultimately, then, it is illogical to assume that the existence and legitimacy of one religious or political power relies on the other since the offices of Pope and Emperor have entirely distinct natures that deprive them of the ability to transfer authority between one another.

Despite insisting that political and religious authorities are inherently different, Dante maintains that Church and State are structural equals because their inherent incomparability makes each is supreme in its own domain. The same distinction of natures that prevents the transmission of power between religious and political authorities also prevents a direct comparison of the two. Dante argues that a universal standard of measurement can only be used to compare things of the same genus, and while the Pope and Emperor are in the same genus of being (because they are both men, and therefore possess the same substance), they have different *genii* of accident (defined, at least in part, by their relationality). Simply put, the Pope is Pope because of his relationship to the Church as a spiritual father, and the Emperor is Emperor because of his relationship to the State as governor. The two powers are thus defined by different accidental forms, which means that the

²¹ *Ibid.*, 9

²² *Monarchia* III.15.1-4

offices²³ cannot be compared to one standard.²⁴ Given this argument, there cannot be a structural hierarchy between Pope and Emperor because that requires one office to fall closer to a unified standard of measurement. Instead, Dante equates the structural significance of religious and political authorities using the universal power of St. Peter “to bind and loose” all things *which pertain to his office*—and his office alone—as evidence for their supremacy within their respective domains.²⁵

At the same time, Dante establishes a clear teleological hierarchy between political and religious authorities that ultimately supports their structural equality. The emphasis on achieving the spiritual fulfillment which culminates in the Beatific Vision throughout *Commedia* gives the Church a greater teleological significance, since it relates to spiritual pursuits more directly. However, Dante maintains the Aristotelian philosophy that earthly fulfillment is a necessary precursor to eternal fulfillment—and thus the state also plays a crucial role in salvation.²⁶ Kallendorf writes that, to Dante, “politics is important . . . as an arena in which the Platonic hero can develop the civic virtues as a prelude to the contemplative pursuit of the summum bonum.”²⁷ The Platonic hero may be markedly distinct from the Aristotelian hero, but both Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies establish virtue-based systems in which human fulfillment depends on achieving particular civic and personal virtues. Aristotelian philosophy, however, bears

²³ Dante is careful to distinguish that the incomparability of the offices does not preclude comparison of the men, insofar as they are men and not Pope or Emperor (*Mon* III.15). This allows for a moral comparison of both figures while still respecting their individual offices.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, III.12.1-5

²⁵ *Ibid.*, III.8.4-5

²⁶ Honess, “Divided City,” 122-23

²⁷ Kallendorf, “Virgil,” 68

Furman Humanities Review

greater similarity to the Dantean understanding that the fulfillment of the end of the state develops the virtues that are conducive to eternal fulfillment. The ends of ecclesiastical and political society are comparable in this sense, though not in structure, because of the type of relationality the comparison considers. Rather than comparing their temporal powers relative to one another, the teleological ranking of church and state powers compares their relationship to salvation, and so is a comparison by the same accident. In the language of the “two suns,” they are two lanes on the same road. Therefore, Dante can and does distinguish between the structural and teleological relationships of ecclesiastical and political authorities to establish a teleological hierarchy even despite their structural equality and incomparability. In doing so, he builds a framework for understanding how the independent existences and structural differentiation of religious and political authorities relate to their teleological fulfillment.

Dante adapts Aristotelian philosophies about the *telos* of the state and rejects the Augustinian condemnation of earthly government to demonstrate the teleological significance of separating religious and political offices. While St. Augustine maintained that earthly politics held no salvific merit other than to reduce earthly chaos, Aristotle believed that the state is an essential leg in the journey to human fulfillment.²⁸ Dante’s notion of the teleological relationship between the structure, function, and end of state derives from Aristotelian thought. In his *Politics*, Aristotle explains that a good state is directed toward the ultimate human good—or happiness—which he believes to be found in the acquisition of the virtues that are necessary to fulfill human nature.²⁹ Given his observation that “man is, by nature, a political animal,” and can only find happiness in society, he contends that human fulfillment

²⁸ Honess, “Divided City,” 122-23

²⁹ Aristotle. *Politics*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941): I.1.1-5

can only be achieved through participation in the state.³⁰ Aristotle thus assigns a massive teleological significance to the state, since a society that fails to promote the pursuit of happiness ultimately cripples the ability of its citizens to ever achieve fulfillment. Since Aristotle means the fulfillment of human nature when he says happiness, and the Christian concept of human fulfillment is the perfection of his nature through the return to a state of perfect communion with God, Dante's ideal Christian-Aristotelian state culminates in the fulfillment of the Beatific vision.³¹

Here it is relevant to note that Aristotle and Dante do not write of the same virtues: superficially, it seems that Aristotle emphasizes political virtues—virtues that moderate human temperaments and relationships—instead of the theological and cardinal virtues upon which Dante focuses. Neither approach displaces the other, however; instead, Dante extends the Aristotelian concept of civic virtue. Dante argues that achieving earthly happiness through civic virtue facilitates the higher-level contemplation that allows the pursuit of eternal happiness.³² This notion is not foreign to Christian thought; in fact, most Christian eschatologies include some reference of political organization in the resurrected world. Consider, for example, the language of the “New Jerusalem” in Revelation 21:22 (NRSV).³³ That Dante thus expands and adapts Aristotelian political teleology to relate the end of the state (earthly happiness) to the end of the Church (eternal happiness) has a tangible historical basis.

The prominence of Aristotelian political teleology in Dante's writing helps illuminate his emphasis on separating religious and political authorities in the world. In particular,

³⁰ Ibid., III.6.19-29

³¹ Ibid., VII.1.22-24; 40-45.

³² Kallendorf, “Virgil,” 68

³³ Fink, David. “Freedom and Politics” (class lecture, Christian Classics: Dante's *Commedia*. Furman University, Greenville, SC. October 2020).

Furman Humanities Review

the salvific significance that Dante assigns the state means that over-subjecting political to ecclesiastical authorities would cripple human fulfillment—a stance which is not unexpected given the historical context and his personal experiences with the Papacy. Despite its role in salvation, Dante still discusses the state in primarily secular terms by arguing that the duty of the Emperor is to guide humans to earthly happiness “by means of philosophical instruction”—in other words, to develop the rationality and intellect that humanity needs to contemplate higher things. The influence of the emperor is not limited to the temporal sphere, however; rather, the emperor fulfills his role in the economy of eternal salvation by cultivating the natural virtues and temporal goods that facilitate spiritual completion. This purpose is markedly different from that of religious authorities, who must “lead the human race to life eternal by means of revelation.”³⁴ Religious authorities skip over the temporal realm and jump straight to the “big picture” issue of eternity. As Marco insinuates in the analogy of the two suns with the statement “the one snuffed out the other,” the combination of political and religious authorities undermines the pursuit of earthly happiness (and therein the achievement of eternal happiness) by overemphasizing either revelation or philosophy to the detriment of the other.³⁵ Logically, then, political and religious authorities cannot be institutionally combined, since it undermines their capacity to recognize the individual role each plays facilitating human fulfillment.

Given his understanding of the relationship between political and religious powers and the pursuit of earthly and eternal virtue, then, it is entirely logical when, in *Purgatorio* XVI, Dante attributes the marked absence of virtue in medieval Europe to an unnatural overlap between the Papacy and Emperor. The analogy of the two suns, read in context of the Aristotelian foundation of Dante’s politics and the incomparability of religious and political authority, depicts two entities

³⁴ *Monarchia* III.16.5

³⁵ *Purg* XVI.109

of equal stature which possess their own sources of authority, significance, and impact. Likewise, the analogy of the cleft hooves emphasizes the need for the need for these two entities to be separate to create a balanced society, and its allusion to ritualistic purity in Leviticus insinuates that the two entities draw a society towards God when separated and away from Him when unified (since the uncleft hooves are defined as ritually impure). Ultimately, Dante's understanding of the Divine allocation of spiritual and political powers, and their resultant relationship, suggests that denying their individualized functions, independent existences, or structural and teleological differentiation undermines salvation by denying the Pope and Emperor the chance to fulfill their respective salvific roles. Since the achievement of perfect human fulfillment is the overarching theme and ultimate goal in *Commedia* and at the basis of *Monarchia*, it is only natural that he is a scathing critic of the combination of ecclesiastical and political powers. In a nation where "Papacy" (the Church) and "Empire" (in this case, in the form of a Democratic Republic) are mostly—if not completely—structurally distinct, some may wonder how Dante's political theory applies to present-day America. The power struggle between organized religion and organized politics seems outdated—but is it? Over the last eighteen months, it seems that the dearth of earthly virtues and goodness far outweighs their presence in our country; and, just as Dante blamed the organizing forces of his society, so today members of the media and public institutions, citizens, and even politicians tend to blame the government for what they perceive to be its failure to regulate society effectively. The Black Lives Matter protests of June-July 2020, for example, were underscored with the belief that lack of reform in the American Justice System perpetuates racism; they were a public cry for governmental change to rectify a perceived social ill. Only months before, the controversial drone strike on Iranian General Soleimani (3 January 2020) sparked an eruption of media outcry and partisan debate that accentuated political division between liberal and conservative groups, once again provoking public

Furman Humanities Review

demands for political reform. In the ongoing wake of the COVID-19 pandemic today, the public continues to petition the government to provide equal access to sufficient healthcare. Each of these examples highlights an instance in which the general public tends to place responsibility for social issues upon the government. The government may influence the issue but, as Dante has shown, the answer is not so simple as “the government is not doing its job.” In fact, his examination of how a dysfunctional relationship between Church and State affects human *telos* is remarkably applicable to present-day issues.

In many ways, the modern American dialogue surrounding the extent to which the government ought to legislate or be held responsible for moral issues adapts Dante’s examination of the ideal balance between a singular Church and State power to a multi-faith, democratic nation. To understand this application, it is beneficial to contextualize the meaning of “moral” in this argument. In his stark structural distinction of religious and political authorities, Dante also distinguishes religious and political morals.³⁶ Broadly, political morals pertain to the fulfillment of the end of a state; whether something is politically moral in America is thus defined by the extent to which it contributes to or obstructs an individual’s Constitutional rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Religious morals relate to the ideas, virtues, ways of life, and guidelines for action that align with a particular belief system; this is what is more commonly associated with the term ‘morality.’ Dante would say that the morality that relates to the

³⁶ On first glance, some might mistake this as a belief hauntingly similar to the Augustinian “city of man” and “city of God” scenario, where each is mutually exclusive. St. Augustine’s political theory is largely based on teleological end, however, and so Dante’s structural distinction does not fall into the same category. The teleological hierarchy of Church and State that he outlines means that this moral distinction works in favor of a harmonious effort between the two authorities, not their disjunction.

social issues for which the government is often blamed is dual: it is a matter of political and religious morals. The cause, he might suggest, is in their imbalance.

The modern picture admittedly looks a little bit different than Dante's did. Where he was concerned with the over-religionization of political power, we face increasing secularization as politics bleed into the churches. Gone is the idea that religion is the moral compass and government the legally organizing principle of society. Morality today—when one dares speak of it as a set of established norms instead of an exclusively subjective lifestyle—is more determined by who you voted for and whether your blood runs red or blue than by your core beliefs and individual temperaments and actions. In other words, it increasingly undermines religious morality by over-emphasizing political “morality” (which has also been perverted by partisanship; but that is a paper for another time). Politics, political morality, and religious morality are becoming so tightly interwound in the attempt to legislate social questions into nonissues by creating laws that theoretically rectify big-questions issues that we are beginning to lose track of where one ends and the other begins. This is not to say that politics should not be religiously moral, or that non-political morals cannot be extended to politics. Politics *should* adhere to certain principles from religious (and other domains of) morality, and so in that sense there is room for healthy overlap between the two. When politics become a means of legislating religious morals instead of political morals, however, or religious morals a means of manipulating political powers, conflict arises as the two “suns” battle for a position in which one can “snuff out” the other.

As Dante demonstrates in his examination of the relationship between the fourteenth century Papacy and Empire, striking a healthy balance between politics, religion, and the enforcement of their respective morals is much more akin to walking a tightrope than a well-paved road. Government, Dante says, regulates earthly society, but the morals inherent to this regulation technically fall within the domain of the

Furman Humanities Review

church, too.³⁷ The duty of the church is to cultivate the proper virtues and dispositions that are necessary to rectify social issues, through emphasis on spiritual and interior life. Large-scale social issues cannot be fixed in a generalized government/political action or legislation alone; they have to be addressed in the everyday lives of individuals, who one-by-one make conscious decisions to live according the principles which are hoped to be implemented. While it is the duty of the government to regulate society broadly so as to best facilitate the development of these attitudes, it is not its duty to actually cultivate these habits of life and mind. Government is not a governor of the individual, but a coordinator of said individuals. The government can legislate morals, but only to an extent, and with a largely disciplinarian approach. It is much more effective if morals are taught, adopted, and incorporated into the daily interior lives of the individuals whom the government governs. Given the individualized nature of this process, and the fact the government is not designed to cater to the individual, this is not a job for politics. Rather, the church should develop/nurture the moral disposition of a person such that they promote healthy ideals in society. The church is thus responsible for cultivating good morals and virtues which can then be translated into government (all of this in a representative system in which the government directly or semi-directly represents the will and disposition of its citizens). In this way, religious morals are not trampled beneath politics, but inform political action such that it is more effective; the “two suns” work together.

Nearly seven hundred years after Dante wrote *Commedia*, we, too, are left striving to stumble across the tightrope that is a healthy balance between political and religious morality and authority. Just as a tightrope sways and gives under

³⁷ Here forward, church refers more to organized religion as a category than one particular denominational iteration of a specific religion to account for the religious pluralism of modern America. Thus, the lowercase ‘c.’

weight and movement, so the ideal balance of church and state ebbs and flows with the evolution of a political society. Our ideal arrangement of political and religious authority may not perfectly mirror that of Dante's time, but that does not discount the significance of striking a balance that *does* work. Trying to address the prominent social issues of our time without considering the proper alignment of their religiously and politically moral components is like trying to walk that tightrope with vertigo: perhaps not impossible, but certainly more difficult. Address the cause of vertigo (an improper balance of political and religious morality in the political approach to social issues) and begin treating it (through gradual changes in the approach to and implementation of political and religious morals), and walking the tightrope suddenly becomes less tenuous. Dante is not one to sugarcoat his warnings, and while his wording may be elegant, his message to readers across the ages is clear: walk the right walk or fall.

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