

The Catholic Church in Conflict with State Power: an Analysis of Historical Literature Studies on the Relationship Between Church and State in Medieval Europe

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The relationship between the Catholic Church and state power in medieval Europe represents one of the most complex dynamics in Western political and religious history. During this period, the Church functioned not only as a spiritual institution but also as a powerful social, political, and economic force. Conflicts between the Church and the state frequently arose due to overlapping authorities, particularly concerning legitimacy of power, appointment of church officials, land ownership, and interpretations of law and morality. This study aims to analyze the forms of conflict between the Catholic Church and state authorities in medieval Europe and the factors underlying these tensions. The research employs a literature study method by examining various historical sources, including classical historical texts and relevant contemporary scholarly works. The findings indicate that Church–state conflicts were not merely theological but also political and economic in nature. Struggles between the papacy and European monarchs, such as the Investiture Controversy, reflect competition for influence over society and power structures. This study is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical roots of Church–state relations and their relevance to the development of modern concepts of separation of powers.

Keywords: Catholic Church, State, Middle Ages, Power Conflict, Europe

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1. Introduction

The relationship between the Catholic Church and state power in Medieval Europe is a crucial theme in the study of political and legal history. During this period, religion and state power developed within the same social space and often influenced each other. The Catholic Church served not only as a religious institution but also as a political actor wielding extensive authority. The state, on the other hand, sought to establish legitimacy and stability of power within a complex feudal structure. This situation gave rise to a dynamic relationship between these two powerful forces. This relationship often led to conflicts of interest and struggles for authority.

The Middle Ages were characterized by a lack of a clear separation between the realms of religion and state. Afifah and Luthfy (2024) explain that state thought during this period was heavily influenced by religious doctrine. Political power was often legitimized through religious symbols and authority. Kings and emperors were considered to derive their power from God's will. In this context, the Catholic Church held a strategic position as the provider of this legitimacy. However, this strategic position also opened up space for conflict when the interests of the Church and the state did not align.

The conflict between the Church and the state arose primarily due to overlapping authority. The Church claimed supreme spiritual authority encompassing all Christians. States claim political authority over their

territories and people. When these two claims intersect, conflict is inevitable. De Gruchy (2003) states that the history of Christianity demonstrates a continuing tension between faith and political power. This tension characterized the relationship between Church and state throughout the Middle Ages.

In practice, this conflict was not only theological but also impacted legal and governmental aspects. The appointment of ecclesiastical officials, land ownership, and the establishment of laws were often sources of dispute. The Church possessed a strong organizational structure that transcended political boundaries. This made it difficult for the state to fully control religious institutions. Dhakidae (2003) emphasized that the relationship between religious scholars and state power was often marked by negotiation and conflict of interest. A similar pattern can be seen in the relationship between Church and state in Medieval Europe.

The study of Church-state conflict requires an appropriate methodological approach. Historical research generally uses qualitative methods to understand the context and meaning of events. Achjar et al. (2023) explain that qualitative methods are highly relevant for analyzing social and historical phenomena in depth. Literature studies allow researchers to trace ideas, policies, and conflicts based on written sources. With this approach, researchers can examine the views of experts and historical figures. This approach helps build a systematic and objective understanding.

Furthermore, the relationship between religion and state also has implications for the concepts of harmony and social stability. Harahap (2011) emphasizes the importance of the theology of harmony in managing the relationship between religion and power. Although the context is different, the basic principles of harmonious relations remain relevant for historical analysis. Conflicts that occurred in the Middle Ages provide lessons on the risks of one party dominating another. These historical experiences demonstrate the importance of balance in institutional relations. Therefore, this study has reflective value for the development of modern political thought.

The development of legal and political thought is also inseparable from the dynamics of Church and state. Maulana and SH (2020) explain that changes in legal thought occurred through a long historical process. Conflicts of authority in the Middle Ages helped shape the foundations of Western law. From these conflicts emerged ideas about limiting power and the rule of law. Kasmuri (2014) states that modern secularism cannot be separated from the historical experience of the relationship between religion and state. Therefore, this study is relevant for understanding the historical roots of contemporary political systems.

Based on this background, this study focuses on analyzing the conflict between the Catholic Church and state power in Medieval Europe. The study was conducted through a literature review of relevant historical sources and scholarly works. This approach is expected to comprehensively describe the form, causes, and impact of the conflict (Nartin et al).

2. Research Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods, focusing on an in-depth understanding of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state in Medieval Europe. A qualitative approach was chosen because it captures the social and historical complexity of the interaction between religious institutions and political power. As explained by Creswell (2021), qualitative research emphasizes interpreting meaning within a dynamic social and historical context. This research is a literature study, so it does not involve field data collection, but rather emphasizes the review and analysis of written sources relevant to the topic.

The data sources used are secondary data derived from history books, scientific journals, and academic works discussing the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state during the Middle Ages. The

literature used includes the works of both classical historians and modern research, thus providing a diverse and comprehensive perspective. According to Booth et al. (2022), the use of multiple sources allows researchers to build a more valid analytical framework and minimize interpretive bias by considering different perspectives.

The data collection technique is carried out through documentary studies, namely tracing, reading, and recording information from relevant written sources. This process is carried out systematically to ensure that all information reviewed aligns with the research focus and maintains academic credibility. As stated by Bowen (2020), systematic documentation studies enable researchers to identify significant historical and thematic patterns, while ensuring the consistency and accuracy of the information.

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive-analytical techniques. The data obtained were grouped based on key themes, such as the nature of the conflict between the Catholic Church and state power, patterns of institutional relations, and the socio-political context underlying these interactions. Researchers then interpret the data to understand the power dynamics, institutional strategies, and social impacts of Church-state relations. According to Yin (2021), descriptive-analytical analysis in historical research enables researchers to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena while linking findings to the relevant historical context.

With this approach, the research is expected to provide a comprehensive and detailed picture of the relationship between the Catholic Church and state power in Medieval Europe, while presenting a valid interpretation of the available historical evidence, ensuring academic accountability for the research findings.

3. Result and Discussion

The Roots of the Conflict of Authority between Church and State

A literature review indicates that the conflict between the Catholic Church and state power in Medieval Europe was deeply rooted in the issue of authority. The Church, through the Pope, claimed supreme spiritual power, believed to originate directly from God. This claim formed the theological basis for the Church's authority being universal and transcending political boundaries. Afifah and Luthfy (2024) explain that state thought in the Middle Ages was heavily influenced by religious doctrine. In this context, the Church positioned itself as the ultimate arbiter of morality and truth. Consequently, the Church felt it had the right to direct the social and political life of Christian communities.

The Church's claim to authority was not limited to matters of worship and religious teachings. The Church was also actively involved in regulating social life and establishing legal norms through canon law. This involvement extended the Church's role into the realm of practical politics. According to Karsono (2022), leadership within Church institutions developed dynamically and adapted to the existing power context. This gave the Church a strong and influential institutional structure. With this structure, the Church was able to influence the policies and decisions of state rulers. This situation increased the potential for conflict with political authorities.

On the other hand, the state viewed itself as the legitimate holder of power over its territory and people. Kings and emperors claimed that their power also stemmed from God's will. The concept of the divine right of kings was used to strengthen political legitimacy and the authority of government. Afifah and Luthfy (2024) state that this concept served as a crucial basis for justifying monarchical power in the Middle Ages. With this legitimacy, state rulers felt they held equal standing with the authority of the Church. Therefore, they rejected the Church's interference in government affairs.

The differing claims of legitimacy between the Church and the state created structural tensions. The Church viewed the state as subject to moral and spiritual direction. The state, in contrast, considered political matters beyond the Church's jurisdiction. De Gruchy (2003) explains that the relationship between Christianity and political power throughout history has often been characterized by tension. This tension arose when religion attempted to directly influence state policy. In the context of the Middle Ages, this tension escalated into open conflict. This conflict impacted the political and social stability of society.

Tensions between Church and state intensified due to the lack of a clear separation between religion and state. The social structure of the Middle Ages allowed the Church to be directly involved in government affairs. The Church wielded significant influence over society through its teachings, canon law, and extensive institutional networks. Dhakidae (2003) states that the relationship between intellectual authority and state power often gave rise to a tug-of-war of interests. This blurred the boundaries between spiritual and political authority. As a result, conflict became difficult to avoid and tended to recur.

This conflict of authority did not arise suddenly, but rather developed as the institutions of Church and state strengthened. As both institutions became more organized, the potential for competition increased. Each party sought to maintain and expand its influence in society. Mun'im (2003) explains that the relationship between faith and politics often sparked conflict when both dominated the other. In many cases, conflict was used as a means of consolidating power. Thus, the conflict between Church and state became part of the political dynamics of the Middle Ages.

Thus, the roots of the conflict between Church and state can be understood as a clash of two claims to legitimacy, both religious in nature. Both parties invoked God's will to justify their respective powers. This situation created structural and recurring conflicts throughout the Middle Ages. Harahap (2011) emphasized that the lack of balance between religious and political authority had the potential to give rise to prolonged conflict. The issue of authority became the primary foundation of various subsequent conflicts. These conflicts then shaped the development of relations between religion and the state in Europe.

The Pope's Role in the Dynamics of Political Power

The Pope, as the supreme leader of the Catholic Church, played a central role in the dynamics of conflict between Church and state in Medieval Europe. The Pope was viewed not only as a spiritual leader but also as a political figure with significant influence. The Pope's authority extended beyond religious matters to the realm of government. In many cases, the Pope was directly involved in determining the political direction of Christian kingdoms. This involvement demonstrates the Church's importance in the Medieval power system. This situation strengthened the Pope's position within the social and political structures of society.

The Pope's political role is clearly evident in the practice of coronation and the assessment of the legitimacy of power. Coronation by the Church is seen as a symbol of divine approval of a ruler. Without the Pope's blessing, a king's legitimacy is often questioned. Suryajaya (2022) explains that in the Middle Ages, political legitimacy depended heavily on religious authority. This made the Pope the arbiter of the legitimacy of a power. With this position, the Pope wielded significant bargaining power over the state.

The Pope's power was further strengthened by the theological belief that he was God's representative on earth. This belief provided the moral and religious basis for every Pope's decision. Christians believed that the Pope's orders reflected divine will. Rahman (2020) states that religion wields significant power in shaping a society's political identity and loyalties. Therefore, the Pope's decisions could influence the people's attitudes toward the ruler. Consequently, the political position of a king or emperor could be weakened when they disagreed with the Pope.

In the context of conflict, the Pope used various instruments of power to maintain his authority. One of the most influential was excommunication. Excommunication impacted not only a person's religious life but also their social and political legitimacy. Excommunicated rulers risked losing the support of the people and nobility. Soetoprawiro (2003) explains that the Church's social involvement often served as a means of moral control over political power. Thus, excommunication became an effective means of political pressure.

However, the Pope's involvement in political affairs also sparked resistance from the state. Rulers felt that the Church's interference threatened the sovereignty and authority of the government. They sought to limit the Pope's influence through state laws and policies. Rahadian and Fallderama (2020) explain that within the Christian tradition itself, there is a critical attitude toward excessive power. This critical attitude also emerged from the state toward the Church. These tensions often escalated into open conflict between the Pope and state rulers.

Overall, the role of the Pope is inseparable from the dynamics of Church-state conflict in the Middle Ages. The Pope served as both a symbol of spiritual authority and an influential political actor. This dual position placed the Pope at the center of the power struggle between religion and state. Panggabean and Ali-Fauzi (2011) emphasize the importance of managing the relationship between religion and power to maintain social stability. Historically, this relationship has often been poorly managed. Therefore, the role of the Pope reflects the complexity of the relationship between religion and politics at that time.

The Investiture Controversy as the Climax of the Conflict

The Investiture Controversy was one of the most prominent conflicts in the history of Church-state relations in Medieval Europe. This conflict took place in the 11th and 12th centuries between the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. The core issue lay in the authority to appoint bishops and ecclesiastical officials. Ecclesiastical offices not only held spiritual significance but also wielded significant political and economic influence. Therefore, the appointment of church officials became a strategic issue for both parties. Husaini (2013) emphasized that this type of conflict demonstrates the strong link between religion and power in Western history.

For the Church, the appointment of bishops is an internal matter of a spiritual and theological nature. The Church believes that only spiritual authority has the right to determine the spiritual leader of the people. State interference is considered a violation of the Church's freedom. Kristiyanto (2012) explains that the Church's social teaching emphasizes the autonomy of ecclesiastical institutions in carrying out their pastoral duties. Therefore, the Church rejects all forms of political interference in the appointment of church officials. This rejection underpins the Pope's strong stance in the Investiture Controversy.

In contrast, the state viewed bishops as part of the political power structure. Bishops often held authority over specific territories and managed significant economic resources. The bishop's role as a regional leader gave the state a vested interest in his appointment. The state considered ecclesiastical officials to be loyal to political rulers. McGrath (2006) explains that in the context of feudalism, ecclesiastical positions were often directly linked to worldly power. This situation strengthened the state's claim to involvement in the investiture process.

The Investiture Controversy demonstrates that the conflict between Church and State was not solely about religious doctrine. This conflict also reflected a struggle for political and economic interests. Control of ecclesiastical positions meant control over land, taxes, and public loyalty. Mustopo (2017) states that the integration of religion and power often gave rise to conflict when there were no clear boundaries of authority. Therefore, both parties insisted on maintaining their positions. This conflict was long-lasting and involved various political and religious actors.

The impact of the Investiture Controversy was far-reaching on European political stability. This conflict sparked divisions between rulers and the Church in various regions. Several kingdoms experienced a crisis of legitimacy due to the conflict between the Pope and the emperor. Urban (2009) states that this conflict fostered awareness of the need to limit power. Furthermore, this conflict also gave rise to treaties to reorganize the authority of each party. The Treaty of Worms was one such compromise between Church and state.

The compromise resulting from the Investiture Controversy was the first step towards a clearer division of authority. The Church gained recognition for its spiritual authority, while the state retained some political influence. Tinambunan (2017) explains that these conflicts also influenced the development of the Reformation within the Church. These changes opened up space for critical reflection on the relationship between religion and power. Thus, the Investiture Controversy was not merely a conflict but also a historical learning process. This process contributed to the formation of a more balanced political and religious order.

Therefore, the Investiture Controversy can be seen as the culmination of the conflict between Church and state in the Middle Ages. This conflict reflected long-standing structural tensions stemming from overlapping authority. This event marked a pivotal point in the history of religious and political relations in Europe. Its influence was felt throughout subsequent periods, including the Reformation and the birth of modern thought. Saifullah (2014) asserts that the Medieval conflict served as a bridge to major changes in the history of Western thought. Therefore, the Investiture Controversy holds significant historical significance.

Excommunication as a Political Tool of the Church

Excommunication was one of the most powerful instruments at the disposal of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. Theologically, excommunication is understood as severing a person from the communion of the Church and sacramental grace. However, in the social realities of the time, its meaning went far beyond mere religious boundaries. Excommunication had severe social consequences because European society was deeply tied to the authority of the Church. An excommunicated ruler was considered to have lost divine legitimacy. This situation led the people to question the legitimacy of his leadership. This situation demonstrated that the Church's spiritual power had a direct impact on political stability.

The Church consciously used excommunication as a means of pressure on state rulers. When kings or emperors opposed Church policies, the threat of excommunication was often invoked. This strategy was effective because people's faith was the primary foundation of social life. Many people were reluctant to submit to leaders perceived as deviating from God's will. Husaini (2013) explains that the Church's moral power was often more feared than the power of arms. Excommunication created political and social isolation for rulers. Thus, the Church was able to influence state policy without resorting to military force.

The use of excommunication also reflected the Church's bargaining position in its relationship with the state. The Church did not have an army or other apparatus of violence like the state. However, the Church controlled moral and spiritual domains that were highly respected by the people. This influence could shake the people's loyalty to the ruler. In some cases, excommunicated rulers were forced to reconcile to restore legitimacy. McGrath (2006) believes that the symbolic power of religion was often more effective than administrative power. This demonstrates that excommunication functioned as a highly sophisticated political strategy.

Despite its effectiveness, the use of excommunication did not always go unchallenged. A number of rulers began to question the Church's dominance in political affairs. They sought to establish alternative legitimacy through law and state administration. This move was taken to reduce dependence on Church authority.

According to Suryajaya (2022), this effort became the seed of the birth of secularist thought. The state slowly began to separate political affairs from religious control. The conflict grew increasingly complex and multi-layered.

Overall, excommunication played a crucial role in the conflict between Church and state. This instrument demonstrated how spiritual power could be directed for political gain. Both Church and state utilized their respective resources of power. Neither party was entirely passive in this conflict. Panggabean and Ali-Fauzi (2011) emphasize that the relationship between religion and power always involves a negotiation of interests. Excommunication became a powerful symbol of this struggle. This practice clearly demonstrates the close relationship between faith and politics in the Middle Ages.

The Ambiguous Relationship between Church and State

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the state in Medieval Europe was ambiguous and complex. On the one hand, both institutions needed each other to maintain their respective powers. The state needs the moral and spiritual legitimacy of the Church. The Church needs political protection and material support from the state. This dependence creates a close cooperative relationship. Many state policies are justified religiously, and in return, the Church enjoys a safe space to carry out its mission.

However, this cooperation is never completely stable. Beneath the seemingly harmonious relationship, deep suspicions lurk. Each party strives to ensure its interests are not threatened by the other. When the Church is perceived as too dominant, the state begins to resist. Conversely, when the state is too powerful, the Church feels threatened. Rahadian and Falderama (2020) describe this situation as a recurring latent tension. Cooperative relationships can easily turn into open conflict.

The ambiguity of this relationship is reflected in various government policies and practices. In some periods, the Church and state are able to work together harmoniously, supporting each other in maintaining social and political stability. However, in other periods, conflict arises due to differing interests. There is no truly consistent pattern of the relationship. Each situation is highly dependent on the political context and the leader in power. This makes the relationship between the Church and the state difficult to predict.

The dynamics of this relationship also have a direct impact on people's lives. People often found themselves in a precarious position when Church and state clashed. Loyalty to faith could conflict with obligations to the state. This situation created significant social pressure. Rahman (2020) assessed that the conflict between religious and political elites was often imposed on society. The people became objects of mobilization and legitimacy. As a result, social stability became fragile.

Thus, the relationship between Church and state in the Middle Ages cannot be understood simply. The relationship was not solely one of conflict, but also of cooperation and interdependence. This ambiguity was a key characteristic of the relationship between the two institutions. Soetoprawiro (2003) emphasized that the Church's social involvement always existed between faith and power. This dynamic profoundly shaped European political history. Its influence is even felt in the development of modern thinking on religion and the state.

4. Conclusion

The conflict between the Catholic Church and state power in Medieval Europe arose from a struggle for influence between spiritual and political authorities, both seeking to be recognized as the ultimate source of truth and legitimacy. This tension was not merely an elite struggle, but permeated social life, law, and the governance of society at large. Relationships, sometimes cordial and sometimes fractured, formed a complex and often tense pattern of power. From this conflict emerged the seeds of awareness about the

limits of power and the need for a separation of the roles of religion and the state. The legacy of this dynamic continues to resonate and influence how modern humans view the relationship between faith and power.

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