

## THE POLITICAL IDEAS OF DANTE

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It has been said that Dante the political thinker is a necessary companion to Dante the poet.<sup>1</sup> Dante makes his political concepts explicit in the prose treatise, *De Monarchia*, where he undertakes a systematic investigation into the nature and function of government. Written around 1312 and 1313, the treatise describes the ideal form of government and assesses the rival claims of the Church and the Holy Roman Empire to fulfill that ideal. The *De Monarchia* stands among the most complete works of political theory of its time and clearly reflects Dante's attitude towards politics. The *Convivio*, more various in the scope of its ideas, merely touches upon Dante's thoughts on government, whereas in the *Divine Comedy*, his political ideals are not only evident to a great degree but take on an allegorical life unequalled in its poetic beauty. The *Divine Comedy* is more than a monument of Dante's artistic genius; it is the most extraordinary and enduring political pamphlet ever issued. In it the author does not deal simply with problems and their solutions, but with passions and their results; not with party slogans, but with moods, ideals, sins, and the eternal aspirations of the spirit. Dante uses art not only in the service of political propaganda but also in the most original way. Couched in his political ideals and preserved in the enduring beauty of his art is the outcome of an ardent search for a solution to the vexed problems of Florentine politics, the insolubility of which was such that it had to produce the unscrupulous *Prince* of Machiavelli two hundred years later. The endemic factional dissensions which resulted in Dante's exile from Florence and the endless bickerings among the papal and imperial parties and their political machinations awoke Dante to the frailties of a power-sharing (or power-corrupting) system of government. Neither by birth nor by upbringing was he a partisan of the imperial cause. But he saw no hope for peace except in the unity of the empire under the all-embracing authority of the Holy Roman Emperor. As his works *in toto* reveal, Dante's imperialism is purely an idealization of universal peace.

Dante's political thought centers on three cardinal principles. The first and foremost is "the knowledge of a single temporal government over mankind which is most important and least

explored."<sup>2</sup> Dante defines this temporal government or universal empire as "single government over all men in time, that is, over all in all things which can be measured by time."<sup>3</sup> The defense of the universal empire is built on a logical line of reasoning, the crux of which is the "universal goal of human civilization," the goal being the realization of man's basic potentiality or power for being intellectual.<sup>4</sup> Dante seeks the actualization of this power neither in a single man nor in any particular community of men, as both are limited and subject to destruction, but rather seeks it in the whole of humanity as an organized multitude under a supranational government. Such a political unity of mankind, he feels, is conducive to peace and tranquility, though peace is not an end in itself. His political formula conforms to a higher goal: "No universal human community, no peace; no peace, no opportunity for man to develop to the highest pitch of his aptitude for discovering truth or, consequently, to attain this goal."<sup>5</sup>

From this universal principle springs the issue of whether or not a single world government is necessary for the well being of the world. Dante ardently believes that humanity, being ordained to an end, should have a single unified government in the form of a world monarchy.<sup>6</sup> He reasons that any cooperative enterprise requires unity of direction; therefore, mankind as a whole must also need it. To affirm the argument Dante invokes divine examples, arguing that "mankind exists at its best when it is most unified for the true ground of unity exists in [God] alone."<sup>7</sup> In submitting to a single government, mankind most resembles submission to God and man most nearly exists according to the divine intention. Furthermore, mankind is at its best when it is governed by a single mover or government and by a single motion or law just as the whole of heaven is governed by a single mover, God. Authority is perfect when it is single, but plurality of authorities yields to disorder and imperfections.<sup>8</sup> Dante further argues more pragmatically that the existence of universal peace is possible only if there is one supreme judge altogether above greed and partiality who can settle disputes among kings and princes. In this way he argues that the best order of the world demands a unitary government under which justice has the greatest power.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, human freedom is possible only if there is in the world a supreme power capable of uprooting corrupt forms of government and replacing them with righteous regimes. Again, the world monarch can have no opportunity for greed, or a



least has much less opportunity than other mortals. His justice can, therefore, be undefiled and true.<sup>10</sup>

Thus Dante proposes that the whole of mankind form one community under a single ruler, the government of this ruler being perfect because it ensures the greatest unity and the highest justice, guarantees liberty and is most apt to be reasonable. According to this poet-political reformer, the capstone of this conclusion is its historical validity, the blessings of universal peace and tranquility having been enjoyed by the Roman populace in the time of Divus Augustus, the Roman emperor. Thus Dante's reasoning curiously combines the traditional idealization of the empire with the new Aristotelian method of explanation.

Not surprisingly, the second fundamental principle lies in answering the question "whether the Roman people acquired its dignity of empire by right."<sup>11</sup> The main contention is that God's will is manifested in history and that the history of Rome shows the marks of providential guidance in her rise to a position of supreme power. This Dante proves by pointing to the miraculous interventions of Providence which protected the Roman state and by pointing also to the nobility of the Roman character. The Romans built an empire not out of greed but for the sake of the common good of the conquered as well as the conquerors. Dante writes that "putting aside all greed as always incompatible with the commonwealth, and seeking universal peace with liberty, this holy, pious and glorious people seemed to neglect its own interests in order to promote the public interest for the salvation of mankind."<sup>12</sup> The will of God is further manifested in that people's war and conquests. The Roman empire, in Dante's conception, was the fifth of the historic attempts at world empire and it alone succeeded. By outdistancing all other contestants as well as actually conquering its rivals, Rome proved that it was destined by Providence to rule the world. Dante clinches his argument by deducing the same conclusion from the principles of Christianity itself. Unless the death of Christ were decreed by a lawful authority, the Messiah would not truly have been "punished" for the sins of men and would not have thus redeemed the human race. Hence the authority of Pilate, and equally that of Augustus, must have been lawful and right. Through these deductions Dante reveals his enthusiasm for arguments of Christian theology which defend pagan antiquity.

The third cornerstone of Dante's political thought centers on the relationship between the "two great luminaries, the Roman pontiff and the Roman prince."<sup>13</sup> Dante spares no pains to show that the de jure ruler of the world is independent of the head of the church. He refutes the arguments adduced by papalists that imperial authority is derived from the Pope. Dante shows a strong animus against the canon lawyers and their tendency to change papal decretal into foundations of faith. Only the Scriptures, he holds, have a supreme authority over the church and the traditions called "decretals" should undoubtedly be subordinated to the Scriptures.<sup>14</sup> Having thus cleared the ground Dante examines the principal passages of Scriptures alleged as authorities for the power of the church over temporal rulers and rejects the analogies of the sun and moon, of Levi and Judah, and of Samuel and Saul as they fail to substantiate the superiority of the spiritual power. He affirms that "temporal power receives from a spiritual power neither its being nor its power or authority, nor even its functioning."<sup>15</sup>

Dante further probes into the two critical precedents from secular history, the donation of Constantine and the translation of the empire to Charlemagne. He regards the former as unlawful, "neither could the church be rightful possessor of the donation, nor the emperor a rightful donor, in the sense he could alienate his own."<sup>16</sup> This argument nullifies the second alleged precedent for the Pope could not legally have imperial power he could not bestow it on Charles. Finally, Dante concludes with an argument to show that the possession of temporal power is in principle contrary to the very nature of the church whose kingdom is not of this transient world.

His positive argument for the political autonomy of the state may be analyzed as follows: man aspires to two beatitudes, one on earth and the other in heaven. The former is attained through the exercise of the moral and intellectual virtues. The rule over man as he struggles toward the first beatitude is designated by God to the emperor but his guidance as he strives toward the second is entrusted to the Pope.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in view of his two-fold end, the reins of man are held by a double driver; one is the supreme pontiff, who guides mankind to life eternal, and the other is the emperor, who guides him to temporal happiness.<sup>18</sup> Dante implies that the two powers are rather like two equal suns, each dependent only on God and destined to guide man toward his two goals: peace



and happiness in this world and spiritual salvation in the next. His view of independence, however, is not a total negation of the church but is an affirmation of harmonious cooperation. Such independence, Dante points out, must not be interpreted so strictly as to imply that the Roman Emperor is not subject to the roman pontificate, for in some ways our mortal happiness is disciplined for the sake of immortal happiness.<sup>19</sup>

If *De Monarchia* is heavily loaded with Dante's opinions and theories, the *Comedy* crowns them with a unique artistic form lest they should sink into oblivion. The literal meaning of the *Comedy* deals exclusively with the life of man after death, but the allegorical implications deal exclusively with the life of man in this world. In its secular meaning, the *Inferno* shows the picture of a corrupt society, the *Purgatorio* shows society engaged in purging off that corruption and returning to the ideal constitution which was God's intention for it when He created man as a "social animal," and the *Paradiso* shows the ideal constitution in working order.<sup>20</sup>

In the allegorical sense Virgil represents the Roman ideal of law which, divinely ordained and assisted, will free mankind from the three beasts: the lust for power, the lust for wealth, and religious hypocrisy as embodied in Ghibellinism, Guelfism, and the worldly aspect of the Church. All authority, ecclesiastical and temporal, is due to man's fallen nature; so at the goal of his pilgrimage in the Earthly Paradise, he will crown himself in the perfect freedom of the Third Kingdom. Here Beatrice appears as the renewal of spiritual life, and the church is restored to its original purity. As a "Joachimist apocalypse," the pageant in the Earthly Paradise is well described. The barren tree of original justice, stricken by the sin of Adam, comes alive when the chariot of the church is tied to it. The eagle that descends from its summit to strike the chariot is imperial Rome. Though anti-Christian it does less injury than when it returns to cover the chariot with its feathers--the Donation of Constantine bestowing the temporal empire through which the church loses her true character.<sup>21</sup>

In the *Comedy* Dante impresses upon his contemporaries his political ideals through the powerful method of allegory, finding it to be more persuasive than straightforward reasoning. In his metaphorical language, the white light of heaven turns red with anger while Saint Peter himself denounces his successors for turning Rome into a sewer of filth and blood. A direct denunciation of

simony would hardly equal in power the vivid picture of pontiffs heads downward with perpetual flames licking their feet. In the *Comedy* Virgil shows the path, and Justinian recounts the workings of Divine Providence through Roman history. The righteous rulers of the great past flash forth the imperial eagle in the heaven of Jupiter discoursing with one voice on God's just purposes. And then we see the empty seat high up in the great White rose where soon shall sit the lofty Henry. Each of the images which the poet reveals combines to create a truly extraordinary way of teaching political principles.

Dante's political thought reflects a sense of prophetic mission that overshadows any selfish ambition. In fact, what dominates Dante's thinking is the reformer's zeal that had burned steadily and fiercely in his breast ever since those early days when he had mingled in and striven to allay the political antagonism of Florence.

In the *De Monarchia* Dante adopts a conventional method of appealing to reasoning faculties. His logic is a curious combination of the traditional idealization and the new Aristotelian categories of explanation. Dante's voice of reason, however, does not always sound coherent, especially when he idealizes Roman authority. Under Nero it was not ideal either in Rome or in the provinces. But his method takes a revolutionary turn in the *Comedy* where he shows that more truth enters the mind of men through the imagination. No writer has equalled Dante in ability to turn politics into art and thus to invoke the authority of the mighty dead. No one has approached him in power to bring the sanction of the Eternal to bear on the trivial concerns of the earth, and to make the judgment seat of the Almighty turn the noisy currents of history.

Although at times pedantry encumbers his genius, no reformer ever adopted a more persuasive approach to suggest that the restoration of society must come from within and not from without, that change of heart must precede the establishment of right institutions. Dante's ideas have long been ridiculed as quixotic. Yet history has been a declaration affirming man's right to the "pursuit of happiness" and the separation of church and state. Today, with the threat of nuclear extinction hanging over us at one end and the daily bloodshed caused by state and camp terrorists threatening to submerge us at the other, the idea of a world government seems no so much chimerical as indispensable for the survival of all the



populace of the earth. In this sense, Dante's political ideas may hold the key to securing our future, thus transcending time and space.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A. P. d'Entreves, *Dante as a Political Thinker*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Dante Alighieri, *On World Government*, translated by Herbert W. Schneider (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1949), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Etienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, translated by David Moore (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1949), p. 170.

<sup>6</sup>Dante, *On World Government*. p. 9.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>17</sup>Dino Bigongiari, Introduction, *On World Government* by Dante, p. xii.

<sup>18</sup>Dante, *On World Government*. p. 79.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>20</sup>D. L. Sayers, Introductory Papers on Dante (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), p. 112.

<sup>21</sup>B. B. Carter, "Dante's Political Ideas," *Review of Politics*, July, 1943, p. 352.