

# Feudalism: A Political-Military Definition

Joseph Strayer

Scholars have differed over the precise meaning of feudalism. In the following selection Joseph R. Strayer, a Princeton historian who has written extensively on medieval history, rejects the narrower legal definition of feudalism in favor of a broader political-military one. At the same time, he rejects as too amorphous interpretations of feudalism that stress social and economic factors.

When we look at the political situation in Western Europe in this period, there are three things that strike us. First, there is a fragmentation of political power. Over much of Western Europe the county is the largest effective political unit, and in some places even the county has splintered into small, autonomous lordships. Moreover, even in these small districts no single ruler has a monopoly of political authority. There are rights of jurisdiction and administration which are held as hereditary possessions by lesser lords. There may be enclaves within a county or a barony in which the count or baron has no authority at all.

Second, this fragmented political power is treated as a private possession. It can be divided among heirs, given as marriage portion, mortgaged, bought and sold. Private contracts and the rules of family law determine the possessors of judicial and administrative authority. Public power in private hands is accepted as a normal and inevitable arrangement; no one considers it peculiar or undesirable.

Third, a key element in the armed forces—heavy-armed cavalry—is secured through individual and private agreements. Knights render military service ~~not because they are citizens of a state or subjects of a king,~~ but because they or their ancestors have promised to give this service to a lord in return for certain benefits. These benefits may range from mere sustenance in the lord's household to the grant of estates, villages, and even some rights of government. Increasingly, the grant of land comes to be the normal way of securing the services of a knight, but other arrangements are always possible. The essential point is that military service is provided through a series of private contracts between the lord and his men.

To sum up, the basic characteristics of feudalism in Western Europe are a fragmentation of political authority, public power in private hands, and a military system in which an essential part of the armed forces is secured through private contracts. Feudalism is a method of government, and a way of securing the forces necessary to preserve that method of government.

# Medieval Essays: Church and State in Carolingian Time

Christopher Dawson

Although most historians stress the local or decentralized nature of feudalism, there were powerful monarchies during the Early Middle Ages. The Carolingian Empire under Charlemagne was the furthest extension of the monarchical state during that period, but to varying degrees other powerful monarchies existed as well. Of fundamental importance to these larger political structures were relations between Church and state, both in theory and practice. In the following selection Christopher Dawson, a British medievalist who emphasizes the positive role of Christianity in European history, argues that connections between the two were so close that distinctions between Church and state became blurred.

The medieval king was not merely the representative of the old barbarian national monarchies; he was also an officer in the Christian society, who stood in a peculiarly close relationship to the Church and was consecrated by religious rites. However much the reforming canonists might insist on the essential distinction between the royal and the sacerdotal functions, the medieval monarchy possessed a sacred and quasi-sacerdotal character which it never entirely lost until the end of the old regime at the close of the eighteenth century.

This religious conception of the State and the royal office found its most complete expression in the Carolingian Empire, which had so vast an influence on the subsequent development of medieval culture. The Carolingian Empire was the most complete political expression of these unitary and universalist tendencies of which we have spoken. It was regarded by Charlemagne and his successors and their ecclesiastical advisers not merely as a Frankish imperial State, nor even as the revival of the Roman Empire in the West, but as the political organ and counterpart of the Catholic Church. In the words of Charlemagne's letter to Leo III, the emperor is "the representative of God who has to protect and govern all the members of God"; he is Lord and Father, King and Priest, Leader and Guide of all Christians....

Under such conditions the distinction between Church and State tended to become blurred and effaced. The Church was a State Church and the State was a Church State, membership of the latter involved membership of the former and the personnel of government was practically the same. Moreover, this state of things was not peculiar to the Empire. Similar conditions obtained in Anglo-Saxon England and in Capetian France. In both the principal advisers and ministers of the king were churchmen. In England bishops and abbots sat along with secular magnates in the Witan and the shirecourt and enacted secular and ecclesiastical laws jointly with them, while in France the king owned much of his influence to his control of bishoprics and his position as lay abbot of some of the richest and most important monasteries.

Thus the Carolingian or unitary conception of the relations between Church and State tended at once towards the secularization of the former and the clericalization of the latter. Bishops and abbots became great secular magnates who administered justice in their own courts and led their "own" solitary into battle, and at the same time the Church became involved in the feudal development of society so the ecclesiastical benefices and offices were treated in the same way as lay fiefs and were used by princes to endow their relatives and followers.

## *"Feudalism" Strayer*

1) Describe in depth Strayer's three major characteristics of Feudalism:

a.

b.

c.

2) Why is military service rendered? Is it because of loyalty?

3) How do you secure the services of a knight?

## *"Church and State" Dawson*

1) What is the dual role of the medieval king?

2) What does it mean for the Medieval Leader to be "Lord and Father, King and Priest, Leader and Guide of all Christians?"

3) Discuss this quote, the "unitary conception of the relations between Church and State tended at once towards the secularization of the former and the clericalization of the latter."