

his society, became more and more explicit. At the height of the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "The obligation of observing justice is indeed perpetual. But the determination of those things that are just, according to human or divine institution, must needs be different, according to the different states of mankind. . . . Laws are laid down for human acts dealing with singular and contingent matters which have infinite variations. To make a rule fit every case is impossible."

If circumstances altered cases, could the state justly exercise unlimited power over the individual? The Christian answer was a resounding "No!" Thomas insisted: "Man is not ordained to the body politic according to all that he is and has." The objection to totalitarian control developed by the Greeks and furthered in Stoic and Christian thought, was now made even stronger:

Here we have the first clear and explicit challenge to totalitarianism. Although by nature part of civil society, the individual person is not to be swallowed up whole in society or state. On the contrary, by virtue of certain aspects of his being — what Kierkegaard was later to call his "God-relationship" — man as such is elevated above political society and the social order. It is man's ordina-

tion to the divine that thus raises him above everything social and political that would totally engulf him. Who denies this, denies both God and man.¹

Medieval Society

While the philosophers and theologians were making more and more specific the moral limitations surrounding the exercise of power, medieval society as a whole was also making its contribution. After the Roman Empire had collapsed in the West, society had become highly decentralized in character and had fragmented power through the institution of feudalism. All attempts to discover a unity of power within society had been discarded, since ultimate authority was felt to rest only in God. Medieval society functioned largely through semi-autonomous religious orders and independent towns and cities.

What early forms of national governments existed in the Middle Ages found their purse strings tightly controlled by semirepresentative legislatures, especially in France, England, and Spain. In practice, these bodies, representative of the social strata of the times, exercised tremendous power because they could and occasionally did withhold all finan-

¹ Will Herberg, "Christian Faith and Totalitarian Rule," *Modern Age* (Winter 1966-67), p. 67.

cial support from centralized administration when they chose to do so. Power remained diffused over a widely decentralized fabric of public, semiprivate, and private institutions, all limited by a moral order above both man and the state, a moral order placing its premium upon individual conscience.

This is not to suggest that abuses of power still did not occur. The point is, rather, that medieval man had succeeded in setting up two barriers to the exercise of unlimited power: (1) The recognition that the exercise of excessive power was in itself an immoral act; and (2) The discovery in practice that power was more safely exercised when fragmented and decentralized through a variety of separate institutions.

Machiavelli

With the Renaissance, a new view of politics, man, and power came on the scene. Machiavelli completely dismissed the idea of any superior power providing a moral order in political life. As Francis Bacon described Machiavelli's politics, the Renaissance Italian concerned himself with "what men do instead of what they ought to do." From the time of Plato and Aristotle through the time of St. Thomas Aquinas, the central question had been the legit-

imate purpose and exercise of power. Power, to the extent that it was to be used at all, was to be used only in the achievement of some higher end such as justice or freedom. But with Machiavelli, for the first time, power became an end in itself. Power was thus separated from any ethical or metaphysical limitation and the state became independent of any other value system.

It was never Machiavelli's intention to further immorality or encourage the destruction of values, but his *amorality* was based on the assumption that the acquisition of power was *an end unto itself*, having priority over ethical considerations. Once power becomes an end in itself, success in political affairs is measured by the acquisition and expansion of power, rather than by its wise use or moral limitation. In Lord Acton's phrase: "Machiavelli released government from the restraint of law. . . ."

Like other realists after him Machiavelli identifies all too readily naked power politics with the whole of political reality, and he thus fails to grasp that ideas and ideals, if properly mobilized, can become potent facts, even decisive weapons, in the struggle for political survival. History is a vast graveyard filled with the corpses of self-styled "realists" like Napoleon, William II, Hitler, and