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DIVINE RIGHTS THEORY OF STATE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Divine Right Theory of State, a theocratic concept that legitimizes monarchical authority is heavenly contrived. Engrained in religious doctrine and historical practice, the theory stated that political rulers are chosen by God and are accountable only to Him. Drawing on Christian and Islamic texts, as well as scholarly interpretations, this paper examines the historical context and core principles of the theory. Lack of accountability, promoting despotism/ tyranny, lack of empirical facts and historical inadequacies are some of the identified criticisms of the theory. The paper concluded with the relevance and challenges of the divine right theory in contemporary political thought.

Keywords: Authority, Divine right theory, Monarchy, Monarchy, Obedience, Religion

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INTRODUCTION

The debacle of all state come to being and how government was formed constitute a major point of interest for political thinkers in the field of politics. This attempt constitute what will now be known as theories of state. These are set of theories seeking to explain how modern state came into existence. So many theories and theorists attempted an explanation of this phenomenon the most prominent of which are; social contract theory, ideal state theory, force theory, organic theory and divine rights (theocratic) theory. It is however noteworthy to say that while the formation of the earth and settlement of the early humans and community that accompanied it represents a great topic of discussion in anthropological, historical and religious studies. The theory of state focus more on how state; that is an entity with definite territory, government, sovereignty, population and international recognition emerge.

Divine right theory is a theory of state advancing a theocratic system of government according to a sacred doctrines, theocracy is a Greek word consisting of two words “theos” meaning God and “krateo” meaning ruling (El Khayat, Ibrahim, & Mansor, 2022: 1701). The essence of monarchy to this theory was that it is divine and supreme in power, authority, and status. All subjects, whether clergymen, nobles, or ordinary citizens, were subservient to his sovereignty. The king claimed to be a little god over his domain, and he articulated his understanding of the nature of monarchy (Greenhaw, 2022: 1). By nature, men are not born free, and as a result, are obligated to obey the

kings/monarchs absolutely without questioning, due to the arbitrary power and the divine right bestowed upon the kings (Olanipekun, 2022: 27).

Unlike democracy that is man-made and attempt to provide opportunity for attainment and preservation of legal rights, it has been argued that the rights to life is exclusively divine rights. Mousavi (2023: 31) noted that the right to life is entirely a Divine right and not a human right that is, only God has the (moral/legal/religious) authority to decree and issue the laws surrounding all aspect of the society including leadership. As Burgess (1992: 844) puts it, God has bestowed a heavenly contrived, unquestionable authority in the Crown. So therefore, political authority in general is ordained by God (Mull, 2018: 606).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

James I a central proponent of Divine Right, famously declared to his Lords and Commons at Whitehall on 21 March 1609/10; “The State of Monarch is the supremest thing upon earth: For Kings are not only God’s Lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God’s throne, but even by GOD himself they are called Gods.” (Burgess 1992: 837). Since divine right ultimately conflicted with the ancient laws and customs of the English government, James’s theory provoked newfound interpretations of the political and judicial authority of the ruler. From a plethora of political treatises, religious sermons, and parliamentary records, these interpretations ultimately affected how governmental institutions, such as Parliament and the courts, interacted with the monarchy. Parliamentarians became more submissive to the king's will, the

importance of constitutional law was diminished, and political theories grew more in favor of divine right (Greenhaw, 2022: 1).

Sir Robert Filmer in his book “Patricia, or the Natural Power of Kings” which he authored in 1680 noted that power belongs to God and gives whoever he wishes. He stated that “To majesty or sovereignty belongeth an absolute power not subject to any law”. Kings derives their authority from God political power is like a father rule over a family.

The theory put forward assertions in defense of the holy character of kingship, by the argument that kingship is in consonance with human's nature and with the natural constitution of society -that is, with human nature as formed by the architect of the universe (Willoughby, 1897: 159). The divine right scholars backed their assertion with proves from the holy books. Biblical scriptures attested to this in Roman 13 verse 1 and 2;

1. “Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God.

2. Therefore, whoever resists authority opposes what God has appointed, and those who oppose it will bring judgment upon themselves.” (Bible, Roman 13: 1 & 2).

Similarly, Quran Chapter 4, verse 59 also corroborates this assertion; “Believers! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger, and those from among you who are invested with authority; and then if you were to dispute among yourselves about anything refer it to Allah and the

Messenger if you indeed believe in Allah and the Last Day; that is better and more commendable in the end.” (Quran, 4: 59).

CORE PRINCIPLES

Divine right theory is premised on the notion that since God created heaven and earth and he will not come down from heaven to administer to preside over affairs of the earth by himself he has vested power in his representative who are kings to preside and exercise power on his behalf. Uche (2019: 29) observed that the State was established by an order of God; and its rulers/leaders are heavenly chosen, hence are not accountable to any authority but God. According to Zolfaghari (2022: 65), God is the significant cradle of religious legitimacy and politics; it therefore means that legitimacy is established and signed by the heavenly lawmaker. God, who is the maker of all things, had a system of constituted leadership and authority.

Obedience to the king is considered obedience to God and disobedience to the king is disobedience to God. The theorist believe that even when a leader is despotic, he is accountable to God and the people should still ensure compliance while they hope and pray for better days ahead. Uche (2019: 40) summited that the word of the Leader (King) stands unquestionable. He is not answerable to any man but God who it was believed was the one who chose him for the leadership. As King James I stated that when a king is harsh to the people God must have sent him as a punishment for their sins and complaining might only add to the punishment, true solution lies in the act of continuously obeying and

steadfastness in praying to God to soften his heart.

Mull (2018: 608) identified four key principles of the divine right theory;

“(1) that ‘monarchy is a divinely ordained institution’ over and above other forms of government;

(2) that the hereditary rights of the royal lineage are divinely ordained and cannot be challenged;

(3) that ‘kings are accountable to God alone’ and not bound by human laws or political institutions;

(4) that citizens are never to actively resist their sovereign, even if the sovereign commands what is contrary to natural or divine law.”

Monarchy according to the theory is a divinely ordained institution, hereditary right therefore is indefeasible. Kings are accountable to God alone. Non-resistance and passive obedience are enjoined by God (Mayer, 2019: 10).

The theory enjoins piety, honesty, sincerity and other ethical values in the selection process of the king to ensure that their choice represents the true reflection of God’s will and not the corrupt choice of any man or group.

SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCES ACROSS THE GLOBE

Despite the fact that Divine Rights Theory is widely questioned in modern political systems, it is noteworthy to state that, it has traditionally played a part in steadying monarchies and instituting centralized authority in different regions, particularly in Europe and parts of Asia. One of the most cited successful examples is the rule of King Louis XIV, known as the *Sun King* in France. His reign (1643–1715) was profoundly

imbedded in the divine right ideology. He famously declared, *"L'État, c'est moi" (I am the State)*, venting the conviction that his authority came directly from God (Beik, 2005: 197). The theory allowed him to concentrate power and maintain order in a politically fragmented France, leading to significant cultural, economic, and military growth.

Also, the Byzantine Empire functioned under a model which is regarded as "Caesaropapism," where the emperor was perceived as God's representative on Earth. The emperor's religious legitimacy ensured unity in diversity among the numerous ethnic and religious interests for a period of iron (Haldon, 2024: 141). In primitive Japan, the Emperor was seen as a divine figure and a direct descended from the Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu (Durd & Kilic, 2025: 322). Despite the fact that subsequent Emperors have their political power lessen, the divine role of the Emperor was instrumental in maintaining national identity and centralized governance until the Meiji Restoration.

Indeed, one of the most persistent and noticeable examples of Divine Rights Theory in the modern world is the Saudi Arabia, where the King draws its right to rule in both ancestral and theocratic foundation. The Al Saud family which is ruling family governs by combining Wahhabi Islamic principles and monarchical rule. The King plays the dual role of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques (religious role of protector of Islam's holiest sites) on one hand and the supreme political authority on the other (Alhussain, 2023: 145). While one can argue that this is not unequivocally depicting the Western concept of divine

right, the system however comes close to it. The Saudi Kingdom has remained stable politically, economically influential and culturally dominant which can be hugely attributed to its perceived divine mandate and control over religious institutions.

CRITICISM OF THE THEORY

The theory was criticized to have advanced a form of rule that lacks accountability and transparency. El Khayat, Ibrahim, & Mansor (2022: 1705) noted that with the theory of divine right, the authority of governance is absolute. It is forbidden for peoples to question the tyrannical ruler, because he works according to divine providence.

It is said to be undemocratic as it lacks salient features of democracy which democratic scholars believe are necessary ingredients for growth and development in any given state. The assertions which form the bedrock of the theory have been pinpointed to be based on facts which are not empirical. Equally, the account which the study gives about events are said to be laden in historical inaccuracy. As Olanipekun (2022: 42) summed it up, divine right theory lacks rational/logical justification, it erroneously assumed that everyone believes in creationism and thereby exaggerating the natural power of kings.

The theory struggles with liberal notions as it does not believe that all men are born equal and have level playing ground to compete for opportunities based on their intellect. Political authority for the theory is not based on the consent of the governed.

Mayer (2019: 10) noted that the divine right of kings was never a consensual

constitutional theory, even during the late medieval ages. It was more akin to a set of various propositions, which evolved through troubled ages and whose aim was to provide some sort of stability from a legal and political point of view.

CONCLUSION

The Divine Rights Theory of the State offers a profoundly theological and monarch-centric lens to political authority, anchored on the belief that rulers are chosen and ordained by God to govern on His behalf. The emergence of the theory was at a period when religious institutions and monarchies were closely interweaved, and it provided a strong ideological device for legitimizing absolute monarchy. By arguing that kings were answerable only to God and not to the ruled, the theory discouraged resistance and promoted passive obedience, regardless of whether the ruler was just or tyrannical.

Historically, the theory found its strongest expression in the early modern period, particularly in the works of thinkers like James I of England and Sir Robert Filmer, who argued that monarchical authority mirrored divine order and paternal hierarchy. This alignment with religious doctrine was reinforced through scriptural references such as Romans 13:1-2 in the Bible and Quran 4:59, which emphasize obedience to authority as a form of religious duty. In this way, divine right not only shaped political structures but also influenced the moral and spiritual behavior of citizens.

However, the theory has faced significant criticism over time. Critics argue that it enables authoritarianism, suppresses

political dissent, and removes accountability from leadership. The notion that rulers cannot be questioned or held responsible by the people undermines the very principles of justice, transparency, and democratic participation. In modern political thought, where the legitimacy of government is often based on the consent of the governed and the protection of human rights, the Divine Right Theory appears outdated and incompatible with contemporary values. Its dismissal of individual freedom, equality, and popular sovereignty makes it an unsuitable model for modern states that prioritize liberal democratic governance.

Despite its limitations, the Divine Rights Theory played a crucial role in the evolution of political thought. It reflects a stage in human history where religion and governance were inseparable, and where power was seen as divinely ordained rather than socially constructed. Even today, remnants of this theory can be observed in theocratic states or monarchies that invoke religious legitimacy, though they are often moderated by constitutional frameworks or public accountability mechanisms.

In conclusion, while the Divine Rights Theory of State may no longer serve as a practical guide for governance in the modern world, its historical significance and influence on political structures, religious ideology, and philosophical discourse remain undeniable. Understanding this theory is essential for comprehending how ideas of power, authority, and legitimacy have evolved and for recognizing the dangers of unchecked power cloaked in divine justification. It also serves as a cautionary

tale about the fusion of absolute authority with religious doctrine, reminding contemporary societies of the importance of balancing spiritual values with democratic principles and human rights.

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