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European History: 1648-1848
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November 16th, 2005

Vindiciae contra Tyrannos: Duplessis-Mornay

Philippe Duplessis-Mornay, or “Pope of the Huguenots” as he was called by his colleagues, wrote many religious writings, the most famous of which was called *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos: A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants (1579)* (Harrie, 502). Although some argue whether or not he wrote this significant work, there has been no irrefutable evidence that would exclude him from having done so. It would be in this document that he would articulate his views on God’s law over the king’s law as well as the attributes of tyranny and the responses thereto. To gain a better glimpse of the meaning and purpose of this pivotal writing in “resistance theory,” one must first gather the appropriate contextual background concerning the author in question (Kishlansky, ed; 18).



Philippe Duplessis-Mornay was born in 1549, a time of severe religious turmoil. Religious fanaticism had spread throughout Europe as a result of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Church’s response to it. He was raised to become a man of the French nobility, and most importantly, a devout Huguenot. Huguenots were the protestants of French heritage and apparently did not extend physical affection (*hug-u(e)-not*). He frequently insisted on referring to the protestant belief system as the “true religion” (Smither, 637). However, to save his fellow Huguenots from total destruction, he did eventually contend for religious tolerance. Although this preceded the *Defense of Liberty*, Duplessis-Mornay later argued for “irenicism” under various common religions of the past, particularly the Hermetic religion (Harrie, 503). The Hermetic religion allows the Protestant and Catholic religions to reconcile their differences based

upon the importance of religious sacraments. He also used pre-Socratic writings, the Old Testament, Platonic works, and Egyptian beliefs to assert his belief of one God for all (Harrie, 506). He became the political advisor of Henry of Navarre, a prince in line for the throne, from 1573 until 1586, when he fought in the French Civil Wars (1562-1598). He then returned to advise the new king of France, Henry IV, until the king proclaimed his conversion to Catholicism (Kishlansky, ed; 18).

Duplessis-Mornay seemed to be writing this work for more than his Huguenot brothers. His message even reached beyond the borders of France. Citing Aquinas's ideas of human, divine, and natural law in this work, Philippe's message, like Aquinas's, was intended to apply to every nation under God. One must concede, however, that this writing could have little bearing on those nations that did not use monarchy as their form of rule. His discussion only pertained to the nature of kings and tyrants. Also, Philippe's religious standard was the Bible, of which he quoted extensively. Therefore, one could conclude that those who do not use the Bible as their standard of faith may ignore this writing. As a result of these two factors, this document may have only had an effect upon his fellow Huguenots.

In *A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants*, Duplessis-Mornay brought forth a number of questions that were pertinent to the political climate at the time and answered them in an exhaustible fashion. The first question brought forth was whether subjects should obey a king's orders that go contrary to the precepts of God. Although he felt this was an established principle to "obey God rather than men," he was compelled to remind his countrymen because of the uncertainty of his present time. He stated that "nothing is so sacred that it could not be violated, during the vices of our times" (Duplessis-Mornay, 19). He concluded that indeed it was a sin to obey the king if the orders were contrary to the law of God. His second question concerned the

armed resistance to the king's law that was divergent to God's law. He concluded that it was the magistrates duty to pick up arms if need be. If the magistrates did so, then the individuals could fight with them. If the nobles did not choose to fight, then the citizenry must either move to another city or "forsake their lives, rather than God" (Duplessis-Mornay, 20).

The third question could really be typified as the exception to the previous question. What if this king was destroying the nation? Duplessis-Mornay then defined the difference between a king and a tyrant. A king, among other things, was created and supported by the people. Philippe stated that even though "free election had vanished in certain regions, kings are not fully established until they are constituted by the people" (Duplessis-Mornay, 21). Tyranny, then, came in two ways: the individual illegitimately gained governing power, or the proper ruler abused the power by "violating the laws in which he had bound himself by oath" (Duplessis-Mornay, 21). Philippe concluded that because this tyrant violated man's natural law (liberty) and the community's civil law (criminal laws), the commonwealth was free to fight to overcome this persecution. Duplessis-Mornay ended his thoughts with a warning concerning those tyrants who were legitimate. One must be cautious, because rulers were human and incapable of perfection. However, if the prince did show that he cared not for justice, promises, and piety, he could be deemed a tyrant and thereby be overthrown (Duplessis-Mornay, 23).

This document was written for a two-fold reason. The first element was to remind his fellow man that God should rule the lives of men and not the laws of princes. The second dealt with the political situation of the times. Religious turmoil had clouded men's minds and rebellious acts were being executed. Duplessis-Mornay wanted his fellow Huguenots to know where God had drawn the line with respect to rebellion and obligations to pick up arms and fight. This was written during the French Civil Wars, a bloody clash between the Huguenots and the

Catholic Habsburgs of Spain. His people needed legitimacy for their actions, for the present situation and for future circumstances one would be sure Philippe was expecting.

The *Defense* was written in prose. It could be grouped with documents of philosophy, theology, or most aptly political theory. With most political documents the question is raised, “Who should rule?” The *Defense* answers this question implicitly and exhaustibly; implicitly because it refers to only a monarchical rule, exhaustibly because it articulates who should not rule as well. A prince or king has legitimacy; a tyrant does not.

Philippe assumed that his readers were using the same standard of religious authority, the Bible. He quoted the Bible numerous times; his main argument for doing God’s will in conflict with man’s will was located in these quotations. He also made assumptions about the knowledge base of those reading his work. One must be familiar with Thomas Aquinas’s *Treatise on Law* to understand that tyranny was evident when a ruler “violated human and divine law” (Duplessis-Mornay, 21). Human law encouraged peace and protection to the good and punishment to the wicked. Tyranny infringing upon divine law simply meant that a tyrant did not allow any type of spiritual rule to hinder his actions upon the persecution of the commonwealth.

Despite the assumptions made by Duplessis-Mornay, one could easily believe that this document had a significant affect upon those who were reading it. Looking at the historical context, one may conclude that the Edict of Nantes (1598) was a direct result of Henry IV’s interpretation and apprehension to Philippe’s writings. To prevent a rebellion, religious toleration was an approach that allowed the king some breathing room. The fact that the principles of this document are still valid today strengthens the notion of its believability.

The *Defense* is a fine example of the results one can attain when using the Bible as a starting point. With this starting point, Philippe was able to incorporate historical precedent and his favorite philosopher to produce a time-less document.

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