CHAPTER 16

William of Ockham’s Ecclesiology and Political Thought*

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William of Ockham (c. 1285–1347) is widely known as a giant of late medieval scholasticism who radically undermined scholastic theology by virtue of his nominalism. Born in the village of Ockham, Surrey, Ockham was a Franciscan theologian and philosopher who taught mainly at Oxford.1 His literary activities are bifurcated in two periods, before and after 1324, when he was summoned to the Avignon papacy. Before 1324, Ockham’s writings include nothing of a political nature.2 His works then were theological and logical, represented by the Summa on Logic and the Commentaries on Peter Lombard’s Sentences. However, after the sojourn in Avignon in 1324–1328, he never wrote anything purely academic. After departing from Avignon with a few Franciscan comrades, including Michael of Cesena, the minister general of the Franciscan order, and Bonagratia of Bergamo, a Franciscan canonist, Ockham wrote a series of anti-papal polemical works in Munich. What we deem his works on ecclesiology and political thought are all the product of his time in exile.

Why did Ockham leave Avignon in 1328? Much ink has been spilt on this biographical question yet no definitive answer has been given.3 However, one thing is certain: in Avignon Ockham was subjected to inquisition as his academic views were suspected of heresy.4 This personal misfortune, however, did

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1 Léon Baudry, Guillaume d’Occam: sa vie, ses oeuvres, ses idées sociales et politiques (Paris, 1949); Jürgen Miethke, Ockhams Weg zur Sozialphilosophie (Berlin, 1969); and V. Leppin, Wilhelm von Ockham: Gelehrter, Streiter, Bettelmönch (Darmstadt, 2003).
4 The latest account of this is Andrew E. Larsen, The School of Heretics: Academic Condemnation at the University of Oxford, 1277–1409 (Leiden, 2011), ch. 5.
not have a direct impact on his later polemical career. What is noteworthy, however, is that Ockham's stay in Avignon corresponds chronologically to the bitter conflict between the papacy and the Franciscan order over the orthodoxy of the Franciscan ideal of evangelical poverty. Pope John XXII declared that the Franciscan idea of poverty was heretical; thus, Michael of Cesena requested Ockham, who happened to be in Avignon, to scrutinize the papal bulls attacking Franciscan poverty. Upon inspection of the bulls, Ockham stated:

In these [bulls] I found a great many things that were heretical, erroneous, silly, ridiculous, fantastic, insane, and defamatory, contrary and likewise plainly adverse to orthodox faith, good morals, natural reason, certain experience, and fraternal charity.

This discovery determined the course of the rest of his life. In the same letter Ockham also stated:

Against the errors of this pseudo-pope [i.e., John XXII], 'I have set my face like the hard rock,' so that neither lies nor slurs nor persecution of whatever sort (that does not physically touch my person), nor multitude, however great, of those who believe or favour or even defend him will ever at any time be able to prevent me from attacking and refuting his errors as long as I have hand, pen, parchment and ink.

Ockham never suspended his attack on the papacy, but continued it for two decades, until he died in Munich, in exile.

These circumstances eloquently show that Ockham's anti-papal polemical activity was motivated by the perception that the papacy of his time had fallen into heresy. Ockham was far from an armchair theorist; his first polemical work was intended to respond to actual issues within the Church surrounding the Franciscan ideal of evangelical poverty. From this, it also follows that Ockham did not conceptualize his ecclesiological and political thought as an abstract system; he was responding to specific issues. Thus, it is historically questionable

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7 Ockham, 'Epistola ad Fratres Minores', 15.