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Political Relations of the University of Paris, 1200-1450

Nathan Parmeter¹

Introduction

After the Western Roman Empire disintegrated, intellectualism and education dramatically declined in Western Europe as disorder, decay and instability took hold.² Emerging out of the chaos came a revival of urban areas and trade, which in turn led to a renewed interest in academia and scholarly work.³ In the long-run, this newly-found interest in education and academia precipitated the rise of the universities, which were considered the pinnacle of Medieval education and learning as the idea and structure of the university became unique to Western Europe during this period.⁴ One of the most significant universities from this era was the University of Paris, which was founded in the mid-12th Century and like other universities, became a corporation created through a charter.⁵ Over time, the institutional rules that allowed the University of Paris to remain independent as a corporate entity created special political relations between the university corporation, inside factions within the university, the Catholic Church and state authorities. Early on, the power of the university to decide its own regulations and rules produced factions within the university to vie for that power, while years later, the university created special political relations with state authorities to advance its interests in contemporary French politics.

Background and History of the Medieval University

During the early half of the Medieval Period, education and academia in Western Europe underwent several major changes as the region declined and then rebounded to economic and social stability. For several hundred years after the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 472 A.D., the intellectual sphere in Western Europe collapsed as chaos, urban decline and frequent migrations and invasions became the norm.⁶ During that time, scholarly work and education were the jobs of transmitters at rural monastery schools, who spread ideas of intellectualism and classical works to upcoming cohorts of students.⁷ In the 900s and 1000s, cathedral schools emerged as newer centers of intellectualism and education, with different schools focusing on

¹ The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

² Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their Religious, Institutional, and Intellectual Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18-19.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵ Marcia Colish, *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400-1400* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 267.

⁶ Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their Religious, Institutional, and Intellectual Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18-19.

⁷ Marcia Colish, *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400-1400* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 54-55.

specific areas of study depending on the composition of its masters.⁸ Building on the cathedral and monastery schools came the university, many of which also had direct or indirect links to the Catholic Church.⁹ These universities emerged at a time when stability was reemerging and urban centers were becoming vibrant once again, allowing for academic culture and education to flourish as it had in Classical times.¹⁰

From its inception, a variety of rules that went into medieval universities such as the University of Paris would influence its political relations with secular and religious authorities. Like with other medieval universities, the University of Paris was not founded on one single date but rather came into being as a consortium of church-educated masters and students with sub-corporations and colleges to provide services to its members.¹¹ Many of the masters and students who founded and entered universities were educated at church-affiliated educational institutions, and as such many gave their indirect influences from the church into the university corporation through their educational background.¹² Simultaneously, many members of the various faculties began advocating for the separation of religion from the university even though many were religious clerics themselves.¹³ The final factor precipitating conflict within the University of Paris was one of the underlying rules of a university guild, which is the fact that the university had a broad amount of jurisdiction over certain internal affairs, privileges to its members and the ability to set their own standards and rules.¹⁴ Political relations between the university, internal factions (like the mendicants) and outside parties were influenced by the structure of the university's rules that governed it as the freedom of the university to set its own rules and regulations caused power struggles for that power. On the other hand, the same rules would also allow it to build friendly relationships with outside actors and institutions, (Such as secular state authorities) even coming to the point of influencing the national political situation of the era.

Intra-University Conflict in the 1200s-1300s

The major period of conflict between the University of Paris, the church and various

⁸ Ibid., 164.

⁹ Ibid., 265-266.

¹⁰ Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their Religious, Institutional, and Intellectual Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 33-34.

¹¹ Marcia Colish, *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400-1400* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 267.

¹² Ibid., 265-266.

¹³ Laurance Brockliss, "Review: Corporatism, Church and State: The University of Paris, c. 1200-1968." *Oxford Review of Education*, 23 (1997): 220, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1050849>.

¹⁴ Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their Religious, Institutional, and Intellectual Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 36.

factions within the university began during the 1250s and lasted discontinuously until the 1290s.¹⁵ In 1254 A.D, the first of the several conflicts during the century broke out, which was caused by an influx of mendicant masters into the theological faculty and their subsequent majority in the faculty.¹⁶ This alone could have given the mendicants (Comprising the Franciscan and Dominican orders) a large voice in university policy, made worse by the increasing number of houses of study.¹⁷ However, the Dominicans within the faculty were not pleased with the changes occurring, even though the Franciscan masters accepted the change in status quo.¹⁸ Upon an appeal to the pope, many of the privileges of the mendicants were revoked, the university was returned to the city of Paris and the two orders were disciplined.¹⁹ The conflict then continued for several years, leading to a propaganda campaign by both orders against each other and against the seculars in the university.²⁰ Two years after starting, a compromise deal was reached, which allowed the Dominican friars to continue working under the university corporation but also reiterated the power of the university over its members.²¹ Overall, the conflict between the mendicants and the secular faculties as well as between the different mendicant orders clearly show the strained and troubled relationship between the University of Paris, the church and factions within the university during this time. The political relations between the church and the university in this case can be seen through the intervention of the church in the conflict and its disciplinary measures against the competing factions. In addition to showing the relationship between the church and the university, it can be determined that the cause of the conflict wasn't necessarily the grievances between the parties involved; the rules and structure of the university also played a role. More specifically, the fact that the university was meant to be independent and have jurisdiction over its rules and legal matters allowed for the two sides to vie for that power to influence the university corporation and its rules to their liking. In any case, the compromise that ended the first secular-mendicant conflict during the 1200s would be temporary, and it would not be long before tensions would rise again.

While the earlier compromise and resolution of the 1250s conflict led to a period of peace within the university and with the ecclesiastical authorities, the conflict was sure to strike again, and it happened a decade later in 1267 A.D.²² This new conflict involved mendicant friars and their relations with the local bishops and opposition leaders such as Gerard d'Abbeville.²³ However, unlike the earlier conflict between the mendicants and seculars a decade

¹⁵ Decima Douie. *The Conflict between the Seculars and the Mendicants at the University of Paris in the Thirteenth Century*(London: Blackfriars Productions, 1954), 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁷ Ibid., 6-7

¹⁸ Ibid., 6-7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 8-12.

²¹ Ibid., 13.

²² Decima Douie. *The Conflict between the Seculars and the Mendicants at the University of Paris in the Thirteenth Century* (London: Blackfriars Productions, 1954), 16.

²³ Ibid., 16-17.

before, this new conflict was triggered by a university sermon on January 1, 1269 when d'Abbeville gave a university sermon denouncing Franciscan ideas of poverty and rejection of materialism.²⁴ This would be followed by the “Contra Adversarium Perfectionis Christainae” which attacked the Franciscans, their doctrine and their views on society.²⁵ The conflict then escalated once again between the Mendicants and Seculars within the university, with each side using propaganda and literature once again to spread their side of the issue.²⁶ In the long-run a series of conventions such as the Council of Lyons were held to resolve the issue and settle on a compromise point, although reaching such a point was difficult and by the early 1280s, the conflict was ongoing.²⁷ Eventually, the disputes began to calm down by 1290 as the Catholic Church took the position of the seculars on their side of the dispute, which weakened the Mendicant friars and their position in the university.²⁸ Despite a later compromise negotiated by Boniface VIII which ended the Mendicant-Secular conflict within the University of Paris, the force used on behalf of the pope towards the university and bishops gave rise to the Gallican movement.²⁹ The fact that the conflict reignited over the same issue a decade later despite an earlier compromise is significant because it shows the consistently strained relations between the university, its members and the church due to the rules established as part of the university. This in turn can be linked to the 1254 and 1267 secular-mendicant conflicts within the university, showing how different factions tried to use the university’s rules to their advantage in order to further their own goals and how outside political actors sought to influence the situation. But the very same rules that caused conflict among factions within the university and with ecclesiastical officials would also allow for close relations between the university and secular authorities later in the Middle Ages.

The University and Secular French Politics

While relations with ecclesiastical authorities and the ecclesiastical state were often tense due to the permeation of Christianity into the University of Paris and the different factions within the university who sought to control its affairs, relations with secular state authorities were much more peaceful, and in some cases even cooperative. Prior to the 1350s, the university did not become entangled with domestic political affairs, possibly a result of the secular-religious conflict that occurred during the previous century.³⁰ However, this trend began changing during the late 1300s and early 1400s when France was in the middle of a conflict between the

²⁴ Ibid., 17.

²⁵ Ibid., 17-18.

²⁶ Decima Douie. *The Conflict between the Seculars and the Mendicants at the University of Paris in the Thirteenth Century* (London: Blackfriars Productions, 1954), 19-22.

²⁷ Ibid., 25-26.

²⁸ Ibid., 28-30.

²⁹ Ibid., 30.

³⁰ Charles Gross, “The Political Influence of the University of Paris in the Middle Ages.” *The American Historical Review*, 6 (1901): 440, doi: 10.2307/1833509.

Burgundians and Armagnacs under Charles VI.³¹ If anything, the university soon became very involved in state affairs, usually aligning itself with the Burgundians on their side of the conflict.³² Meanwhile, the university began to push for political change at home and with external enemies such as England.³³ Overall, the university's influence in politics was due to the rise of Charles VI and the related social and political turmoil that existed in the era.³⁴ It can seem surprising the university, which had previously remained "Politically" neutral, was now taking sides in the contemporary political realm. The reason for this change was not just due to the contemporary political atmosphere but to one of the most fundamental elements of the university; its independence and various privileges assigned to it for being a university. Such rules that were built into the university gave it a sense of strength in the political realm, and with free discussion of political issues allowed within the university corporation, this gave the university the power and will to enter and even take stances on secular politics.³⁵ This is significant because the same rules that allowed for conflict between different factions within the university (As mentioned previously with the Mendicants and Seculars) also allowed for cooperation and even direct influence on secular politics. However, the major difference between the two is that both situations were influenced by the contemporary political realm during the 13th and 15th centuries, which had changed drastically in the time since the university's founding.

Conclusion

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church was the primary institution promoting the establishment of educational institutions in Europe, with the most prominent example being the university, meant to prepare and educate students for high-level occupations. While most universities were founded directly or indirectly by the church, its officials or those educated at other religious institutions, almost all were granted exclusive privileges, independence and jurisdiction over certain legal matters, although this did not mean that the universities were free from political influence. The University of Paris is a prominent example of a university that was not free from political conflict or influence, and has been that the case since its founding in the thirteenth century.³⁶ By looking specifically at several cases of the university and its relations with religious and secular politics during the Medieval Period, it can be concluded that the university was an important aspect to various groups who sought to take control of it to further their own goals (Such as the Mendicants).³⁷ The political aspects and relations of the University of Paris would not end with the Medieval Period; between the fifteenth century and French

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 441-442.

³⁴ Ibid., 445.

³⁵ Ibid., 443-444.

³⁶ Laurance Brockliss, "Review: Corporatism, Church and State: The University of Paris, c. 1200-1968." Oxford Review of Education, 23 (1997): 219-200, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1050849>.

³⁷ Ibid., 220.

Revolution; the university would increase its political relations with the secular state, even to the point of being given close scrutiny by the French monarchs.³⁸ Regardless of the political relations the university had with secular and ecclesiastical authorities, the university's basic fundamental rule of being sovereign and independent in certain legal aspects was the basis for its political relations with secular and religious authorities in addition to conflict between internal factions.

³⁸ Laurance Brockliss, "Review: Corporatism, Church and State: The University of Paris, c. 1200-1968." *Oxford Review of Education*, 23 (1997): 217-220, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1050849>

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