

The Question of Uncertainty in Late Medieval Political Thought

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This paper analyses the strategies adopted to address political uncertainty by several major late medieval political thinkers. It focuses on: 1) Thomas Aquinas' treatment of whether, and when, it is appropriate to overthrow a tyrant; 2) Marsilius of Padua's conception of peace as a precarious and fragile condition that must be defended daily amid the relative insecurity that characterises every human society; 3) John Wyclif's doctrine of grace-based dominium and his ecclesiology, which require seeking stable points of reference by which to formulate valid assessments about who holds genuine lordship and the composition of the true church; and 4) John Fortescue's analysis of the economic impact of different forms of government, grounded in the conviction that people's economic security is better protected in a «political and royal» constitutional regime – that is, a temperate monarchy.

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1. The political dimension of an age of uncertainty

The aim of this paper is to examine a few examples of how the theme of uncertainty is addressed by some of the most important late medieval political thinkers, and to explore the strategies they adopted to cope with elements of uncertainty in an age largely dominated by it. This makes it all the more interesting to analyse which aspects of community life medieval political theory regarded as most problematic; and how it proposed to address them most effectively – starting from a core set of fixed points intended to reduce the margins of uncertainty as much as possible.

To this end, the following pages will examine four prominent figures in late medieval political philosophy, each of whom emblematically represents a distinct type of uncertainty that medieval thought had to confront:

- political and constitutional (Thomas Aquinas);
- anthropological and social (Marsilius of Padua);
- political and ecclesiastical (John Wyclif);
- economic and financial (John Fortescue).