The Feast of Christ the King calls to mind the authority of Jesus Christ over the kingdoms of men. But since we live in an age that has rejected both monarchical models of government and the religious orientation of the state, much of the rich symbolism of this truth has become incomprehensible in the age of democracy. In this article we shall begin to remedy this by conducting a brief survey of coronation rites of East and West during the first millennium to see how God's rulership was invoked as a model for the earthly reign of Christian kings.

Byzantine Coronation Rites

Let us begin in the East. Distinctively Christian coronation rites in Byzantium date from the 5th century. The first emperor crowned by the Patriarch of Constantinople was Marcian in 450, although the coronation ceremony seems to have been relatively simple. By the time of Leo II (473) the ceremony had evolved to include liturgical prayers. At the coronation of Anastasius in 490 the prayers of the Patriarch and presentation of the Gospels were prominent. The Patriarch then administered an oral and written oath to the emperor-elect, making him swear that he would "keep the faith entire and introduce no novelty into the Church."[1] The coronation began to reflect the Christian sensibility that the monarch was, in some sense, a protector of the Church tasked with promoting the reign of Christ.

The first emperor crowned inside a church was the usurper Phokas, in 602. This was likely a propaganda device by Phokas, who as a usurper was desperate to project legitimacy. By that time the entire imperial coronation ceremony assumed a formal and religious character. These coronation liturgies compared anointed emperors to biblical kings and their Christian subjects to the new Israel. Associations with King David were especially prominent. Upon Heraclius's victory over the Persians in 628, a set of magnificent silver plates were commissioned depicting the triumphs of King David and associating them with the reign of Heraclius. Called the "David Plates", this set of seven engraved plates shows David as a Byzantine nobleman and the Philistines as Persians. The emperor's victories are God's victories.

By the seventh century, coronation rituals were no longer mere transfers of political office but divine ordinations—no longer the proclamation of a *de facto* ruler, but the creation of a *de jure* monarch. In some ways the Byzantine emperor was viewed as a type of ecclesiastic—of what sort, nobody could say. This was reflected in the rite of investing the emperor-elect with a *mandyas*, or cope, as well as the emperor's apparent exercise of the function of a minor order in the Eucharistic liturgy that followed.[2]

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Western Coronation Rites

Moving to the West, it was here that the practice of anointing a king with oil appeared. This likely began in Visigothic Spain, seemingly in imitation of King Solomon's coronation in the Old Testament (Solomon's coronation would be a favored theme in medieval coronations in the West). The unction was performed by the Bishop of Toledo or another high-ranking ecclesiastic after the king had made a profession of faith. The best-preserved transcript of a Visigothic coronation comes from the coronation of King Wamba in 672. The unction soon became the central focus of the western ceremonial, in contrast to the eastern emphasis on the crowning with the diadem.[3]

The coronation orders of Anglo-Saxon England provide a telling insight into the evolution of the kingly image. The earliest Anglo-Saxon coronation rite was called the Egbertine Order, associated with Archbishop Egbert of York (732-766). The king was anointed with oil from a horn while the antiphon *Unexerunt Salomonem* ("Thus they anointed Solomon") was sung. A staff was presented to the king, with allusions to the bringing of the olive branch to the ark by the dove — but more importantly, to the selection of Aaron as High Priest over Israel when God made his rod blossom. Thus, the biblical figures of Solomon (the archetypal king) and Aaron (the archetypal priest) were combined in the coronation of the king.[4]

Another example of the sacerdotal imagery in the Egbertine Order came when the king was presented with three naked swords, one with the tip cut off.[5] The first two corresponded to the swords of temporal and religious power, representing the king's promises to govern justly and defend the Church. The third was the sword of mercy, cut short to symbolize that the monarch's justice should be tempered with clemency.[6]

The Coronation of Edgar of Wessex

Two centuries later, Edgar of Wessex was crowned and anointed in 973 in an elaborate ceremony at Bath, presided over by the great saints Dunstan of Canterbury and Oswald of York. Thankfully a detailed account of the ceremonial has survived, which we shall consider at length.[7] The coronation took place on Whitsunday when Edgar was 30 years old — incidentally, the canonical age at which a man might be consecrated bishop. All notables of the kingdom were invited to the ritual, held during Pentecost, so

> "… that the most reverent bishops might bless, anoint, [and] consecrate him, by Christ's leave, from whom and by whom the blessed unction of highest blessing and holy religion has proceeded."

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The implied meaning of the text is that the king will be God's chosen — his elect, upon whom God's favor will rest.

As the ceremony began, Edgar was led into the church by the two bishops to the singing of the choir. The king prostrated himself before the altar and laid aside his crown (which he already wore). St Dunstan began the singing of the *Te Deum* (the account says he was moved to tears by the king's piety). When the *Te Deum* was completed, the king was raised by the archbishop and swore the coronation oath. The king swore "that the Church of God and all his Christian people shall keep true peace under our rule at all times; that I shall forbid thefts and every iniquity of every grade of man; that I shall ordain justice and mercy in all judgments, that the kindly and merciful God may grant to me and to you His mercy."

Next came invocations of blessing upon King Edgar. These prayers are interesting, as they intentionally drew parallels between Edgar and the biblical heroes he was expected to imitate. The blessing upon "your servant Edgar, whom we have chosen with suppliant devotion for royal authority over Angles and Saxons" petitioned God for the faithfulness of Abraham, meekness of Moses, bravery of Joshua, humility of David, and the wisdom of Solomon, "to help to nourish, instruct, fortify and build up the church of his kingdom and all the people committed to him." After this, St. Dunstan anointed Edgar in the Name of Jesus Christ while the choir chanted the antiphon "Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet."[8]

While prayers continued, the king was presented with a ring and sword, symbols of his royal authority. Then he was crowned, and a scepter and staff were placed in his hands with another solemn blessing. The peers of the realm there gathered then made an act of allegiance, after which the king was acclaimed "*vivat rex, vivat rex, vivat rex in aeternum*."

The king was now considered crowned, and all that remained was for the archbishop to remind him of the lofty station he now held. St. Dunstan delivered a pious oration:

> "Stand and grasp your royal status, which you have held till now at your father's designation, delegated to you by hereditary right on the authority of almighty God and by the present agency of ourselves, God's bishops, and other servants; and the nearer you see the clergy standing to the holy altars, the stronger the honor you should remember to give them…so that the Mediator of God and men may confirm you on the throne of this kingdom as mediator of clergy and people, and make you reign with Him in the eternal kingdom — Jesus Christ, to wit, Our Lord…"

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Then followed the coronation of the queen and the conclusion of the ceremonies with a solemn Mass.

The most striking passage of the rite was the concluding prayer, in which Christ's own mediatorship was compared to that of the king. Christ, "Mediator of God and men" was invoked to confirm Edgar "as mediator of clergy and people." Did this mean Edgar was mediator *between* God and his subjects, or did it merely indicate Edgar was to mediate *among* his subjects on God's behalf? Given the parallel the rite makes with Christ's own mediatorship, it would not be amiss to say the rite envisioned the king himself as a sort of special intermediary with God on behalf of his people. Such was the coronation of King Edgar in a rite which was used almost unchanged until the Norman era, elements of which survived even into the coronation of Charles III in 2022.

The Carolingian Era

The coronation liturgies of the Carolingian era were also rich with theocratic imagery. The Carolingians viewed their royal authority as divinely sanctioned. From the time the dynasty assumed power, coronation was done by the pope.[9] The emperor-elect was crowned in Rome, took a coronation oath after kissing the pope's foot, and swore fealty to the reigning pope before receiving an unction performed by the Bishop of Ostia.[10] The rituals were bathed in sacral imagery from the Old Testament; Pope Stephen compared Pepin II to Moses and David.[11]

Pepin's son Charlemagne was crowned by Pope Leo III in 800 as *Imperator Romanorum*. When the crown was placed on his head, the clergy cried out "pious Augustus, crowned by God!"[12] Other royal coronation ceremonies merely invoked God's blessing on the king, but Charlemagne's coronation depicts him as selected by God directly, crowned by the pope with a title that set him apart from other kings.

Conclusion

The invocation of biblical images of kingship in Christian coronation rites would continue into the second millennium, becoming more elaborate and richer in symbols of divine kingship. Catholics viewed the temporal and spiritual powers as mutually reinforcing: the Church's spiritual work was made possible by the peace maintained by the monarch—and the monarch ruled by God's grace to extend Christ's reign. Incidentally, if you'd like further study on Christian symbolism in medieval monarchy, I encourage you to get a copy of my book *Power from on High: Theocratic Kingship from Constantine to the Reformation* (Cruachan Hill Press, 2021) which explores these concepts in much greater depth.

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[1] Herbert Thurston, “Coronation,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, ed. Charles G. Herbermann (Robert Appleton Co.: New York, 1908), p. 382

[2] Ibid.

[3] The legend is that a miraculous vapor arose from the head of the king after he was anointed with oil, which those present took as a supernatural portent (ibid.).

[4] Ibid., p. 383.

[5] This may be a take on the popular “Two Swords” theory of the later Middle Ages.

[6] The king took three oaths as he was presented with the three swords. After each oath, the people present responded with a hearty “Amen.” The oaths corresponded to rule of the state, defense of the Church, and extension of mercy, as the swords symbolized. “First, that the Church of God and all Christian folk should keep true peace at all times. Amen. The second is that he should forbid all robbery and all unrighteous things to all orders. Amen. The third is that he should enjoin in all his dooms justice and mercy, that the gracious and merciful God, of His everlasting mercy, may show pardon to us all. Amen.” (Ibid.)

[7] The following details of King Edgar’s coronation are found in Christopher Brooke, *The Saxon and Norman Kings* (Barnes and Noble Books: New York, 1963), p. 44-46.

[8] The same antiphon was used throughout English history, later in English instead of Latin. In 1727 Handel composed an orchestral rendition of the antiphon for the coronation of King George II that has been used in British coronations ever since.

[9] Pepin II was crowned twice, once by St. Boniface (751) and once by Pope Stephen I (754).

[10] Thurston, *op. cit.*, p. 385.

[11] Courtney Bowers, “Pepin, Power, and the Papacy: The True First Holy Roman Emperor,” *The Histories,* Vol. 4, Issue 2 (2019), p. 17.

[12] Matthias Becher, *Charlemagne*, trans. David S. Bachrach (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT., 2003), p. 7.

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