

History & Civilization - Global Governance - Tor Vergata

Religion and Politics in the 20th Century

Jacopo Cellini (EUI), 12 May 2025

Religion and politics after the French revolution

- The French revolution (1789) played a pivotal role in shaping a new discourse and imaginary concerning the political sphere: creation of a **political space**, autonomous from religion.
- Replacing religion as source of identity and legitimation of power: the cult of Reason. French revolutionaries created a **political religion**: a system of beliefs and rituals built around a political ideology.
- Long-lasting consequence of the French revolution: birth of a **civic (or civil) religion**. The concept of civic religion concerns the implicit religious values of a nation, as they are expressed through public rituals, symbols and ceremonies.



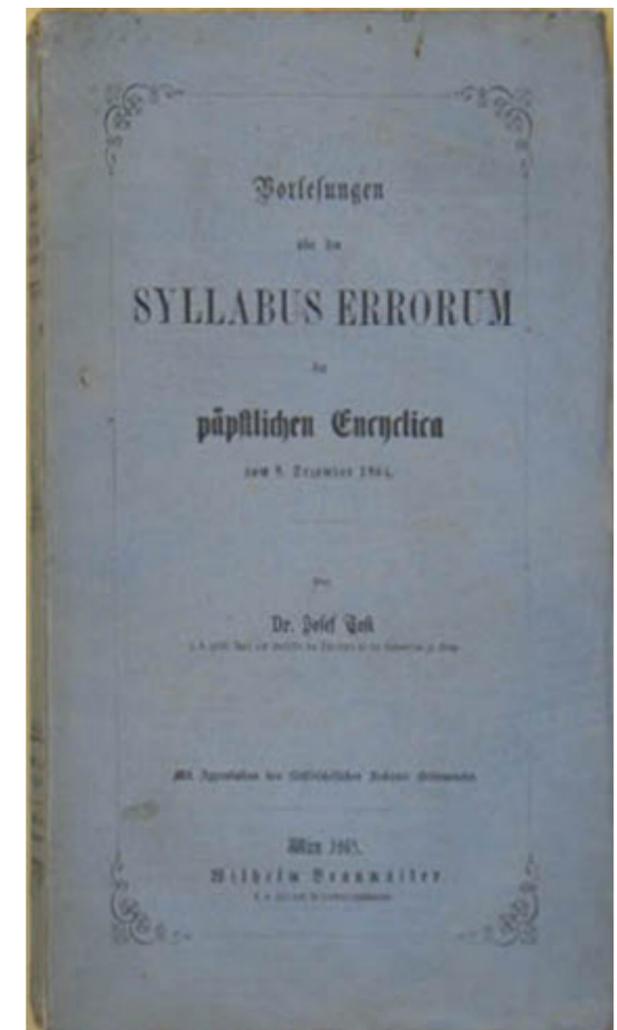
Temple of Reason, Ivry-la-Bataille (France)

Church vs modernity

- Reaction of the Church: modernity disrupted a model that had worked for centuries, based on the primacy of the spiritual power over the secular one. The proposed solution to restore the balance was to go back to the **idealized model of Christendom**. The reconciliation of the Church with modern culture is a very recent development (1960s).
- Quote from *Syllabus of modern errors*, 1864 (pope Pius IX):

X. ERRORS HAVING REFERENCE TO MODERN LIBERALISM

80. The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization.



Church vs nationalism - Theory and practice

- Distinction between ‘**thesis**’ and ‘**hypothesis**’: while in principle the Church opposed political modernity, including the idea of nation, in practice it allowed for **compromises**, in order not to lose all the opportunities to influence the evolution of societies.
- What does it mean as regards the relation with Nation-States? In practice, the Church came to terms with the idea of nation and nationalism, underlying the role of Catholicism as a factor of **social cohesion** that could reinforce the love of country.
- The contribution to stability and order within the State was usually offered in exchange for the protection of the **rights of Catholics**, and **privileges for the Church** (Concordats: formal agreements with states).

Pius XI, Encyclical Ubi arcano (1922)

“Patriotism - the stimulus of so many virtues and of so many noble acts of heroism when kept within the bounds of the law of Christ - becomes merely an occasion, an added incentive to grave injustice when true love of country is debased to the condition of an extreme nationalism, when we forget that all men are our brothers and members of the same great human family, that other nations have an equal right with us both to life and to prosperity, that it is never lawful nor even wise, to dissociate morality from the affairs of practical life, that, in the last analysis, it is "justice which exalteth a nation: but sin maketh nations miserable." (Proverbs xiv, 34)”

Catholicism and nationalism - The First World War

- Catholic on both sides
- Neutrality of the Holy See
- Peace campaign of pope Benedict XV: [1917 note to the heads of the belligerent peoples](#)
- Mix between Catholicism and nationalism: prayers for the war, cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Politicization of religion: cults and religious symbols acquire definite political meaning

Reading: Renato Moro, *Religion and Politics in the Time of Secularisation: The Sacralisation of Politics and Politicisation of Religion*

Fascism as political religion

- Totalitarianism as **political religion**: the **sacralization of politics**.
- Fascism constructed its own system of beliefs, myths and rituals, centred on the **sacralization of the state**.
- In 1922 Mussolini wrote that fascism was a “belief which has reached the level of religion”.
- The **First World War** was the ‘origin story’ of the Fascist movement. Quote from journal *Il Fascio*, 1921: «The Holy Communion of the war has moulded us all with the same mettle of generous sacrifice».
- The definition of **Fascism as a political religion** became the foundation of Fascist culture and was repeated at all levels of the hierarchy, and in all elements of propaganda: Catechism of the Fascist religion (1938), consolidation of **rites** and **ceremonies** based on a religious model.

Fascist rituals



Mussolini
at
Palazzo
Venezia
in Rome



Ceremony of leva fascista



School of Fascist Mysticism

Quote from *Critica Fascista*, 1931

“[the organization of the fascist state] in some way mirrors some of the more important characteristics of Roman Catholic organization: a power which combines and unifies the activities of its members, which transmits its character to them, which transforms its own aims into the highest aims of their own lives in society, and which does not tolerate attempts at schisms or civil heresies.”

Church and Fascism

- **Competition** (clash between Fascism and religious authorities, especially at local level).
- **Pragmatism**: the consolidation of power in Italy was difficult without the support of the Church. Mussolini abandoned his early anti-religious rhetoric, and worked for a conciliation between the State and the Church.
- The official reconciliation between the Church and the Italian State took place officially on **11 February 1929**, when Mussolini and the Church's Secretary of State signed the so-called **Lateran Pacts**.
- Article 1 of the Treaty defined the Catholic religion as the **official religion of the State**. The Church had other benefits, i.e. the recognition by the State of the validity of the Catholic marriage, the right to religious education and important economic benefits.
- The Church recognized the **legitimacy** of the Fascist government, and agreed to support it.

Fascism and Catholic culture/1

- Conception of family
- Support to hierarchical structure
- **Myth of Rome**

“The Fascist State expresses the will to exercise power and to command. Here the Roman tradition is embodied in a conception of strength. Imperial power, as understood by the Fascist doctrine, is not only territorial, or military, or commercial; it is also spiritual and ethical. [...] Fascism sees in the imperialistic spirit - i.e. in the tendency of nations to expand - a manifestation of their vitality. [...] The Fascist doctrine is that best suited to the tendencies and feelings of a people which, like the Italian, after lying fallow during centuries of foreign servitude, are now reasserting itself in the world.”

(Mussolini, The doctrine of Fascism, 1932)

Fascism and Catholic culture/2

- Myth of Rome in the Catholic culture:
 - ‘Primacy’ (the genetic link with Catholicism qualified Italy to lead the other Nations along the path towards civilization)
 - Idea of mission

Conclusion: religion and politics were interconnected in the age of totalitarianism and mass politics: the concepts of **politicization of religion**, **political religion** and **sacralization of politics** help us to understand this relationship.

Reading Materials

Required

Emilio Gentile (1990), *Fascism as Political Religion*. In: *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25/2-3, 229-251

Suggested

Renato Moro, (2005) *Religion and Politics in the Time of Secularisation: The Sacralisation of Politics and Politicisation of Religion*. In: *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6/1, 71–86

(uploaded on DIDA)

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