

Religion and Politics in the Time of Secularisation: The Sacralisation of Politics and Politicisation of Religion

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ABSTRACT *The main purpose of this article is to suggest a few brief reflections on the relationship between religion and politics in the time of secularisation, from the point of view offered by the sacralisation of politics. I will start by drawing three examples from the history of contemporary Catholicism which show such a strong connection between religion and politics that they seem to present serious problems of interpretation. I will try, then, to demonstrate that at least some of these problems can be solved with the help of the analysis of political religions. If we identify, in fact, the sacralisation of politics as one of the products of secularisation, it is easier to look at another parallel development of the contemporary age: the politicisation of religion. And the two processes have important mutual relations. I will conclude by trying to show that many of the forms assumed by the politicisation of religion can be better understood taking into account the new point of view offered by recent research on civil and political religions.*

Three Examples

A first example. The devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which originated with the revelations to Marguerite Marie Alacoque at Paray le Monial, started in seventeenth-century France as an act of inner piety, devoted to the union of the faithful with Christ's sufferings in atonement for the sins of the world.¹ In the nineteenth century, however, this devotion was closely linked with a conservative and counter-revolutionary attitude.² The Royalist and Catholic army of Vandée turned the heart, surmounted by a cross, into the symbol of its fidelity to traditional order.³ A Tyrolese assembly established in 1796 to celebrate solemnly the feast of the Sacred Heart *zum Schutze und zu Rettung des Vaterlandes*.⁴ In the period of the Restoration and of the Bourgeois revolutions, an intransigent Catholic culture abandoned its nostalgia for a Catholic monarchy and proclaimed the need to return to a form of political power directed and controlled by ecclesiastical authority, as it was deemed to be the case in the Christian Middle Ages. The old Carolingian hymn *Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat* had been proposed again by Joseph de Maistre in his *Considérations sur la France* of 1796 as the synthesis of the counter-revolutionary mission of modern France.⁵ In this

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way, the cult of the Sacred Heart, more than a symbol of monarchical absolutism, became a symbol of the return to a hierocratic society, submitted to ecclesiastical directives. It stressed the 'social royalty' of Christ, the existence of a real Kingdom of Christ in modern society, as well as the necessity of Christian politics and the need of building 'Christianity' again.⁶

In 1870–71, after the defeat of France in the war against Prussia and after the dramatic events of the Paris Commune – and therefore during a civil war and under the eyes of the enemy – two Catholic middle-class men, engaged in the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul, opened a subscription in Paris for erecting a national temple to the Sacred Heart in atonement for the sins of the country. The archbishop of Paris, Joseph-Hyppolite Guibert, suggested a location with a relevant symbolic significance, the hill of Montmartre: it dominated the city, it was the place of the martyrdom of Saint Denis and, above all, it was the site where the Communards executed the generals Lecomte and Thomas. A Catholic movement was created to implement the project. The Association for the *Voeu national* devoted itself to building a basilica which would have raised to the sky the monumental sign of the country's repentance for the crimes and errors that attracted God's punishment on it. This Catholic association asserted that the fault of which France was guilty was its estrangement from the Church. As well as being a sign of collective penitence, the new basilica would represent a supplication for the country's spiritual and secular regeneration. In 1873 the majority of the National Assembly declared that the building of a church on the summit of the hill of Montmartre, consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Christ, was an event of 'public interest'. The Assembly also agreed to the proposal of a national consecration to the Sacred Heart, although with energetic protests from Republicans and supporters of the laity. The construction work lasted more than 30 years, from 1876 to 1914. *Gallia poenitens et devota* was the inscription put on the front of the building. The façade was garrisoned by two huge statues of Saint Joan of Arc and Saint Louis the King, and the interior of the basilica was derived from the model of pilgrimage churches, decorated with mosaic works. In the choir vault, Luc Olivier Merson portrayed the devotion of France, of its kings, of its saints, to the Sacred Heart.⁷ The consecration of France to the Sacred Heart was the expression of a Catholic nationalism that linked the country's greatness to the struggle against revolutionary secularisation. The building of the *Sacré-Coeur* church seemed an affirmation of the fact that the holders of civil authority in France, regardless of the way in which they had been appointed, drew their powers from God and had to act conformingly to ecclesiastical instructions.

For these Catholics, the omission of a formal recognition of God and of an explicit acknowledgment of his rights over the state and the nation was an act of impiety or atheism. Their aspiration for a public reaffirmation of the Kingdom of God on society took the form of a solemn and public consecration to the Sacred Heart. In March 1874, a year before being assassinated, the president of Ecuador, Gabriel García Moreno, consecrated his country to the Sacred Heart. When a scapular of the Sacred Heart was found on his corpse, García Moreno's figure became a model and a martyr.⁸ In 1899 Pope Leo XIII, in the encyclical *Annum sacrum*, wrote that the new century would open a second Constantinian age under the new banner of the Sacred Heart. Many devotional writings began to propose the Sacred Heart as the 'new labarum' of Constantine, the sign with which it would be possible to defeat the paganism that had conquered modern society again.⁹

During the First World War the cult of the Sacred Heart acquired nationalistic features, as a guarantee of sure victory for both sides involved in the conflict. In 1914 the Emperor of Austria, Franz Joseph, consecrated his person and his dynasty to the Sacred Heart in order to defeat the enemies of his country.¹⁰ During the war a movement to affix the symbol of the Sacred Heart on the national flag arose in France. In March 1917 a solemn ceremony consecrating Entente nations to the Sacred Heart took place at Paray le Monial.¹¹ After the war, on 30 May 1919, the King of Spain, Alphonso XIII, in front of a monumental statue of the Sacred Heart recently erected on the Cerro de los Angeles near Madrid – a statue on which was carved ‘I reign over Spain’ – repeated aloud a solemn act of consecration of his country to the Heart of Jesus.¹² In Belgium there was also a consecration of the country to the Sacred Heart showing the same willingness to unite state, nation and Catholic religion.¹³ Something of this tradition still exists today. In 1996 the mayor of the French city of Toulon, elected in the list of the National Front, recited, together with his Cabinet, a prayer of consecration to the Sacred Heart at the end of Mass.¹⁴

A second example. Let us consider now another central element of Catholic religiousness in the contemporary age: the Catholic Action. Pope Pius XI defined it as ‘the collaboration of laymen to the hierarchic apostolate of the Church’.¹⁵ But Catholic Action sometimes acquired a different, political meaning. In September 1948, a few months after the extraordinary Catholic victory at the political elections, the youth organisation of Italian Catholic Action invaded Rome. Thousands of ‘green berets’ – as young Catholics were called by virtue of the hats they wore – celebrated the eightieth anniversary of the Society of Catholic Youth with musical, theatrical and folk shows, bicycle races, football matches, gymnastic competitions, art and handicraft exhibitions. Singing ‘*Bianco Padre*’ (‘White Father’), ‘*Noi vogliam Dio*’ (‘We want God’) and ‘*Bianco fiore*’ (‘White flower’), Catholic Youth showed its numerical strength and its full national citizenship. The meeting had two crucial moments. A strong display of national character was given through homage to the tomb of the unknown soldier, when 10,000 Italian tricolours were wrapped around the monument to Victor Emanuel II (‘a stunning sight’, a newspaper wrote). The standards of the associations of Trieste, Pola and Fiume – cities Italy risked losing after the war – were then handed over to the President of the organisation, Carlo Carretto. National identity, praise of youth (as a metaphor of the eternal Spring of the Church and, at the same time, of the visible reality of ‘una nuova Giovane Italia’, a ‘New Young Italy’) and fidelity to the Pope mingled together. At night, nine processions of torches (‘a sea of flames’, the press wrote again) arrived at Saint Peter’s Square. Three hundred thousand young people sang the *Credo* together with hundreds thousands of Romans (about half a million people). President Carretto made his speech before a large deputation of the Italian government headed by Prime Minister Alcide de Gasperi, and 50 delegations of Catholic foreign associations. Irritating de Gasperi, Carretto addressed himself to the men who were in the government ‘only because the Christian soul of Italy’ had sent them there and reproached them for following the ‘liberal middle-class economy’, an economy ‘imbued with “terrestrialism”’; the ‘economy of the devil’. Carretto, therefore, asked them not to disappoint Catholics and adopt a ‘Christian economy’. Uniforms, singing of hymns, the occupation of a city, military organising of parades, aggressiveness of slogans, praise of youth: many aspects were similar to Fascist gatherings. A liberal observer noticed that, in Italy, a politically organised Catholicism, equipped with modern techniques of mobilisation, had appeared.¹⁶

A third and last example. Rome, 1951. A new church which I had the opportunity to visit opened in the city suburbs, located in a working-class and lower-middle-class neighbourhood. It was consecrated to Saint Leo I, the Pope who defeated Attila; Leo the Great. The architecture is reminiscent of the ancient paleo-Christian basilicas and, in fact, above the apse a large mosaic sparkles. Its style, however, is very different from those in Santa Maria Maggiore, San Paolo or San Giovanni in Laterano; it is, on the contrary, very close to many monumental mosaics of the Fascist age, like those by Mario Sironi. The mosaic shows the Pope stopping Attila, the barbarian, at the threshold of the Holy City. As in every paleo-Christian basilica, there is also a triumphal arch decorated with a mosaic work. In the upper part some words stand out: 'ACTIO CATHOLICA PRAESIDIUM ECCLESIAE ET PATRIAE'. At the centre, a bridge with Christ's monogram is represented with four large arcades, under which four rivers (the Gospels) flow. On the left, separated by the writing 'ECCLESIA', a woman is reading a text before four figures that represent the Evangelists. On the right, separated by the writing 'FAMILIA', a mother and a father nurse a newborn child in homely scenery. In the lower part of the arch, on the left, with the word 'LABOUR', a male figure is carrying a basket of stones on his shoulders and has a trowel in his hands, while in the background a city with walls and arches is visible. On the right, with the word 'PATRIA', a turreted female figure in front of a tower is bringing bread in her right hand; in the left, a sword. At the bottom, the mosaic closes with some words by Pope Pius XII: 'Keep always alive in your mind and in your heart the ideal not only of defence but of conquest'. The symbolism is clear. The Church desires social triumph: its domain includes not only family, but also labour and nation. The mosaics of Saint Leo's Church declare that no distinction has to be made between private and public life, between beliefs and socio-political behaviour: both belong to the Church. They also affirm that only Roman Catholicism, viewed via the Papacy, can stop barbarism (that is, communism) and defend civilisation. The Catholic militia, with its ideal of conquest, is a key to the presence of the Church in society and has a national task.

Problems of Explication

I think that it is easy to identify in these examples some of the fundamental aspects of the way in which the Catholic Church has acted during a time of secularisation, at least before the Second Vatican Council. The social and political sphere prevails. A Christianity of militancy and mobilisation predominates. This image of Catholicism is perhaps different from the one we have before our eyes today. At the beginning of the second millennium the Church offered an essentially spiritual and charitable image, identified itself with evangelism and human promotion – both key words of contemporary Catholicism – while Catholic associations are manifold and differentiated, formed by largely self-governing volunteer-based groups. It is difficult, however, to deny that the image also found in monuments and mass gatherings has characterised the relationship between Church and society throughout long periods in the contemporary world.

One could say that phenomena like the *Sacré-Coeur*, the 'green berets' or Saint Leo's parish in Rome are very simple to explain. At our disposal is a classic interpretation: events like these would be mere manifestations of clericalism, or, if you prefer, of Catholic integralism and fundamentalism. They would represent only the Catholic answer to laicism. This is basically true, at least in part. It is clear, however, that an explanation of religious manifestations – like those we examined

– in terms of a simple, far from moderate reaction to laicism reveals several shortcomings.

Much research has been devoted to the birth of counter-revolutionary Catholic thought and of intransigent Catholicism, as well as to the mentality in which both of them are rooted.¹⁷ These analyses generally insist on the authoritarian and anti-modern hardening of Catholic attitudes, its preoccupation with the reducing its role as an ecclesiastical institution, and its attempt to reorganise Catholicism against hostile forces deployed by the modern world. This approach to 'Catholic intransigence' looks at the object of its study from a point of view paying little attention to its religious dimension: it analyses the relationship between public powers and confessional institutions, between states and churches; it observes law and politics; and it does not consider what is specifically religious (that is, faith with all its consequences in life and in the behaviour of believers). These studies, in other words, forget that at the root of 'intransigence' resides a deep religious need. Catholics discover a risk for their faith in the process of secularising political and social structures which begins with the liberal revolutions. This process seemed to question the legitimacy of a positive religion, based on a public revelation of divine origin, preserved and guaranteed by the authority of the Church and, with it, the collective, popular dimension of the faith. Thus Catholics also struggle against secularisation to defend the autonomy of the ecclesial community and religious action.¹⁸

To sum up, an approach dominated by the relationship between lay states and the Church does not go to the core of the religious dimension: it can perhaps explain the birth of Catholic movements and parties; it can interpret their actions; but it cannot ever explain the ways, the forms in which, they express themselves.

Myths, rites and symbols of power have pressingly come into the central domain of historians of the contemporary age. It is obvious that not every time we encounter symbols or rites are we in the field of political religions. Hopefully no one will dispute, however, that myths, symbols, rites and monuments as typical as the ones we have examined here, are in some way connected with the world of the sacralisation of politics. Nevertheless, seldom has research on the sacralisation of politics been considered a point of departure for the study of Church history in the contemporary world. For example, in defining the problem of nineteenth-century political religions proposed by a scholar as important as Karl Dietrich Bracher (a very clear-headed and persuasive definition indeed), the bases of the new phenomenon are identified in the reduction of the religious sphere, and in the birth of individual and lay faiths outside institutional Churches.¹⁹ So the connection between secularisation and the sacralisation of politics has been often found without examining the transformation of the religious dimension in the proper sense (that is, the transformations of traditional faiths and Churches). Clearly this is not incorrect. But we could also point out that, by following this approach, we run the risk of completely forgetting one side of the coin: the *politicisation of the sacred*.

The Sacralisation of Politics and Politicisation of the Sacred

The scientific study of religion is particularly complicated by the same complexity of its object, 'a protean cultural "reality"', whose elusive outline – as has been observed²⁰ – is always mirrored in different, non-religious realities (social, psychological, anthropological ones). As for the relationship between religion and

politics in the time of secularisation, this is an even more confused and complicated matter: the modern condition of secularisation as a process which turns religion into a private fact and politics into an autonomous sphere is completely new, without any possibility of comparison with the past.²¹ Borders between the two dimensions of politics and religion do not always appear well-defined. We need to understand their connection more clearly. And we should do this not only in the direction from religion to politics, as is normally done, but in the one from politics to religion. We especially need to understand better the political role that Christian churches, and in particular the Catholic Church, gave to specific aspects of their inner life as the religious observances (cult, piety, spirituality) that involve the very meaning of their presence in society.

Scholars of the Middle Ages and of Modern History are inured to the politicisation of the sacred. In feudal societies, as in the society of the *ancien régime*, the organic connection between religion and power clearly brings out this issue. Thus the religious nature of the rites of power, as well as the political nature of religious ones, have been for some time subjects of inquiry in these domains. On the contrary, we have a much less focused picture of what has happened in the age of secularisation. Hardly ever does the historiography of saints and cults, which so flourishes among medievalists and modernists, cross the border into the history of the last two centuries. Generally speaking, studies on the Catholic Church in the contemporary age have moved in two different and often completely separate directions: on the one hand, research on the politics of Catholics, on Catholic political movements and parties, on their action and thoughts; and on the other hand, studying the forms of piety and religious culture, examined in themselves and, if anything, scrutinised as important premises underpinning political action. If historians have looked at the politicisation of religion in contemporary history, they have normally done so by exploring those political regimes (such as Spanish Francoism, but also, in part, Italian Fascism) that have exploited religious themes and institutions. Thus, the issue of the politicisation of the sacred in contemporary Catholicism has found only few and pioneering analyses.

Marina Caffiero, for example, has documented that the canonisation of Benoît-Joseph Labre (the *causa* started between 1792 and 1796, reached beatification in 1860, with the proclamation of sainthood in December 1881) became an instrument of the Church's struggle against modern rationalist culture, inaugurating a new form of reaction – not simply a passive one – to the secularisation processes while announcing a growing politicisation of contemporary Catholicism.²² Claude Langlois illustrated the nationalising significance of the Catholic project by erecting a colossal statue of the Virgin, *Notre-Dame de France*, at Puy-en-Velay in 1860.²³ David Blackbourn has studied the events following the days in July 1876, when three young girls claimed to have sighted the Virgin Mary in the fields outside the German town of Marpingen, transforming it, for a while, into 'the German Lourdes', or 'the Bethlehem of Germany'. In the atmosphere of the 1870s, a very heavy atmosphere for German Catholics, even the miracle, reveals a subtle interplay between politics and religion with parliamentary debates and a dramatic trials.²⁴ Especially in the twentieth century a 'Marian maximalism' will see in the apparitions of the Virgin the last bulwark of a Christianity besieged by modernity.²⁵ Various studies have been devoted to the way in which French Catholics regained possession of the cult of Saint Joan of Arc at the end of the nineteenth century, giving it a definite nationalistic value.²⁶ We already examined the studies devoted to the cult of the Sacred Heart. Émile Poulat has shown that

even the struggle against heresy, like the case of *integral* Catholicism and modernism, may transform itself into an anti-democratic and anti-socialist struggle.²⁷ Fulvio De Giorgi has traced the development of a military language in the Catholic mobilisation over the 1920s and 1930s, and has discovered that a very old tradition acquired new life under the pressure of lay religions within the nation.²⁸ Maria Paiano has seen a connection between the 'liturgical movement', which largely spread in the Catholic world from the beginning of the twentieth century to the second Vatican Council, and the politico-religious plans for a 'Christian reconquest' of contemporary society. In addition, the growing adherence of Catholic youth organisations to liturgical spirituality in the years between the two world wars was stimulated by the confrontation with political and social movements (socialists, communists, nationalists, fascists) which addressed themselves to the masses in the name of lay religions, and used true forms of secularised liturgy as a means of propaganda.²⁹ In the case of Franco's regime, Giuliana Di Febo's research has described the fusion of the secular baroque religious tradition of cults, rites and symbols promoted by the Church in order to fascinate the faithful through rituals, emotionality, and grandeur (the devotion to the *Virgen del Pilar*, the cult of Teresa D'Avila as *La Santa de la Raza*, the rites of sacralisation of the kings of Spain) with a modern political liturgy, in a common patriotic-military-religious representation.³⁰ I have for some years been studying Catholic prejudice against those who believe in a different faith, such as Jews and Protestants. This prejudice has a strong religious specificity, and comes from an old and definite theological and doctrinal tradition. At the same time, it is undeniable that, in the new situation marked out by secularisation and hostile political religions, prejudice against Jews and Protestants does not depend any longer upon pastoral issues, but has a political significance connected to social questions and the nationalisation of masses.³¹ All these researches, however, do not seem to have had any lasting influence, so far, on the course of studies on contemporary Catholicism, at least in Europe.

Yet it is not difficult to see that the Catholic answer to secularisation and to the sacralisation of politics is the *politicisation of religion*. As a consequence of an unexpected turning point in history, cults and religious symbols acquire definite political meanings. In a well-known commentary, the Italian Communist leader and intellectual Antonio Gramsci outlined the problem for Catholicism, after the French and Liberal Revolutions, of becoming a *part*, from the *whole* it was.³² Emile Poulat has suggested the need to look at the transformation of nineteenth-century Catholicism as at the development of a *tertium genus* in the political conflict between the middle classes and the proletariat, which persisted for more than a hundred years.³³ Perhaps this view of Catholicism as a third political protagonist in the history of contemporary Europe is too radical, and in the end exaggerated; but there is no doubt that Poulat's idea puts the matter in its own terms. The formation of political organisations of a para-religious kind, as Catholic parties are, is typical of modernity. As another subtle historian of the Church, the British historian Owen Chadwick, has pointed out, there is a moment in history in which even 'God' and 'anti-God' become political slogans.³⁴ In many European countries after the 1870s, deciding whether to go to Mass on Sunday was not only an act of individual belief, but of political and ideological membership.³⁵ The identity of the Catholic also changes: the model of Catholic patronage is progressively abandoned and a new figure of the Catholic militant emerges, imbued with a stronger fighting spirit, with the pride of his faith and the determination to

defend his beliefs, with an inclination to conquest more than to defence.³⁶ An instrument for first organising associations, mass institutions then become fundamental for the Church as well. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – the centuries of ideologies, of political myths, of *Weltanschauungen* that promise redemption for man and society – Catholicism built new ideological premises. Catholic intransigence spoke to heart as well as head. The myth of medieval Christianity, regarded as a kind of ‘Golden Age’, with the direct subordination of civil authority to Rome and with a Pope seen not only as the head of the ecclesiastical institution but as the supreme moral and spiritual ruler of peoples, gave a new explanation of past and present, while justifying political action.³⁷ In past times the faithful hardly knew the name of the reigning Pope; in the nineteenth century not only was this name well-known, but it stirred up love and devotion, it gave rise to a particular myth: Rome is the centre of Catholicism, and from Rome the movement regenerating human society must start.³⁸ As popular novels like *Fabiola* (1854), by a converted Englishman, the cardinal Nicholas Patrick Wiseman, and *Quo vadis?* (1896), by the future Nobel Laureate Henryk Sienkiewicz, show, Christian Rome, the Rome of martyrs and catacombs, became a myth which could compete with the myth of Imperial Rome. The Church, in the struggle against Idealism, Historicism, Liberalism, Positivism and Marxism, chose for the first time an official philosophy, Thomism.³⁹ With the pontificate of Leo XIII the idea and the practice of a ‘social doctrine’ (that is, a corpus of teachings officially proposed by the Church and that constitutes an organic whole) imposes itself.⁴⁰ Evident thereafter is a vision of history, as well as a political and social philosophy. The well-known sentence uttered by the French politician Léon Gambetta in the Chamber in 1877, ‘*le cléricalisme, voilà l’ennemi!*’, gives a description of the transformations of Catholicism under the pressure of secularisation and of the religions of politics.

The Pressure of Political Religions on the Catholic Church

We shall now come back to the three examples made at the beginning of this article. I think that we can say something more, and that we can get deeper into explanations behind such expressions of religious life, on account of the new research on civil and political religions; in particular, thanks to Emilio Gentile’s efforts. In Emilio Gentile’s book on political religions, there is a page which I find illuminating from this point of view. Gentile writes that the sacralisation of politics, as a fusion between the religious and political sphere, ‘has to be distinguished from modern manifestations of the *politicisation of religion*, as, for example, in the case of the fundamentalist Islamic movements that conquer power to establish in society and state their religious principles’. Gentile adds that this approach opens a new field of observation, although this new domain remains outside the scope of his study. ‘As a hypothesis of research’, however, he hints

at the problem of the eventual influence that the experience of political religions – as experiences of symbiosis between politics, religion and modernity – could exert, even if in an indirect way, on the new forms of politicisation of traditional religions, and in particular on fundamentalisms that are inclined in the same way to combine fanaticism and technology, myth and organisation, sacredness and modernity.⁴¹

I think that these words are particularly important and that they open a completely new field of research on the politicisation of religion in contemporary history.

As will be very clear by now, I am convinced that we cannot thoroughly understand the transformations of many aspects regarding the religious dimension inside Churches, and inside the Catholic Church in particular during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, if we do not consider the point of view offered by the theme of civil and political religions. It is not possible to think that the pressure of this new dimension of the sacralisation of politics could only be applied to political, and not also to religious, life. If politics assume many religious aspects, religion assumes many political ones, and these come from the experiences of political religions.

Moving on from this point of view, I think we can now better appreciate the difference of the three examined cases, and in particular the difference between the first one (nineteenth century) and the others (twentieth century). Gentile urges us to look, in general, at the influence of the process of the sacralisation of politics on religious life, and then, in particular, at the pressure of political religions on it. So, in the first example given (the cult of the Sacred Heart), we may see the influence of the sacralisation of politics, in the forms of a national religion, on a Catholic devotion. In this instance, the politicisation of a religious element begins like an intransigent reaffirmation of the Church's dominion over the whole society, and ends with the division of Catholics along national and conflicting fronts. In the other two examples, instead, we may see the influence of political religions, of their totalitarian language, of their exclusivism, of the stress they put on organisation. In these two other cases, in fact, we can notice the fact that Catholicism no longer presents itself as a fundamental element of the nation but as an autonomous, total and hierarchical experience.

According to authoritative scholars like the Italian Pietro Scoppola, the Catholic Church, in a kind of 'eschatological reserve', always kept 'a fundamental otherness in front of the phenomena of mass society', restricting itself to assume some elements of them only 'instrumentally'.⁴² However, some voices from within the Catholic world noticed, and in some instances criticised, a transformation in the direction of mass mobilisation. According to the young Catholic philosopher Augusto Del Noce in 1946, many sectors of Catholic opinion, playing on a confessionalism masked by a fascinating form of fundamentalism or by the ideal of a Christianity without compromises, wished to oppose 'a more or less disguised Catholic totalitarianism with a more or less disguised Communist totalitarianism'.⁴³ At the height of anti-communist mass mobilisation in 1953, an attentive observer noted the existence of a 'suffocating mania' in the Catholic world: 'believing of doing something religious counting, enrolling, gathering the Catholics, and then counting them again, enrolling them again, lest that somebody could vanish, that he/she could lose or "unchristianise" oneself'.⁴⁴ Another free conscience of Italian Catholicism denounced the dangers of a 'mass Christianity' in 1954.⁴⁵ These preoccupied opinions obviously confirm that a tension between Church and mass society indeed existed, but at the same time they demonstrate that a kind of mass Catholicism really penetrated into the Catholic world. This penetration did not begin with the Communist challenge, but started many years before, with the diffusion of mass society and, above all, with the First World War and its mobilisation of the masses.

As has been the case with other mass movements, the Catholic one also shifted from bonds based on the model of *Gesellschaft* (if we refer to the distinction made by

Tönnies⁴⁶ which Maurice Duverger applied to the history of political parties⁴⁷) to organisational structures of a community type, based on the *Bund* model, with the connected appeal to total and absolute militancy. The dimensions of organisation, of mobilisation, of propaganda became important, and even decisive, inside Catholic associations. As with the political mass movements of the *entre-deux-guerres* period, for Catholics too, the 'mass organisation claimed to have generated a totalising educative environment, which aspired to guide the personalities of the young in every aspect: rationality, emotionality, spirituality'.⁴⁸

The experience of political religions taught the Church something. The Archbishop of Rheims, Cardinal Suhard, declared in 1936 that it was necessary for the clergy to be completely devoted to the 'mystique of Catholic social action' in order to establish a completely 'new order' in society: social action provided a mystique which could warm hearts, kindle hopes, create propagandists, apostles, fighters.⁴⁹ According to many Catholic militants, a 'total' view of Catholicism would steer activists into an 'integral formation', would stress the necessity of '*la vita una*'⁵⁰ – of 'only one life' – as well as the importance of 'a Catholicism without adjectives'. In 1934 don Ernesto Vercesi proclaimed that Rome would not desire a 'mutilated Catholicism': the Papacy appealed for an 'integral Catholicism'.⁵¹ And an 'integral' Catholicism may be defined as one 'which applies itself to every need of the society of our times, evoked in the light of its doctrine'.⁵² The Church experienced how strong the pressure of mass politics could be upon the Catholic militant. Thus, after its early contacts with the new political religions, the Church proposed itself as a 'total horizon', as a totalising sphere. 'Medievalism', as proclaimed by many Catholic intellectuals,⁵³ contains all the features of an ideological myth, a myth parallel to, and not less powerful than, 'Roman greatness' or the 'New State'.⁵⁴ Catholicism, too, like other populist ideologies at the time, restored a project and a sense to life, proclaimed the idea that history had a providential guidance, and proposed an organic conception of the world. In an age in which every truth seemed partial, fragmentary and, in the best case, appeared as an '*idée-force*', Catholicism could offer itself as an extraordinary illumination on the totality of existence, as a synthesis able to conciliate the principal dualisms society was involved in: individuality and polity, idealism and realism, action and contemplation, life and thought, faith and obedience.

In the age of mass politics and totalitarianism the Catholic Church, in its own way, accentuated its features as a total, tight and all-embracing organisation. It was a complex process of defence from, and osmosis and rivalry with, the new religious dimensions of politics. If we want to escape the risk of a conceptual confusion which could destroy the very premises of the analysis, we have to refrain from the temptation simply to merge or divide the Church and Fascism as two 'totalitarianisms', as some scholars have suggested. For example, Luisa Mangoni wrote in 1971: 'The two totalitarianisms, the Catholic and the Fascist one, exploiting one another on the basis of their unshakable points of view, ended with a mutual adhesion'.⁵⁵ This is not correct, because the Catholic Church does not possess any features of modern totalitarianism. Nonetheless, it is not without foundation to think that Catholicism aimed to defend itself, in the years of totalitarian political religion, with 'a totalising aspect, or at least an aspiration to be so'.⁵⁶

During the years of Fascism, Nazism and Stalinism, Catholics frequently spoke of a 'Catholic totalitarianism' without visible uneasiness. The real duty of a believer – wrote a young university student to the President of the Italian Catholic

University Federation (FUCI) in 1930 – is to be ‘a total Catholic’.⁵⁷ Monsignor Adriano Bernareggi, Bishop of Bergamo and chaplain of the Italian Catholic *Movimento Laureati*, observed in 1934 that, if Fascism was the totalitarian idea ‘from the social and political point of view’, this very idea ‘from the spiritual point of view’, was ‘Catholicism which, although it always had been totalitarian for the essential part, was now showing itself such again, especially on account of the renovation of the Catholic conscience in many people’.⁵⁸ Pope Pius XI, in a speech of September 1938, declared that, ‘if there is a totalitarian regime – totalitarian by law and by fact – this is the regime of the Church, because man belongs totally to the Church’.⁵⁹ In the Fascist *Dizionario di politica* edited by the National Fascist Party (the PNF) in 1940, Monsignor Pietro Pisani gave a definition of Catholicism which expressed the new reality of an ecclesiastical institution which had begun to perceive itself on the same wavelength as the totalitarian model and, at the same time, as an alternative to it: ‘The positive concept of Catholicism is based on unity: absolute unity which requires that every one of its adherents should have the same religious faith, the same ecclesiastical law, the same government, personified in the visible chief of the Church upon which all the bishops depend’.⁶⁰

Fascism and Nazism politicised and ideologised Christianity in order to insert it into their totalitarian political religion.⁶¹ Besides, political religions looked at the Catholic Church as a fundamental reference and at its religious integralism as a primarily political model. In doing so, they certainly contributed to a process of politicisation and ideologisation of the same traditional religious faith. In Italy, for example, it is possible to identify a clear process of a nationalisation of the Catholic faith in the 1930s. In these years, statues of Mussolini made their appearance in some church frescos near the crucified Christ.⁶² Also in these years, a chaplain of the Catholic Youth movement and of Fascist *Balillas*, don Carlo Gnocchi, was responsible for a column entitled *Gesta Dei per Italos* in the pages of *Credere*, one of the official Catholic Youth magazines. At this time, the ‘religious missions’ promoted by bishops became transformed into national ceremonies in front of memorials for fallen soldiers, or at the front of votive chapels for Fascist martyrs built inside the Littorio palaces. Even sanctuaries became ‘autarchic’,⁶³ and popular devotion developed the dimension of a ‘Christian nation’, and not without ‘a sense of contraposition and superiority in front of other nations and peoples’.⁶⁴ The Catholic world, especially through organisations oriented toward youth education, began to receive a set of models which were derived directly from Fascist ‘modernity’, aimed at heroic and patriotic formations, acknowledging the model of a ‘mighty’ nation. In the Italian Catholic Youth Organisation (GIAC), led by Luigi Gedda from 1934, the proposed ideal was of youth made up only of the ‘pure and strong ones’, an ideal which left aside traditional ‘chastity’ and chose the virile force of a real ‘militia’.⁶⁵ This appeal to the strength of Christian faith is an appeal to inner resistance, to morality as robustness, to sainthood as an element of force which always supported Christianity (and with it civilisation). Frequent Holy Communion was seen as a secret source of fortitude. Christianity was viewed as action,⁶⁶ virility,⁶⁷ dynamism, will power and anti-intellectualism. Catholic Action journals spoke of a ‘heroic pastoralism’,⁶⁸ a ‘heroic pedagogy’,⁶⁹ and a spirituality of martyrdom.⁷⁰ The soldiers that fell during the Great War were more and more often presented as models of sainthood for the young. The Catholic Youth publishing house devoted, under the name of ‘San Giorgio’, a series of biographies on personalities killed for their fatherland or for Fascism. Even priests

were now seen being as 'heroic men of new times, able to offer to souls a positive and conquering Christianity'.⁷¹ One of the most successful novels of Italian Catholicism between the two world wars, *Il pastore sulle vette* by Nino Salvaneschi (30,000 copies sold in 1940 alone), had, for its protagonist, a young priest fond of risk and of sports, especially of climbing; he was 'tall, thin, with a well-proportioned athletic body enclosed in his cassock and an energetic face, similar to the one of a leader bronzed by the mountain sun, lit by clear eyes, with a cordial smile on his big lips'.⁷² An ex-serviceman (he discovered his vocation while in the trenches, on the Ortigara mountain, with the *alpini* regiment), don Giovanni Maria is described as 'the sentry of his flock'.⁷³ 'a soldier during the war against the enemies of the country; a soldier today, in the everlasting battle against the invisible but ubiquitous enemy of mankind'.⁷⁴ This Catholic idealisation for a 'robust, masculine, inflexible' youth comes from myths of Fascist political religion, but, at the same time, opposes them. The full affirmation of Fascism as a national and Catholic expression, the fusion of symbols, the insertion of portions of traditional religious rituals into the new totalitarian Fascist religion – none eliminated a subtle dualism in intentions and perspectives, and in some cases a definite competition, between Catholicism and Fascism.

This transformation of Italian Catholicism took place during the 1920s and 1930s, in the course of confronting the two 'parallel mobilisations',⁷⁵ of two different projects aiming for the nationalisation of Italians which fought each other for hegemony.⁷⁶ Catholic actions were effectively defensive reactions, an adjustment to the Fascist climate; but were also something more. These events were not limited to Italy,⁷⁷ and lasted even after the end of Fascism in the new landscape of the Cold War.

Politicisation of religion is a phenomenon which has always occurred. It is typical of traditional religions, as in the old case of the various state religions. Also, the form of the sacralisation of power (for example 'sacred kingship') is very old.⁷⁸ But the modern sacralisation of politics, which acts in an immanentist landscape, is obviously a very different thing. In the age of secularisation, phenomena surrounding the politicisation of religion continue. In this last phase, however, secularisation deeply changes their profiles. There is, on the one hand, a political use of religion by lay power; on the other, an internal process of transformation toward politics in which Catholicism is, above all, concerned. If we look at the books of the New Testament, it is very difficult to discover a specifically Christian politics (that is, the possibility to draw from a more or less definite political programme). While Protestant tradition tried to secularise the political sphere with the theory of the 'two kingdoms', Catholic tradition reacted in a different way in order to defend the intermediary role of ecclesiastical teaching.⁷⁹ Thus in the case of the Catholic Church, we can only speak of an imitation, of the adoption of methods drawn by modern forms of mass aggregation. We have to recognise the existence of an autonomous phenomenon, of an attempt to compete with political religions, occupying their same space. Does not this new Catholic mentality share one of the fundamentals of great modern revolutions, namely faith in the pre-eminence of politics?

To conclude, I hope to have demonstrated that if we want to understand more thoroughly many important aspects in the transformations of Catholicism in the nineteenth and, above all, in the twentieth century, we have to look at political religions as a basic product of secularisation. The Catholic reaction to the age of revolutions and to the sacralisation of politics accepted a challenge that stimulated the

peculiar dynamism of the same ecclesiastical world, in order to influence masses and society in depth by entering the field of politics, competing with political religions and drawing means of expressions, codes and languages from them. Some years ago, a sophisticated Italian scholar of twentieth-century myths and ideologies, Niccolò Zapponi, pointed out that it was necessary for political history and the history of religions to cooperate more closely together in their respective work on the contemporary age.⁸⁰ This means not only that research on politics can profit from many aspects of religious history, but that studies on Churches and on religious movements can usefully apply many theories from analyses of political history.

Notes

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3. Cf. J.M. Crosefinte, *Le Sacré-Coeur insigne du combattant vandéen* (Toulouse: Niort, Chez l'auteur, 1983).
4. Quoted in Menozzi, *Sacro Cuore* (note 2), p.81.
5. J. De Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, ed. J. Tulard (Paris: Garnier, 1980), p.61.
6. Cf. Menozzi, *Sacro Cuore* (note 2), pp.106–54.
7. Cf. J. Benoist, *Le Sacré-Coeur de Montmartre: De 1870 à nos jours*, 2 Vols. (Paris: Editions ouvrières, 1992); R. Jonas, 'Le monument comme ex-voto, le monument comme historiosophie: la basilique du Sacré-Coeur', *Cahiers du Centre de recherches et d'études sur Paris et l'Île-de-France* 53 (1995), pp.21–38; D. Harvey, 'La construction de la basilique du Sacré-Coeur: le monument et le mythe', *Cahiers du Centre de recherches et d'études sur Paris et l'Île-de-France* 53 (1995), pp.125–48.
8. Cf. M. Granata, 'L'intransigentismo cattolico e il mito di Garcia Moreno', *Bollettino dell'Archivio per la storia del movimento sociale cattolico in Italia* 19 (1984), pp.49–77; M. Lagrée, Garcia Moreno, la Révolution et l'imaginaire catholique en France à la fin du XIX^e siècle J. C. Martin (ed), *Réligion et Révolution* (Paris: Anthropos, 1994), pp. 203–213.
9. Cf. Menozzi, *Sacro Cuore* (note 2), pp.212–24.
10. *Ibid.*, p.264.
11. Cf. A. Becker, *La guerre et la foi: De la mort à la mémoire, 1914–1939* (Paris: Colin, 1984), pp.77–87.
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13. Cf. Menozzi, *Sacro Cuore* (note 2), p.277.
14. R. Rémond, *Religion et Société en Europe. Essai Sur la Secularisation des Sociétés européennes au XIX^e et XX^e Siècles 1789–1998* (Paris: Seuil, 1998) p. 80.
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 21. *Ibid.*, p.321.
 22. M. Caffiero, *La politica della santità: Nascita di un culto nell'età dei Lumi* (Roma and Bari: Laterza, 1996).
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