

History & Civilization - Global Governance - Tor Vergata

Religion and Politics in the 20th Century

Jacopo Cellini (EUI), 17 April 2024

Catholicism and nationalism

- Global Catholic activism nowadays concerns the engagement on human rights (religious freedom), peace-making efforts, advocacy for international social justice.
- This focus is relatively new in the Catholic approach to international issues.
- The first half of the twentieth century was dominated by the confrontation with nationalism.

Church involvement in world affairs

- Premise: long-standing claim to the precedence of papal authority over royal authority (popes were heavily involved in world affairs in the Middle Ages).
- Rationale behind Church involvement in world affairs: the Christian doctrine should preside over the life of the human society, both at individual and at collective level, in order to fulfill God's plan and guarantee the soul's salvation.
- The symbiotic relationship between the Church and civil powers was put under stress by the establishment of the modern State, and later by the French revolution (separation of Church and State).



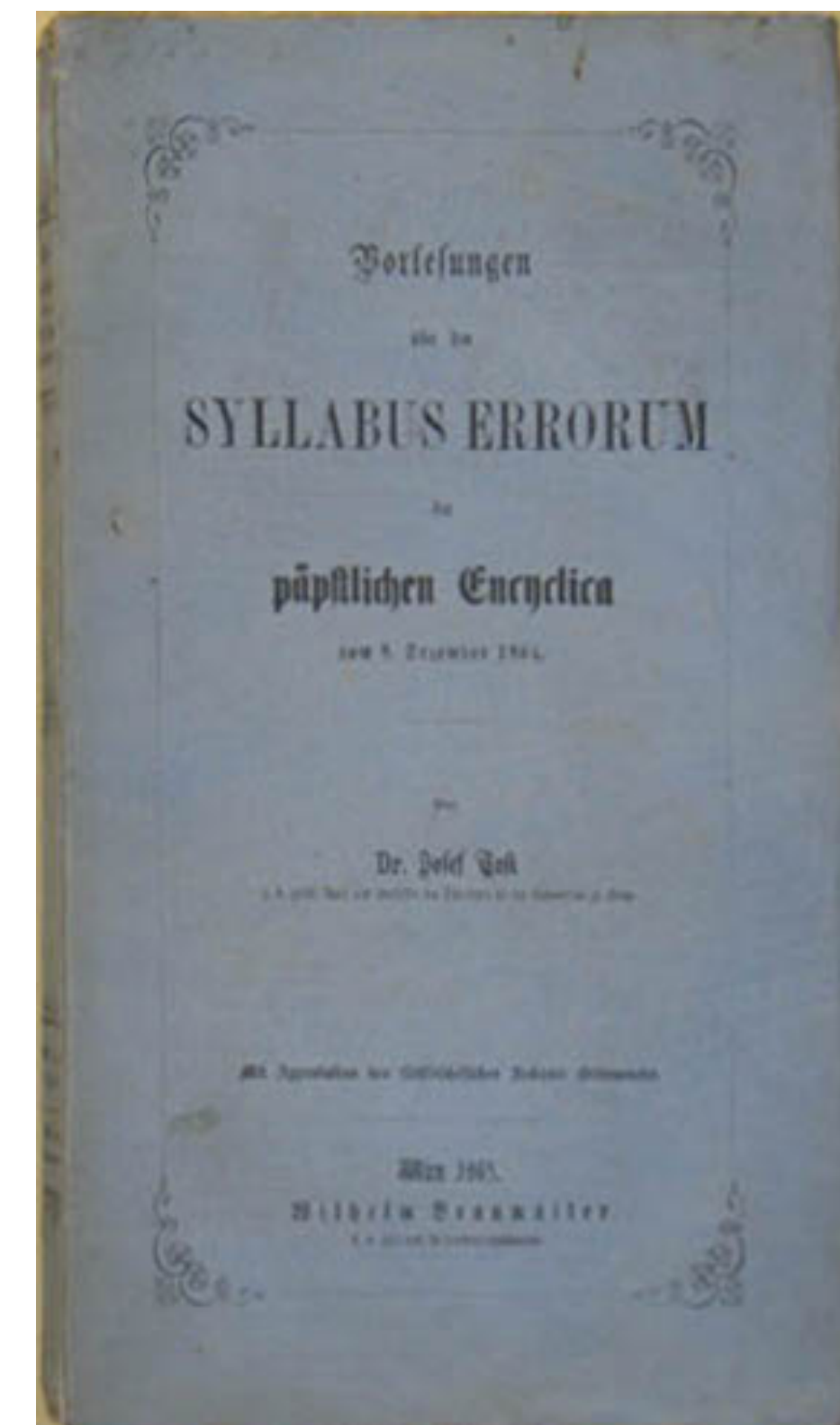
Donation of Constantine, Santi Quattro Coronati, Rome

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 modernity - Theory and practice

- Distinction between ‘thesis’ and ‘hypothesis’: while in principle the Church opposed all things modern, in practice it allowed for a compromise with other institutions and cultures, be they religiously based or not, 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, 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)”

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*

Sacralization of politics

Reading: Emilio Gentile, *Fascism as Political Religion*

«In modern society, secularization has not produced a definitive separation between the spheres of religion and politics. With the development of mass politics, the boundaries between these two spheres have often become confused, and on these occasions politics has assumed its own religious dimension. At the same time as this process of secularization within both the state and society, there has also been a 'sacralization of politics', which reached its highest point in the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century. [...] With its method of mobilizing and integrating the masses through the use of myths, rituals and symbols, fascism possessed some aspects of a lay religion, which corresponded to the essential characteristics of a 'political religion' [...]»

Sacralization of politics: politics takes on the features of religion

Fascism as political religion

- Fascism, due to its own totalitarian concept of politics, took upon itself the prerogative of defining the meaning and the ultimate goals as regards the lives of all the citizens of the State. Consequently, 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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