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Anticommunism and the sacralization of politics in christian democratic culture: a contribution

In the post-war period the rise of an international bipolar system compelled a strong ideological hardening of the political struggle between competing communism and anticommunism. The political conflict became a "clash of civilisations" and affected the overall vision of human life. The process of secularization, the crisis of positivism, the spread of the philosophy of action, the emergence of the masses on the political scene and the evolution of technical knowledge require a drastic reconsideration of our understanding of political action, communication and relations between elites and masses. The experience of totalitarian regimes (fascism, Nazism and Communism) has shown which tools could be used to mobilize the masses successfully. The rise of political religions occurred as a consequence of new patterns in modern society and the need to provide answers to new questions of modernity. In historiography, the first attempts to understand this novelty can be found in George Mosse's works and particularly in his category of «new politics»^[1]. But a complete analysis and detailed description of the overall phenomenon is developed by Emilio Gentile. His work on the «sacralization of politics» and his original distinction between «political religion» and «civil religion» – the first linked to totalitarian politics and the second linked to a democratic one – are a point of reference for an overall understanding of mass politics in the twentieth-century. ^[2]

Based on these analyses we can better analyze how a mass party such as Italian Christian Democracy - characterized by its affiliation with traditional religion - acknowledged and used the contents and forms of the sacralization of politics in original ways. ^[3] From several points of view the totalitarian fascist experience provided the pattern for Italian mass parties. This is true above all for the myth of the nation, on which post-fascist Italian mass parties fought the decisive battles for the support of the masses, particularly among the middle class and younger generations. ^[4] It was with reference to the myth of the nation that Christian Democracy defined its opposition to communism. Starting from a specific interpretation of the Italian national civilisation—whose identity was basically marked by the religious and civil traditions of Christianity—the Christian Democratic governing class portrayed communism as an antithetical phenomenon foreign to Italian culture and tradition. One of the main leaders of party said expressly:

That Communism is an ideology that is alien to Italy; that is an enemy of western Latin and Christian civilisation; that it is opposed to the best interest of our nation; it is the responsibility of the Italians to say this, that is, the Italians who have not lost their sense of patriotism. ^[5]

From his point of view, the leader of Italian Christian Democracy and prime minister, Alcide De Gasperi, defined Marxism as "danger of asphyxiation to the vital atmosphere" ^[6] of Christian national civilization. The overall Christian Democratic strategy consisted of exposing communism as an obvious expression of anti-Italian sentiments. By contrast, the Christian Democratic Party represented itself as the most genuine expression of the religious and civil traditions of the nation and the sole political force capable of saving the national civilisation. The elaboration of this salvation myth was linked to the building of «national party» as envisioned by De Gasperi, by which the Catholic Party presented itself as the real heir of the tradition of Risorgimento (the process of Italian unification). ^[7] This explains why the awkward unity of the party needed to be protected at all costs because it not only saved party but safeguarded the «salvation of Italy».^[8] The communist danger was perceived foremost as a threat to national civilisation. Christian Democratic propaganda charged the Italian Communist Party not only with following the dictates of a foreign state (namely the Soviet Union) but rather maintained that Marxist ideology was totally extraneous to the spirit and the soul of the nation. In the view of De Gasperi, the triumph of Marxism in Italy would have meant that the Italian people had failed to understand their own history and national tradition. ^[9]

This idea was hardened by the representation of communism as a political-religious phenomenon, an idea advanced by the Christian Democratic governing class. According to this interpretation the central core of communist ideology consisted of a religious idea, fanatically espoused by the masses in their political support for this faith. In the words of Catholic politician and intellectual Iginio Giordani, «the attraction of Communism comes from its chiliastic faith that turns into an idolatrous religion».^[10]

According to this view Marxism constituted a heretical religion, ^[11] no different from what, for instance, Manicheism had been. ^[12] Its true strength derived not from its political and social program or its economic analysis and proposed solutions but rather from its «mystical millenarianism»,^[13] «earthly Messianism»,^[14] and «religious content».^[15] In the judgement of the secretary of Italian Christian Democratic party, Guido Gonella, communism was above all «a problem of political faith»^[16].

This analysis implied that the struggle against communism had to be fought on political-religious grounds. As a result, the language used in this battle was full of theological words. The Soviet Union, both as a

geographic and ideological place, was defined as the «root of all evil».[17] Similarly one of the most important leaders of the party described communism as a «monstrous and demonic phenomenon».[18]

The elaboration of this anti-communist ideology allowed Christian Democracy to appeal to the masses and national public opinion as the best-suited force for opposition against communism.

With its novel interpretation of national political history, the Christian Democratic governing class legitimized themselves as the party of the nation, heir to the tradition of Risorgimento and true representatives of the religious identity of the Italian people. [19] By invoking its Christian identity and defining the communist enemy as a political-religious phenomenon, the DC could present itself as the sole force capable of contending against this foe. By portraying communism as a political religion with religious content designed to provide answers about questions of the meaning of human life, the DC constructed an opposition of civilisation against civilisation, of religious view to religious view. In 1949 the party newspaper claimed: «in the face of the Marxist ideology, only the Gospel can marshal an infinitely more powerful force».[20]

Because of its religious foundation, the Christian Democratic party became the best-suited party to combat the communist threat. They argued that the opposition to communist totalitarianism depended on Christian and democratic ideas of politics, the state, government and civil society. Of course, it was part of a new approach to modernity. [21] The idea of Democracy could not be disconnected from main principles of Christian ethics. The party elite had elaborated an ideology based upon a spiritualized idea of democracy, which echoed well-known thesis of Henry-Louis Bergson who argued that democracy has its origin in the values of the gospel. [22] Similarly the motto of Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, «democracy will be Christian democracy or it won't be» was often recalled. [23] This also assimilated the theory of Giuseppe Mazzini who developed a spiritualized and anti-materialist idea of democracy, which also represented the basic character of the Mazzinian Anticommunism. [24]

Despite such religious definitions of democracy and, more generally, of politics, the Italian Christian democratic party should not be considered a confessional party. While the Christian Democratic elites considered religion a key-factor in modern mass politics, they rejected confessionalism consistently and clearly. They called on religious elements in order to construct political identities and to mobilize public support, both in political theory and in praxis. They invoked principles, ideas and identities on the basis of Christian values and Catholic national identity which had become an integral part of the shared heritage. They repeatedly quoted Benedetto Croce who said that we cannot define ourselves as not Christian men in order to assert the inextricable link between religious and national identity. [25] This reference was not simply a statement of fact or a profane interpretation of Christian values but rather indicated the precious origins of fundamental values of the new national, European and Western community. [26] Christianity supplied the basic building blocks for a sacralized communal identity.

On this topic, it's useful to consult David Kertzer historical and anthropological approach to national identity when he concludes that whether or not the new national entity would be seen as culturally artificial creation without historical roots, it nevertheless had to present itself as a «sacred entity» and thus be conceived as a «social and natural entity».[27]

Most Christian Democratic political speeches linked European and Western civilisation to a common religious heritage. Between 1949 until 1954, the attempts to build European unity and to forge a genuine Atlantic community capable of transcending the political-military limitations of NATO, was argued on the basis of Christianity as the only source for values and principles capable of construct such new political identities by Christian Democratic leaders.

On the European level, this approach was shared by the other Christian-inspired parties. [28] In the Christian Democratic International Organizations most major discussions of international policy centered on the elaboration of the myth of a Christian Europe and of the mission of Christian Democratic parties, which were alone believed capable of building such a Union of Europe in keeping with its civil and religious tradition. [29] By identifying European civilisation as essentially Christian, the Communist movements with their materialist doctrines could be declared as profoundly alien and contrary to the original and genuine «European spirit». Communism was thereby turned into a political religion which needed to be fought not for its political programs but rather for its religious message, tagged «Soviet Evangel».[30] Fritz Schäffer, a member of German CDU, stated:

En ce qui concerne l'Europe, je pense que le grand danger vient de ce qu'il existe à l'Est un bloc homogène, armé d'un Evangile. A ce bloc, nous devons opposer notre conception chrétienne de l'Etat.[31].

The clash of systems thereby assumes a political-religious character and involves elements of identity and affiliation with specific civilisations. Anticommunism became a basic feature of Christian Democratic Europeanism. Because of this interpretation, the Christian-inspired parties considered themselves the only forces capable of comprehending the «real meaning» of anticommunism. [32] As the sole representatives of European civilisation and as political movements capable of expressing an overall religious and political view of human life, the Christian-inspired parties of Europe asserting their monopoly in the battle against communism. The mission to safeguard the Christian tradition and, at the same time, to build a new civilisation founded on Christian values depended upon their rejection of a different civilisation supposedly founded on a communist values system represented by the communist forces. This mission was clearly put forth in a sacralizing political language:

«cette mission implique la conscience profonde d'être dans le vrai: elle implique une volonté

religieuse de créer un monde nouveau; elle implique une inébranlable intransigeance en face des idéologies ennemies» [33]

Therefore the struggle against communism was waged on the terrain of myth and sacralized politics. New research in historiography should take note of this topic and come to a better understanding of the central role of religion in European post-war society.

[1] See G.L. Mosse, *La nazione, le masse e la nuova politica*, Di Rienzo, Roma, 1999

[2] See above all E. Gentile, *Le religioni della politica. Fra democrazia e totalitarismi*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2001

[3] See P. Acanfora, Myths and the political use of religion in Christian Democratic culture, in «*Journal of Modern Italian Studies*», vol. 12, n. 3, 2007, pp. 307-338

[4] For an overall view see E. Gentile, *La grande Italia. Ascesa e declino del mito della nazione nel XX secolo*, Mondadori, Milano, 1997

[5] Archivio Storico Istituto Luigi Sturzo (ASILS), Fondo Scelba, fasc. 301, speech by Scelba for the electoral campaign of 18 April 1948

[6] ASILS, Fondo Bartolotta, 1945, vol. IV, speech by De Gasperi in Frascati on 28 August 1945

[7] On this topic see P. Acanfora, La Democrazia cristiana degasperiana e il mito della nazione: le interpretazioni del risorgimento, in «*Ricerche di Storia Politica*», n. 2, 2009, pp. 177-196

[8] Minutes of the report by De Gasperi before the DC National Council of 31 July – 3 August 1945 in DC National Council; see *Atti e documenti della Democrazia Cristiana: 1943-1967*, (ed.) A. Damilano, Cinque Lune, Roma, 1967, vol. I, p. 187

[9] See the speech by De Gasperi to First DC National Congress of 24 – 28 April 1946, in A. Albonetti, *La DC e il PCI, Circolo Stato e libertà*, Roma, 1978, p. 7

[10] I. Giordani, C'è una coscienza democratico cristiana?, in «*La Via*», 18 June 1949

[11] See for instance J. De Ménése, Non sono otto milioni, in «*Stadium*», n. 5, maggio 1948

[12] Archivio Igino Giordani, sc. 18, fasc. 18.2.2, see I. Giordani, «*Cristianesimo e socialismo*», unpublished article.

[13] Ivi

[14] G. La Pira, Il comunismo, in «*Cronache Sociali*», 15 July 1947

[15] E. Dirks, Marxismo e cristianesimo, in «*Cronache Sociali*», 31 May 1948

[16] ASILS, DC, National Councils, sc. 14, fasc. 26, typescript minutes, speech by G. Gonella before the DC National Council of 21 – 24 June, 1952 in the session of 21 June 1952

[17] Speech by Piccioni in Turin on 30 April 1949, in A. Piccioni, *Scritti e discorsi (1944-1965)*, (ed.) C. Danè, Cinque Lune, Roma, 1979, vol. II, p. 355

[18] ASILS, DC, National Councils, sc. 11, fasc. 23, speech by G. Gonella before the DC National Council of 29 June – 3 July 1951, in the morning session of 3 July 1951

[19] See P. Acanfora, *La Democrazia cristiana degasperiana e il mito della nazione*, cit. More generally on the relation between nation and Catholic movements see also G. Formigoni, *L'Italia dei cattolici: dal Risorgimento a oggi*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2010 and F. Traniello, La nazione cattolica: lineamenti di una storia, in Id., *Religione cattolica e Stato nazionale. Dal Risorgimento al secondo dopoguerra*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2007, pp. 7-57

[20] B. Galletto, Guerra fredda, in «*Il Popolo*», 30 June 1949

[21] See P. Pombeni, The ideology of Christian Democracy, in «*Journal of Political Ideology*», n. 5, 2000, pp. 289-300

[22] De Gasperi used Bergson's thesis in an important speech in Bruxelles of 20 November 1948. See A. De Gasperi, *Le basi della democrazia*, in *L'Europa: scritti e discorsi*, (ed.) M.R. De Gasperi, Morcelliana, Brescia, 2004. A specific analysis of this speech is in F. Traniello, *Civiltà cristiana e civiltà europea: sviluppi e metamorfosi di un'idea nella cultura cattolica italiana fra anteguerra e dopoguerra*, in *Italia e Germania, 1945-2000. La costruzione dell'Europa*, (ed.) G.E. Rusconi e H. Woller, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2005, pp. 125-151

[23] For an example see L. Sturzo, La DC nella storia di un secolo, in «*Il Popolo*», 1 August 1948

[24] See, P. Acanfora, *La Democrazia cristiana degasperiana e il mito della nazione*, cit., pp. 179-183

[25] B. Croce, Perché non possiamo non dirci cristiani, in «*La Critica*», 20 November 1942

[26] On this topic see P. Acanfora, *Identità atlantica ed identità europea. Nella politica della Democrazia cristiana (1943-1954)*, Doctoral thesis, 2006/2007, Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale".

[27] D.I. Kertzer, *Ritual, politics and power*, Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 1988

[28] About the relation between Christian Democratic organizations and European unification see W. Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the origins of European Union*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2007

[29] See P. Acanfora, The Italian Christian Democratic Party within the international Christian Democratic organizations: nationalism, Europeanism and religious identity (1947-1954), in «*Journal of Modern Italian Studies*», vol. 15, n. 2, 2010, pp. 200-231

[30] Centre Historique des Archives Nationales (CHAN), Archive Privé (AP) 519, Fond Robert Bichet (FRB), c. 10, speech by R. Houben (Parti Social Chrétienne, Belgium) at the Geneva meeting of 13 February 1950

[31] CHAN, AP 519, FRB, c. 10, speech by F. Schäffer at the Geneva meeting of 13 February 1950

[32] CHAN, AP 519, FRB, c. 10, speech by A. Colin (Mouvement Republicain Populaire, French) at the Geneva meeting of 2 October 1950

[33] CHAN, AP 519, FRB, c. 9, speech by L. Benvenuti (Democrazia Cristiana, Italy) at the Nouvelle Equipes Internationales Congress of Sorrento of 12-14 April 1950

