Politica e Religione

UNIVERSITÀ
DI TRENTO

Politica e Religione
Annuario di Teologia Politica | Yearbook of Political Theology
ISSN (online) 2612-6478

UNIVERSITÀ DI TRENTO

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THE CONCEPT OF "POLITICAL RELIGION"
A historical overview

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Abstract. *A historical overview of the rich ambiguity of the concept of "political religion" is offered here. After a glance at the early modern period, some of the most important authors who treated political religions as secular religions, such as Condorcet and Voegelin, are analyzed before diving into the current debates. Although the exact use of the term "political religion" is not yet fully defined, this paper makes an argument that the early meaning of the concept did not refer to the secularization of religion, nor to the sacralization of politics, but rather to the public character of religion, as opposed to inner or private beliefs.*

1. *Introduction*

The concept of "political religion" is important for the history of religion for two reasons. In the early modern era, it was this concept that first defined religion as a primarily political phenomenon; while after the French Revolution, it was the first to debunk certain political ideologies as covertly or unconsciously religious. At a first glance, this suggests that the concept has two opposite meanings: in the first case, a political religion is something that is used for political purposes but still remains a "real" religion, while in the second, it is understood in a merely analogi-

cal sense, expressing the similarity of an essentially secular phenomenon to what is called religion in the full sense.

The situation is more complex, however, since the two categories are often entangled. Some modern ideologies debunked as political religions have themselves used the religious analogy, although it is not always easy to decide whether in a literal or a metaphorical sense. The same holds for external descriptions, which sometimes treat the mentioned ideologies as lacking some important element that would make them "truly" religious, while at other times speak of new, perhaps unusual, but nevertheless genuine religions. The two contrary notions are sometimes mixed by the same author, not to mention those cases when – without precise definitions and criteria – it remains dubious whether the association of the political and the religious has any deeper meaning or just remains a rhetorical tool.

The situation becomes even more difficult when the concept of "political religion" is extended to historical epochs in which the term itself did not exist. It may be argued, of course, that every religion is political, if it is "rooted in a political community – to the extent that it could not exist without this political foundation," and in this sense the city and state cults of antiquity will all become political religions[1]. In this case, however, further conceptual difficulties arise, for these were called civil or political theologies and not religions by contemporaries; for the simple reason that the concept of "religion" as it is understood today (a "social genus or cultural type," a distinct set of beliefs and practices within a complex socio-cultural system) did not exist before the 16th century[2].

Because of this, it is more appropriate to limit our investigations to the modern use of the term "political religion" (*religio politica*, *religion*

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[1] H. Maier, "Political religion – state religion – civil religion – political theology: distinguishing four key terms", in: H. Maier (ed.), *Totalitarianism and Political Religions*, Vol. 3, Routledge, London - New York, pp. 197-201 (197).
[2] See K. Schilbrack, "The Concept of Religion", in: E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition). https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/concept-religion/.

politique, *politische Religion*, *political religion*). This use also has its ambiguities, but most of these can be grasped and sufficiently clarified by a conceptual-historical approach. In what follows, I will first discuss the early modern period, then the most important authors who treated political religions as secular religions, most importantly Condorcet and Voegelin, and finally, I will review the current debates about the concept of "political religion."

2. *Political religion as a "real" religion*

The Latin term *religio politica* appeared at the beginning of the 17th century. Most scholars attribute its first mention to George Thomson's *Vindex veritatis*[3] who used it in a brief, polemical reference to those who choose their religion for political reasons, as in this case Justus Lipsius: "And who, besides you and those who are like you, have pleasure in that political religion?"[4]. The profound aversion to confusing the transcendent sphere of religion with the profound world of politics is in turn combined with the Protestant contraposition of internal and external, true and virtual religiosity[5].

Thomson's criticism of Lipsius' conversion therefore suspected Catholicism of being a political – and false – religion[6]. This was made possible by the modern use of the word "religion," which no longer meant a virtue or a way of life as in the Middle Ages but served as a collective

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[3] H.O. Seitschek (2008) "Early Uses of the Concept 'Political Religion': Campanella, Clasen and Wieland", in: *Totalitarianism and Political Religions, cit.*, Vol. 3, pp. 103-113; M. Mulsow, *Radikale Frühaufklärung in Deutschland 1680-1720*. Vol. 1: *Moderne aus dem Untergrund*, Wallstein, Göttingen 2018.
[4] G. Thomson, *Vindex veritatis adversus Iustum Lipsium libri duo* (1606), *Praefatio*, Norton, London.
[5] F. Voigt, "Politische Religion", in: F. Jaeger (ed.), *Enzyklopädie der Neuzeit*, Vol. 10, J. B. Metzler, Stuttgart 2009, pp. 152-154.
[6] On the polemic surrounding Lipsius' Catholic turn, see T. Hermans, "Miracles in translation: Lipsius, Our Lady of Halle and two Dutch translations", *Renaissance Studies*, 29, 1(2015), pp. 125-142.

noun for different creeds and denominations. Although the reference to false religions raises the possibility that the latter were not even religions in the strict sense of the word, this is rather an implicit suspicion. Since it was unimaginable at the beginning of the 17th century that any community could be based on other foundations or remain completely without them, Thomson and others seem to have accepted that a political religion was what its name suggested, a religion. The only thing that could be disputed was whether this or that form of it was right or wrong, where the standard of rightness was its compliance with the internal religiosity of the heart – and also with the truly transcendent, universal religion.

A more positive and more detailed description of political religion is found in Tommaso Campanella's 1638 *Metaphysica*. Here, political ("external") religion is still a counterpart of private ("internal") religiosity[7], yet its political character is no longer a mistake but a necessary tool of state government. It is important to point out that it is also a real religion with the same attributes as any other: "This common religion requires priest, sacrifice, prayer, praise, devotion, consultation with God on hidden and future things, oath, promise, consecration, blessing, and an outward union with God"[8]. Campanella is even inclined to say that public religion is more complete than the private one, which may also be understood as saying that every good religion is also necessarily public. Only if the human being was *not* a social animal, as Campanella says in an Aristotelian style, would contemplation and personal devotion be sufficient to reach religious perfection (ibid.) In contrast to Thomson, Campanella's concept of political religion is not in the least negative, quite to the contrary: it is the true religion that expresses the social es-

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[7] E. Feil, *Religio. Bd III: Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs im 17. und frühen 18. Jahrhundert*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2001, p. 188.
[8] Campanella, *Universalis philosophiae seu metaphysicarum rerum iuxta propria dogmata partes tres, libri 18.* Burelly, Paris 1638, p. 207.

sence of the human being, and it is in this sense connected to natural or universal religion (208).

A similar view was expressed by Petrus Muccius, an Italian immigrant to Germany[9], who defined political religion in a 1648 booklet as the collective counterpart of individual religion: "How does the political religion differ from the ancient and simple one? Just as the salvation of the universal differs from the salvation of individuals"[10]. The argument is based mostly on ancient Greek and Roman authors, as well as some Church Fathers and contemporary writers, and tries to prove – at the end of the Thirty Years' War – that political unity cannot be achieved without religious unity, the enforcement of which is the prince's privilege. Citing Lucretius, he allows that "religion can cause evil" but only "bad and dissident religion," and not the "real and one." In other words, political religion is no longer a supplement to private religion; it is *the* real one, even if the only essential criterion for its realness is its unity. The end of the work explicitly defines political religion as the "divine cult to be introduced by the prince into the republic in an appropriate way and preserved for the sake of its well-being"[11].

The opinion of German Protestant authors was more ambiguous, for in the distinction of inward and outward religiosity, the former had to appear more real while it was the latter that had more political relevance. Daniel Clasen, who gave the first book-length study of the topic in 1655[12], also began his work with the separation of the internal and external acts of religion:

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[9] Or Pietro Muzzi, see M. Mulsow, "Mehrfachkonversion, politische Religion und Opportunismus im 17. Jahrhundert: ein Plädoyer für eine Indifferentismusforschung", in K. von Greyerz et al. (ed.), *Interkonfessionalität – Transkonfessionalität – binnenkonfessionale Pluratität: Neue Forschungen zut Konfessionalisierungsthese*, Gütersloher, Gütersloh 2003, pp. 132-150 (145).
[10] P. Muccius, *Religio politica*, Coler, Leipzig 1648, p. A2.
[11] Muccius, *op. cit.*, p. C3.
[12] Feil, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

> According to the scholastic doctors there are two internal acts of religion: devotion and prayer. There are six external acts: adoration, sacrifice, promise, oath, adjuration, and praise. Some politicians, who accommodate religion to the state, take this word for external divine worship, which is like a bridle to their subjects, so that they can most easily be compelled to do their duties[13].

External acts of religion are not essential, according to Clasen: "they do not constitute religion, nor are they necessary for it, but at the same time accompany it"[14]. The very diversity of ceremonies proves that these are arbitrary, but exactly because of this, any of them can be used as the cement of the political community. The political religion of Clasen is thus still a "real" religion, insofar as it is the external manifestation of the one true religion. "It is indeed certain that people are led by nothing higher than what they think about God, so in the republic there is no small necessity and utility of religion. Ferdinand ab Effern in his *Manuale politicum* 2, 1, 72 calls religion the foundation of the republic"[15].

It is therefore wrong (although it has been a commonplace of religious history for a long time) that because of the negative experience of the wars of religions, modern states chose the path of secularization as early as the 17th century. What actually happened was that by eliminating the Christian separation of temporal and spiritual power, they started to exercise an even stronger religious control over society, which authors like Clasen justified on the grounds that it did not touch the status of "true," "internal," and thereby universal religion. The formulation is obviously provocative when it claims that the prince can choose even the "Turkish, the Judaic, or the gentile religion" if it seems more politically appropriate[16]. It should be noted, however, that this pragmatic notion of political religion stems less from Clasen's Protestantism than his political realism

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[13] D. Clasen, *De religione politica liber unus,* Johannes Müller, Magdeburg 1655, pp. 5-6.
[14] *Ibi,* p. 3.
[15] *Ibi,* p. 6.
[16] *Ibi,* p. 283.

as attested by his frequent references to the "raison d'état"[17].

Unlike Clasen, who with all his Protestantism was primarily a jurist and political theorist, the Lutheran theologian of Augsburg, Theophil Spizel (or Spitzel) took a more strongly condemning position. His *Scrutinum atheismi historico-aetiologicum* (1663) names political religion one of the chief causes of atheism, which undermines the credibility of religion by making it an instrument to maintain public tranquility and the political state. It lends a peculiar tone to the argument that it speaks of the "irreligious religion" of machiavellists and pseudo-politicians[18], foreshadowing the oxymoronic style of the later discourse on secular religions[19].

The reason why he speaks of "pseudo-politicians" is because real politicians (according to him) rely on the Christian religion, compared to which a merely political religion is the corruption of both politics and religion. Although he does not explicitly call it a "pseudo-religion," his description is strikingly similar to how Paul Tillich will characterize the latter in the 20th century. For this political religion still looks like a real religion insofar as its inventors and operators are not only secular leaders but (as Clasen said before) also priests; it is effective exactly because it appropriates religious symbols and ceremonies, declaring itself to be a religion. This constitutes a misleading analogy between religion and what will later be called "ideology," something that wants to look like a religion but is in fact not. In Tillich's later words:

> Sometimes, what I call quasi-religions are called pseudo-religions, but this is as imprecise as it is unfair. "Pseudo" indicates an intended but deceptive similarity; "quasi" indicates a genuine similarity, not intended, but based on points of

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[17] An outstanding example of this is the above citation from Wilhelmus Ferdinandus ab Effern's *Manuale christianum de ratione status*, an attempt to reconcile the Christian and realist conceptions of politics in 1630.
[18] T. Spizel, *Scrutinum atheismi historico-aetiologicum*, Praetorius, Augsburg 1663, p. 85.
[19] Cf. T. Nyirkos, "Secular religions and the religious/secular divide", *Christianity-World-Politics*, 25(2021), p. 148-159 (156).

identity, and this, certainly, is the situation in cases like Fascism and Communism, the most extreme examples of quasi-religions today[20].

What seems to be evident from all this is that the 17th-century concept of political religion – even in this sharply condemning form – is different from the one applied to 20th-century totalitarianisms, which tends to emphasize not the pseudo- but the quasi-religious character of political religions.

Many further examples could be cited, for instance that of Angelus Silesius (Johannes Scheffler), whose *Ecclesiologia* (1677) calls political religion the "destroyer of all good polity." The argument is very similar to Thomson's, stating that those who think it permissible to follow "now this, then that religion" in an outward conformity will finally "laugh at each one"[21]. This is also why he calls political religion a false religion or "heresy." He nevertheless adds (in a way resembling Spizel) that there is no false religion without the true one, so a political religion operates as a copy of the real one, parasitizing it, not representing an independent alternative.

Although Silesius was a Catholic, he was also a former Protestant and a mystical poet, whose criticism of political religion was also grounded in his preference of inner over outer religiosity. The separation of inner and outer remained prevalent in the works of such authors as the Lutheran theologian Andreas Carolus who wrote of "political and philosophical religions" in the passage on Grotius in his *Memorabilia ecclesiastica* (1697). He even added that "political religion" should rather be called the "religion of politicians," for it expresses the political leaders' freedom and flexibility, just as philosophical religion is an expression of the phi-

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[20] P. Tillich, "Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions" (1963), in *Main Works*, Vol. 5, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1988, pp. 291-326 (293).
[21] Feil, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

losophers' independence from any higher authority[22]. A similar path is taken by Johann Cristoph Dorn's *Bibliotheca theologica critica* (1721) which does not deny the existence of an inner (natural) religiosity but separates from it the public cult that is prescribed by the ruler's own will: "Yet there is, for me, apart from the natural religion, also a political religion, a religion of society. For I am a citizen and subject, etc. I therefore worship the God that the prince and the republic orders me to worship." He also adds that a Turkish ruler may prescribe the Quran, a Jewish the Old Testament, and a Christian the New Testament as "the law and the norm of my religion"[23].

In sum, the concept of "political religion" in the 17th and 18th centuries referred to the public, exclusively or primarily politically motivated part of religion, in contrast to what was identified as individual religiosity, Christian belief, or natural religion. In some cases, political religion was seen as a supplement to the latter, in others as its fulfillment. It also happened that it became a positive or negative counter-concept: a religion that, by eliminating the flaws of private, Christian, or natural religion was able to guarantee social welfare, or, conversely, one that represented a kind of heresy, if not downright atheism, in face of the "true" religion. What was common to all of these was that political religions were explicitly religious: they either adopted the institutions, practices, and symbols of an existing religion (most naturally Christianity) or, less frequently and rather in theory than in practice, tried to invent new religions to serve political purposes. Political religion as a concept describing the hidden religious nature of a secular ideology came into being only after the French Revolution.

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[22] A. Carolus, *Memorabilia ecclesiastica seculi á nato Christo decimi septimi*, Johannes Georgius Cotta, Tübingen 1697, p. 1088.
[23] J.C. Dorn, *Bibliotheca Theologica Critica: Quam Secundum Singulas Divinioris Scientiæ Partes Disposuit Atque Instruxit Ioannes Christophorus Dorn*, Ernst Claudius Bailliar, Frankfurt and Leipzig 1721, p. 524.

3. *Political religion as a "secular" religion*

The first work that mentions the term in this sense is probably Condorcet's *Cinq memoires sur l'instruction publique* (1791). Its novelty is not that it uses "political religion" with a negative meaning, for – as we have seen – Thomson, Spizel, or Silesius all did the same. The real difference is that political religion is no longer the deformation of a true religion but the transformation of a secular ideology into a religion or its replacement by an implicit or concealed religious belief system. In other words, the peculiarity of Condorcet's concept is the aim of exposure, to unmask the religious leanings of a political program that should not have such leanings. The argument concerns the educational reform of the French Revolution, asserting that teaching the Constitution should remain a fully secular project:

> It has been said that the teaching of the constitution of each country should be part of its national education. This is true, no doubt, if we speak of it as a fact; if we content ourselves with explaining and developing it; if, in teaching it, we confine ourselves to saying: *Such is the constitution established in the State to which all citizens must submit*. But if we say that it must be taught as a doctrine in line with the principles of universal reason or arouse in its favor a blind enthusiasm which renders citizens incapable of judging it; if we say to them: *This is what you must worship and believe;* then it is a kind of political religion that we want to create. It is a chain that we prepare for the spirits, and we violate freedom in its most sacred rights, under the pretext of learning to cherish it[24].

The description of religion thus involves belief in an absolute (in this case, universal reason), the dogmatic exposition of this belief (expressed by the indisputability of the current Constitution), and the fanaticism (blind enthusiasm) it may provoke. Which also means that political re-

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[24] Condorcet, "Cinq mémoires sur l'instruction publique", in *Écrits sur l'instruction publique*, Vol. 1. Edilig, Paris 1989, p. 68.

ligion is not the parody of religion, for religion is itself a parody, that of human rationality. The problem – in contrast to the earlier criticism of political religions – is not that they take the place of real ones or abuse them for their own purposes but that they resemble a religion at all.

It is also a problem, of course, that they do so secretly while they pose as secular, but this half of Condorcet's charges soon proved to be groundless. The Feast of the Constitution created in 1792 was described as a religious ceremony not only by later historians but also by the participants themselves, with its sacred symbols, holy books, liturgical texts, and rituals[25]. That the political religion of the Constitution – sometimes called not even a political religion but a religion per se – was also intertwined with the cult of Human Rights, the Fatherland, the Nation, Reason, and ultimately with that of the Supreme Being shows that the unification of the secular and the religious (or even the explicitly transcendent) was not an accident but belonged to the essence of French revolutionary ideology.

The negative connotations of "political religion" would not become dominant for the next few decades, either. In the United States, an 1838 speech of Abraham Lincoln suggested that "support for the Constitution" and "reverence for the laws" should be the "political religion of the nation"[26]. He also added that politicians and preachers should work together to bring about this happy result, so it is once again difficult to decide whether the passage is about an ideology that acts as a new (secular) religion, or about a symbiosis of religion and politics in the same vein as in early modernity. Some authors treat Lincoln's "political religion" as being synonymous with the more overarching concept of American

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[25] M. Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, transl. Alan Sheridan, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1988, pp. 69-72.
[26] A. Lincoln, "Address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois (27 January 1838)", in R.P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. 1, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 1953, p. 112.

"civil religion"[27], while others only speak of an "almost sacred" obligation to abide the law[28], and still others suspect the young Lincoln to be devoted to secular, "republican ideals *instead* of God and scripture"[29]. The same ambiguity is found in other scattered mentions of the term, for example in Luigi Settembrini's memoirs which claim that the Young Italy movement was called "a new political religion, of which we had to be the apostles and even martyrs" as early as 1837[30].

This positive meaning of political religion, however, would never become widespread. The real – and more ominous – career of the term only started with the rise of Fascism and Nazism in the 20th century. The latter were also called "secular religions" in works like Guy Stanton Ford's *Dictatorship in the Modern World* (1935), Frederick Voigt's *Unto Caesar* (1938) or Raymond Aron's *The Future of Secular Religions* (1944)[31], and although political religions were in principle only part of the broader category of secular religions, they were sometimes used as synonyms.

Eric Voegelin's famous *Political Religions* also used the term "political religion" and "inner-worldly religion" interchangeably, while expanding the historical scope of the former to include as ancient examples as that of Akhenaton's Egypt. This, however, proved to be a multiply problematic venture. First of all, it is highly dubitable whether Akhenaton was such an exceptional figure as Voegelin's interpretation claimed. If every religion

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[27] S.J. Lenzner, "Civil Religion", in J.D. Schultz - J.G. West Jr. - I. Maclean (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Religion in American Politics*, Oryx, Phoenix, AZ 1999, p. 53.

[28] L.E. Morel, "Lincoln's Political Religion and Religious Politics: Or, What Lincoln Teaches Us about the Proper Connection between Religion and Politics", in M.J. Rozell - G. Whitney (eds.), *Religion and the American Presidency*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2007, pp. 73-93 (73).

[29] N. Parrillo, quoted in Morel, *op. cit.*, p. 88 n. 2, emphasis mine.

[30] L. Settembrini, *Ricordanze della mia vita*, Laterza, Bari 1934, p. 84. Cf. E. Gentile, *Politics as Religion*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 2006, p. 2.

[31] G.S. Ford, (ed.), *Dictatorship in the Modern World*, The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1935; F.A. Voigt, *Unto Caesar,* G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York 1938; R. Aron, "L'avenir des réligions seculiéres", *La France Libre*, Vol. 8, pp. 210-217 and 269-277.

that does not share the Christian idea of separating temporal and spiritual powers counts as a political religion, then not only Akhenaton's cult will belong here but the cult of all Egyptian pharaohs. And not only that of the pharaohs, but all forms of divine rulership in the ancient Middle East, the idea of heavenly mandate in China, or the public cults (political theologies) of ancient Greece and Rome, not to mention the Islamic *din wa-dawlah*. From this angle, Voegelin's historical narrative that leads from Akhenaton's cult of the Sun God (through some neo-Platonic philosophies of hierarchy, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, and the cult of Louis XIV as the "Sun King") to 20th-century dictatorships seems highly artificial. What Voegelin in fact does is criticize all these conceptions of politics from a Christian viewpoint, while suggesting that there is a religious tradition broader than Christianity that does not serve political purposes, and from the perspective of which all instrumentalization of religion seems pathological. This is all the more strange since Voegelin himself acknowledges that the separation of politics and religion was a product of European Christendom:

> When one speaks of religion, one thinks of the institution of the Church, and when one speaks of politics, one thinks of the state. These organizations confront one another as clear-cut, firm entities, and the spirit with which these two bodies are imbued is not one and the same. The state and secular spirit conquered their spheres of power in the fierce battle against the Holy Empire of the Middle Ages[32].

From which it would follow that neither the separation of religion and politics nor the effort of political religions to overcome this separation can be meaningfully discussed beyond the borders of Christian civilization. Another problem of political religions is that they can hardly be categorically distinguished from religions like Christianity either.

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[32] E. Voegelin, "Political religions" (1938), in M. Henningsen (ed.), *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin: Modernity without restraint*, Vol. 5, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, MO 2000, p. 27.

Although Voegelin insists that political religions are "inner-worldly" (that is, secular) religions[33], his argument is burdened by the same contradictions as any other analysis of secular religions. On the one hand, he maintains that political religions – in contrast to "other-worldly" or "spiritual" ones – make the "content of the world" their absolute, while on the other, he admits that the "objective will" of Fascism or the "spirit of the people" in Nazism have no empirical reality, they are only "ideas;" moreover, the latter even contains the word "spirit"[34]. At a closer look, therefore, political religions are just as transcendent as all others that profess belief in supernatural agents, which is not changed at all by the fact that they profess the actual existence of these agents, for "real" religions do just the same.

The term "political religion" also appears in Raymond Aron's 1939 review of Élie Halévy's book *The Era of Tyrannies*. Discussing the debates that divide European countries in an "epoch of political religions" he says that these are not about "opportunity or interest, they stem from intentions that are deeply contradictory, and they rely on metaphysics or rather dogmas. It is in vain to ask for tolerance. People demand that their actions or their sacrifices be justified by an absolute value"[35]. Regarding communism, however, he repeats the claim that it is only "a caricature of a religion of salvation"[36], and his only concrete example is Catholicism, which raises the suspicion that the vocabulary of "political religions" is again only applicable in the Christian context. Christopher Dawson's 1939 article on *The Claims of Politics* likewise makes "messianic salvation" – and not any other religious trait – the criterion of political religions, which he himself associates with totalitarian regimes[37].

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[33] *Ibi,* pp. 32-33.
[34] *Ibi,* pp. 65-66.
[35] R. Aron, "L'Ère des tyrannies d'Élie Halévy", *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 46, 2(April 1939), pp. 283-307 (306).
[36] *Ibi*, pp. 304-305.
[37] C. Dawson, "The Claims of Politics", *Scrutiny*, 8, 2(1939), pp. 136-41 (138).

It can therefore be concluded that the term "political religion" began its journey toward becoming a specific description of totalitarian ideologies in the 1930s – regardless of the fact that in principle any other ideological system could be called as such. One could, for instance, speak of the political religion of democracy, liberalism, or human rights, since each of these have already been compared to religions. In most cases, however, they are rather called "faiths," "creeds," or "secular religions"[38], while "political religion" – with some exceptions like Bock-Côté 2016[39] – remains a description of dictatorial ideologies. At first glance, this practice has mostly historical reasons, but since the end of the 1990s, more and more attempts have been made to analytically separate it from terms with a similar but not identical meaning like "secular religion" or "civil religion."

4. *Political religion as an analytical concept*

"Political religion," as is obvious from the above, is a remarkably vague term. In many cases, it is simply a rhetorical tool, an expression of irony or moral warning. But even when someone tries to establish a systematic analogy between the political and the religious, its criteria – because of the vagueness of the term "religion" itself and the diversity of religious traditions – remain contingent. Most frequently, only some superficial similarities to Christianity (or rather to Catholicism) are mentioned. It is not difficult to notice, of course, that political religions, despite all these similarities, are still not identical to Christianity or Catholicism; the only

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[38] See P.J. Deneen, *Democratic Faith,* Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005; R. McLaughlin, *The Secular Creed: Engaging Five Contemporary Claims*, The Gospel Coalition, Austin 2021 and H. Féron, "Human rights and faith: a 'world-wide secular religion'?", *Ethics & Global Politics*, 7, 4(2014), pp. 181-200, DOI: 10.3402/egp.v7.26262, respectively.
[39] M. Bock-Côté, *Le Multiculturalisme comme religion politique,* Cerf, Paris 2016.

question is whether it is sufficient reason to exclude them from the category of religions altogether.

That is why it seems more auspicious to use some other term, as Emilio Gentile did in the title of his 1993 (in English, 1996) book that spoke not of a "political religion" but the "sacralization of politics" in the case of Italian Fascism. It raised the possibility that political and religious sacrality were not two basically different things, yet the content of the book returned to the more traditional vocabulary of political religions. Moreover, "political religion" often appeared as synonymous with "secular religion"[40], even though the latter is an even more problematic – or even senseless – term. The distinction that the book emphasized instead was that of political and civic/civil religion:

> But what many thought was a civic religion for a united Italy of free citizens, such as had been heralded by the prophets of the Risorgimento, was from the very beginnings of Fascist power really a new religion, one that, by ambiguously mixing together the symbols of the nation and those of the party, professed the totalitarian vocation of a nascent political religion, one readying itself to use the altars of the nation to celebrate, in a new, integralist state, the cult of the lictor[41].

"Political religion" is thus explicitly presented as a description of the ideology of dictatorships, in sharp contrast to the "civic religion" of the Risorgimento or the "civil religion" of democracies:

> In a democratic society in a state of crisis, the function of guaranteeing a "prescriptive, central nucleus" may develop in a lay religion in a way that is totally different, as regards its consequences, according to whether this religion is based on the discrete and noncoercive forms of a civil religion of the sort typical to "open societies," or whether it adopts the integrative form of a political religion, typical of "closed societies" such as Fascism[42].

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[40] Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1996, p. 3.
[41] *Ibi*, p. 31.
[42] *Ibi*, pp. 156-157.

What remains dubious is whether the civil religion of so-called democratic states is actually "civil" and not a state religion; or whether it completely lacks any element of official compulsion. It is even more dubious whether only political religions aim to define "the meaning of life and the purpose of being," or they alone "reproduce the typical structure of traditional religions as articulated in faith, myth, ritual, and communion," in order to bring about "a 'metanoia' in human nature, whence a 'new man' should emerge"[43]. It is an appreciable endeavor to keep the accounts of democratic and dictatorial regimes as distinct as possible, but to reserve the concept of "political religion" solely to the latter is ultimately a contingent choice.

But whether it makes sense to distinguish civil and political religions or not, the concept of the latter may never have developed if it did not have some palpable advantage. As Hans Maier explains in an article first published in 1996, the discourse of political religions spread so dramatically in the 1920s and 1930s because it grasped best the never-before-seen features of new dictatorships, "the enlargement, intensification and dynamization of political power"[44]. In this regard, it was similar to the concept of "totalitarianism." What is less certain is that it was only an external, critical description, "a characterization coming from the outside, for neither Lenin nor Hitler nor Mussolini regarded their movements as 'religions'"[45]. Gentile's book in fact cited many cases when Fascists called their own movement and ideology a "religion" or literally a "political religion"[46].

All this will not alter the fact that the term "political religion" became so closely associated with totalitarianism by 2000 that the two appeared together in the title of an academic journal, *Totalitarian Movement and Political Religions*, edited by Michael Burleigh and Robert Mallet. The

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[43] *Ibi*, p. 158.
[44] H. Maier, "Concepts for the comparison of dictatorships: 'Totalitarianism' and 'political religions'", in Hans Maier (ed.), *Totalitarianism and Political Religions,* Vol. 1, Routledge, London-New York, 2004, pp. 188-203.
[45] *Ibidem.*
[46] Gentile, *The Sacralization of politics*, cit., pp. 59, 69, 74, 96, 139.

journal did not live long in this form (its name changed to *Politics, Religion, and Ideology* in 2011), showing that the term "political religion" remained restrictive and controversial. The terminological ambivalence was explicitly acknowledged by Emilio Gentile in his 2001 book, the Italian title of which mentioned the "religions of politics," while the title of the 2006 English translation used "politics as religion," and the main text combined the vocabulary of "political religions", "secular religions," and the "sacralization of politics." At the same time, well-selected mottos from Huizinga to Burckhardt emphasized the impossibility of reaching any high degree of conceptual clarity in such a complicated historical issue.

The first sentence of the first chapter nevertheless attempted something like a categorization saying that political (and civil) religions belonged to the "more general phenomenon" of secular religion[47]. The difference between secular and religious religions remained obscure, however. If it is true that the definition of religion does not necessarily suppose "the existence of a supernatural divinity"[48], then political religions – some of which, moreover, do possess such a divinity – can without any qualification be called religions. Since the text explicitly acknowledges that a "religion of politics is created every time a political entity such as a nation, state, race, class, party, or movement is transformed into a sacred entity, which means it becomes *transcendent*"[49], it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that "the religion of politics" or "political religion" (used interchangeably) refer to full-fledged religions in the traditional sense of the word. The more detailed definition, however, returns to the language of secular religions when it speaks about a political movement or regime that:

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[47] Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2006, p. 1.
[48] *Ibi*, p. 3.
[49] *Ibi*, p. xiv, emphasis mine.

- Consecrates the primacy of a *secular collective entity* by placing it at the center of a set of beliefs and myths that define the meaning and the ultimate purpose of the social existence and prescribe the principles for discriminating between good and evil;
- Formalizes this concept in an ethical and social *code of commandments* that binds the individual to the sacralized entity and imposes loyalty, devotion, and even willingness to lay down one's life;
- Considers its followers to be *community of the elect* and interprets its political action as a *messianic function* to fulfill a mission of benefit to all humanity;
- Creates a *political liturgy* for the adoration of the sacralized collective entity through the cult of the person who embodies it, and through the mythical and symbolic representation of its *sacred history*—a regular ritual evocation of events and deeds performed over a period of time by the community of the elect[50].

As for the first criterion, we have already seen in the case of Voegelin how difficult it was to conceive collective entities as truly secular, and this is also what Gentile admitted when he called the nation or the race "transcendent" ideas. The other three criteria are not even valid for every so-called "real" religion. Everyone knows that there are philosophically individualistic religions; that fanaticism, self-sacrifice, or messianism are only characteristic of certain traditions; and that the "cult of the person" is not something that is a specifically – or even primarily – religious. It is difficult not to suspect that there is a reverse strategy at work here: the features of religions are deduced from the features of totalitarian dictatorships, whereby the word "religion" becomes to mean just about everything that is offensive in the former.

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[50] *Ibi*, pp. 138-139.

This totalitarian concept of political religion, however, will not ultimately become identical to the "religion of politics," because "Religions of politics cannot be associated with a single type of movement or political regime. They can sacralize democracies, autocracies, equality, inequality, nation, or humanity"[51]. Here, the concept of civil religion reemerges, although – somewhat confusingly – not as the sacralization of democracies or humanity, but as a supra-ideological and supra-denominational, but at the same time theistic, liberal creed of a political community[52]. One is not accidentally reminded of the American civil religion here, but why this religion is not "political" is difficult to explain.

In a 2005 essay, Gentile makes a renewed attempt to fix the use of "political religion" and distinguish it from similar terms like "civil religion, secular religion, public religion, politicised religion, religious politics and so on"[53]. He rightly criticizes those authors (from Ernest Koenker to Jean-Pierre Sironneau) who somewhat haphazardly talked of "political," "secular," "civil," and other religions during the second half of the 20th century, but the argument that "political religion" would best describe totalitarian ideologies and movements is ultimately historical. It is certainly true that although the word had existed as early as the French Revolution, it gained real significance only in the 20th century, with the rise of modern dictatorships, which does not mean, however, that this later use was also theoretically better founded. "Actually, the first scholars who used this concept were religious people with a deep knowledge of what religion is" as Gentile argues[54], but it is dubious whether anyone could have any such knowledge, regarding that almost a hundred years later, we still do not possess any generally accepted definition of religion.

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[51] *Ibi*, p. 139.
[52] *Ibi*, p. 140.
[53] Gentile, "Political religion: a concept and its critics – a critical survey", in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6, 1(2005), 19-32 (19), DOI: 10.1080/14690760500099770.
[54] *Ibi*, p. 26.

What seems more likely is that because the mentioned authors were either Christian theologians or critics of the Christian tradition, they mistook Christianity for religion. The similarity of totalitarian regimes is not to "religion" in general but to some forms of Christianity; but since they are also different in many respects, it creates the illusion that the former are "incomplete," "flawed," or "deformed" religions. This, however, supposes that there are also "true" religions, and Gentile himself acknowledges that this is a highly problematic supposition:

> It is obvious that the answer to the question of whether political religion and civil religion could be considered "true religions" depends on the definition of what a "true" religion actually is. Not even the definition of "true" religion enjoys an extensive consensus among scholars. In my essay about the religions of politics I tried to demonstrate how the concept of political religion is consistent with the main interpretations of a religious phenomenon, except for those which identify "true" religion exclusively with revealed religions and traditional religions[55].

The demarcation of political and civil religion is also ambiguous, since Gentile himself accepts that the two have largely similar criteria: "Both civil religion and political religion consecrate '*a collective entity*', formalise a '*code of commandments*', consider their members a '*community of the elect*' with a '*messianic role*', and institute a '*political liturgy*' which represents a '*sacred history*'"[56]. It is again suggested that civil religion is "better," for it does not represent the concrete ideology of a political movement; against which, however, one might argue that even if all parties share an ideology, it nevertheless remains an ideology. It is also suggested that civil religion stands above all religious confessions, but it is difficult to see why this does *not* mean the subjection of the giv-

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[55] *Ibi*, pp. 27-28.
[56] *Ibi*, p. 30.

en confessions to a higher one. The spontaneous nature of consent also sounds somewhat naïve, since if this were the case, perhaps no form of indoctrination or liturgy would be needed.

After all, the only difference that remains is the less physically violent nature of civil religion. But even this is not a stable criterion: "The difference between civil religion and political religion can appear total if we compare the US with Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. But even civil religion can, in certain circumstances, become transformed into a political religion, thereby becoming integralist and intolerant, as happened during the French Revolution"[57]. The threat of intolerance is also felt by authors like Stanley G. Payne who therefore names other possible candidates like "multiculturally diverse political correctness" for the role of political religions yet remains ambivalent whether "soft coercion" or "cultural hegemony" is enough to define "a full PR"[58], In any case, the insistence on calling only some of these examples "political religions" seems more conventional than logically necessary. Payne himself adds that although "the concept of PR has proven useful," it is "not as an absolute definition of a *ding an sich* but simply as a heuristic device for the analysis of strong ideology and its cultic practices"[59]. Others nevertheless keep trying to create a precise definition, with various success. As David D. Roberts remarks:

> Although Gentile and most proponents take care with definition and distinction, "political religion" is used in varied ways, a fact that especially complicates assessment. Michael Rißmann notes that some focus on single "religious" elements and others treat "political religion" as an ensemble (…) In some cases the quest for political religion yields merely a catalogue of parallels or resemblances[60].

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[57] *Ibidem*.
[58] S.G. Payne, "On the Heuristic Value of the Concept of Political Religion and Its Application", in R. Griffin - R. Mallett, J. Tortorice (eds.), *The Sacred in Twentieth-Century Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2008, pp. 21-35 (32-33).
[59] *Ibi*, p. 33.
[60] D.D. Roberts, "'Political Religion' and the Totalitarian Departures of Inter-war Europe: On the Uses and Disadvantages of an Analytical Category", *Contemporary European History*, 18, 4(2009), pp. 381-414 (383).

There is also no agreement on whether we are "talking about religion in general or some – surely deeply heretical – issuance from Christianity in particular?" As Roberts adds, German scholars – and some others like the Swiss Philippe Burrin – are especially prone to accept the latter view, emphasizing that "the actual historical breeding ground of the phenomenon in question was Christianity"[61]. Any comparison with the more overarching category of "religion" would make not only the category of "political religion" malleable, but also that of religion itself. As Roberts – like many others before him – asserts:

> A belief system need not be based on some divine revelation or a transcendent God to count as a religion; any such limitation would seemingly limit its applicability to our three regimes. Gentile is explicit that political religion, linking the meaning of human existence to some earthly entity, entails a relationship with the sacred, but not the divine[62].

Which is not precise, however, since (as we have seen) Gentile himself spoke of "transcendent" realities. The "sacred" is indeed not the same as "divine," but let us add, that the divine itself is not necessarily transcendent (see the divinities of all religions except theistic ones). So much is certainly true, however, that even "even Gentile's usage is ultimately negative; among other things, political religion proved to be bound up with crippled, superficial modes of participation, leading to mere spectatorship"[63].

As A. James Gregor remarked in 2012, "Unhappily, over time, and most emphatically over the past two centuries, the sacralization of politics in modern settings has taken on ominous features." He also uses the "sacralization of politics" as synonymous with "political religion" and "secular religion," including all the pejorative connotations suggested by

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[61] *Ibi*, p. 387.
[62] *Ibi*, p. 383.
[63] *Ibi*, p. 389.

their application to 20th-century dictatorships:

> Political religions are understood to be phenomena essentially peculiar, though not exclusive, to the twentieth century. Though secular in character, such "religions" are understood to share some properties of generic religion—properties conceived negative in import—fanaticism, intolerance, and irrationality[64].

In other words, if the conceptual vagueness of the word "religion," the different uses of the word "political religion," or the demarcation problems of "political" and "civil" religion had not been sufficient to discredit the concept, now its unscientific, more normative than descriptive character raises further doubts. As Gearóid Barry asked in 2015: "Is political religion just the preserve of those we deem 'unreasonable', or is it a more protean force?"[65]. Referring by this to the fact that the extension of the concept from "classical" totalitarianism to present-day phenomena like terrorism makes the concept not a bit more scientific if it only expresses moral indignation. Moral judgments, however, are difficult to avoid, and Barry himself cannot resist the temptation to separate "bad" and "good" (or at least less bad) political ideologies and to preserve the term "political religion" for the former. The reference to Gentile is imprecise, however, for Gentile distinguished between political and civil religion, not political and secular:

> Emilio Gentile's distinction between *political religion* and *secular religion* is more than just linguistic. Secular religions, while implying ideological commitment, allow a space for the individual that political religion obliterates[66].

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[64] A.J. Gregor, *Totalitarianism and Political Religion: An Intellectual History*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 2012, p. 3.
[65] G. Barry, "Political Religion: A User's Guide", *Contemporary European History,* 24, 4(2015), pp. 623–638 (628).
[66] *Ibi*, p. 628.

Although Barry admits that "this remains a slippery distinction," he ultimately cannot deny his sympathy of the "world-changing 'secular religions'" (in this case, Mazzini's republican cult of the nation) that "carried great dangers of amoral sacred egotism, to be sure, but they should not therefore be reduced to a type of Romantic idolatry. Political movements to overturn inequality and empire are not synonymous with the hubris and bigotry that feature in political religions"[67].

This, however, sounds more like a political confession than an objective analysis, which shows exactly that the discourse of "political religions" still cannot abandon the normative framework that has been decisive from its birth to the present day.

5. *Conclusion*

In sum, the original use of the term "political religion" did not suggest anything that looked secular but was in fact religious. It rather meant something like the more ancient concept of civil or political *theology*, compared to which only the vocabulary changed, most likely because of the early modern semantic shift and the more widespread use of the word "religion"[68].

This meaning of "political religion" expressed the public character of religion: the fact that contrary to contemporary tendencies of privatization, belief and ritual still had significance for the community and its political government. Besides its descriptive value, the term also had a normative, even polemical overtone: some authors saw public religion as more

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[67] *Ibi*, p. 630.
[68] About the changing use of "religion" in modernity, see: J.Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious", in M.C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1998, pp. 269-284; W.T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009; B. Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2013.

perfect than individual religiosity, while others viewed it as a deformation of the latter.

It was only during the 18th and 19th century that "political religion" began to mean "a virtually secular but in fact religious ideology," which could involve a negative judgment but was also occasionally used as a self-reference. The great change of the 20th century was that the negative sense of the term became dominant in the description of new, totalitarian dictatorships, while the magnitude of the challenge also made it impossible to turn it into an objective, purely analytical concept. More recently, feminist criticism also pointed out that the seemingly abstract conceptualizations of political religions have never been truly innocent: treating the latter as irrational, atavistic forms of mass manipulation may itself betray a gendered underestimation of the "masses" and their feminine instincts[69], while the modern Western concept of religion that takes the public/private binary as a given is itself an inherently gendered and – in its relation to other traditions – gendering one[70].

The meaning of the concept would never become sufficiently fixed, either. Even today, it may refer to borrowing certain elements from a so-called religion; a genuine and consistent analogy with the same; or the antithesis of a (true) religion, a sort of anti-religion. Since a consensual definition of political religion is still to be achieved, its use may have greater significance for religious studies than for political science, shedding some light on the problematic nature of the word "religion" in the first place.

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[69] K. Passmore, "The Gendered Genealogy of Political Religions Theory", *Gender and History*, 20, 3(2008), pp. 644-668.
[70] R.M. Khan, "Speaking 'religion' through a gender code: The discursive power and gendered-racial implications of the religious label", *Critical Research on Religion*, 10, 2(2022), pp. 153-169.