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Emilio Gentile: Politics as Religion

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Chapter I

A NEVER-NEVER RELIGION, A SUBSTITUTE FOR RELIGION, OR A NEW RELIGION?

Our logical apparatus is an imperfect instrument. The word, that indispensable aid, always has the tendency to deceive us with its splendid appearance of immediate truth, and the more the balance of time is shaken, the greater the danger of words that pretend to pass for wisdom. On the other hand, our debate should be as simple as possible. We will leave profound lucubration to others.

—Johan Huizinga

SECULAR RELIGION

Civil and political religions belong to a more general phenomenon, *secular religion*. This term is used to describe a more or less developed system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that create an aura of sacredness around an entity belonging to this world and turn it into a cult and an object of worship and devotion. Politics is not alone in this: any human activity from science to history or from entertainment to sport can be invested with “secular sacredness” and become the object of a secular cult, thus constituting a secular religion. In politics, however, the term “secular religion”¹ is often adopted as a synonym for civil religion or political religion.

There does not appear to be any doubt about the attribution of the concept of “civil religion” to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who introduced it to define a new citizen’s religion that he considered essential for democracy. This civil religion was to be distinct and different from Christianity, and in some ways antagonistic to it. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term “secular religion” was explicitly adopted to define ideologies and ideals that intended to replace traditional metaphysical religion with new humanist concepts that created a cult of humanity, history, nation, and society. On the other hand, the concept of “secular religion” is commonly attributed to the French sociologist Raymond Aron, who used it in an article written in 1944 to define doctrines that promise the

salvation of mankind in this world.² In truth, the expression had been in use since the early thirties. The editor of a collection of essays on dictatorship, which was published in 1935, observed that the novelty of contemporary dictatorship in relation to dictatorships of the ancient world was to be found in the “powerful technique of controlling the masses by means of propaganda through radio, cinema, the press, education and a secular religion of their own creation.”³ In 1936, the Protestant theologian Adolf Keller wrote that bolshevism had transformed the scientific philosophical system of Marxism into a secular religion.⁴ Two years later, the English journalist Frederik A. Voigt conducted a comparative analysis of Marxism and national-socialism, treating them as secular religions.⁵

The concept of a secular religion was therefore already in use in the thirties as a definition for the forms in which totalitarian regimes created political cults. As for the term “political religion,” it is generally attributed to the Austrian philosopher Eric Voegelin, who published *The Political Religions* in 1938.⁶ Here again, the term had been used before the publication of Voegelin’s book; Condorcet had used it at the time of the French Revolution.⁷ Abraham Lincoln defined reverence for the laws handed down by the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as the “political religion of the nation.”⁸ Luigi Settembrini called the Giovine Italia (Young Italy), a nationalist movement of *Risorgimento*, a “new political religion.”⁹ Fascism explicitly used the term since the twenties to define its own fideistic and totalitarian view of politics. In 1935, the Austrian historian Karl Polanyi studied the “tendency for National-Socialism to produce a political religion,”¹⁰ while the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr applied this term to Marxism and communism.¹¹

Even though these terms have been in use for some time, it was only in the mid-sixties that civil and political religions became the subject of systematic research and debates, which at times could be extremely impassioned. You only have to recall the long debate provoked by the article on American civil religion that the sociologist Robert Bellah published in 1967.¹² After defining religion as “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity,” Bellah asserted that there was a religious dimension to politics alongside the traditional religions but distinct from them. Borrowing the term from Rousseau, he defined it as a civil religion, one that had been developed and institutionalized through a system of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that conferred a religious significance on the American national experience.¹³

In more recent times, secular religion has increasingly become the object of new studies as a phenomenon in the political world. These studies have mainly concentrated its ritualistic and symbolic features, often dissociating them from the beliefs, myths, and dogmas of which they were an expression, in order to treat them solely or principally as useful political instru-

ments in the conquest and maintenance of power.¹⁴ Today we can turn to numerous studies that contain detailed descriptions and comparative analyses of the principal manifestations of the sacralization of politics in both democratic and totalitarian states, although the definition of secular religion is still the subject of fierce debate. The controversy inevitably also involves civil and political religions and their specific characteristics.¹⁵

Doubts have been expressed about the actual existence of an American civil religion.¹⁶ Objections have also been raised to the concept of secular religion, and there are those who firmly reject the idea that any political phenomenon could be defined as a religion. For example, those who argue that only belief systems that refer to a supernatural being can be considered *true* religions argue that there can be no such thing as a secular religion. For them the term “secular religion” is a kind of conceptual oxymoron on a par with “square circle.” Others argue that we should avoid using the term “religion” to describe political movements that adopt forms of words, rituals, and symbols of a religious kind, and at the very most are willing to concede that such movements could be defined as “pseudo-religions” because they are simply political phenomena that dress themselves up in religious garments in order to beguile the masses. Yet others claim that calling a political movement a religion is nothing more than making use of a metaphor. This means that the political movement cannot be considered a real religion and studied as such. In conclusion, these viewpoints suggest that secular religion and therefore civil or political religion simply does not exist. Anyone who says anything else has mistaken a metaphor for reality and does not know what a religion is. Alternatively, they are victims of an illusion that led them to believe in a “never-never religion.”

Clearly, the definition of a religious phenomenon plays a decisive role in this controversy over whether there is a secular religion in the modern world. If, for example, your definition of a religion is premised on the existence of a supernatural divinity, then you would be justified in denying that a belief system that considers a secular entity to be sacred could be a religious phenomenon. However, if we accept this definition, we would be obliged to deny that Buddhism is a religious phenomenon, because it does not allow for the existence of God, whereas the Nazi political religion could be considered a religious phenomenon, because it did not deny the existence of a god, even though it dressed that god up in its own ideology. However, not all scholars link religious phenomena to the presence of a supernatural divinity.¹⁷ This presence is not considered indispensable by sociologists and anthropologists, who interpret religion as a social and cultural phenomenon, namely a system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that express the common principles and values of a collectivity. Fundamentally, there are various interpretations of religious phe-

nomena, and some of these make it possible to include some political phenomena within the wider context of religious phenomena.

BEGUILING THE MASSES

At the end of the nineteenth century, Gaetano Mosca, one of the founders of political science, provided us with a classic formulation of what we could call the *crowd manipulation* interpretation of religion and the sacralization of politics perceived as a mere expedient and artifice made up of seemingly religious myths, symbols, and rituals that are consciously adopted for propagandistic and demagogic reasons. In *The Ruling Class* (original title: *Elementi di scienza politica*, 1895), Mosca discussed churches, religious sects, and political parties in the same chapter, and put founders of religions and founders of sociopolitical schools within the same category. He observed that the latter “ultimately are quasi-religions stripped of the divine element.” According to him, religious sects and political parties operate in the same way, and “as long as their followers are loyal to the flag, they cover for and excuse their worst villainies.” As far as they are concerned, *whoever wears the habit* immediately becomes someone quite different. Mosca believed that the ritualistic, symbolic, and fideistic aspects of political movements were a secular form of Jesuitism used to dupe and beguile the masses:

One notes, on close inspection, that the artifices that are used to wheedle crowds are more or less alike at all times and in all places, since the problem is always to take advantage of the same human weaknesses. All religions, even those that deny the supernatural, have their special declamatory style, and their sermons, lectures, and speeches are delivered in it. All of them have their rituals and their displays of pomp to strike the fancy. Some parade with lighted candles and chant litanies. Others march behind red banners to the tune of the “Marseillaise” or the “International”. . . . All religions and all parties which have set out with more or less sincere enthusiasms to lead men toward specified goals have, to varying degrees, used methods similar to the methods of the Jesuits, and sometimes worse ones. . . . In our day sects and political parties are highly skilled at creating the superman, the legendary hero, the “man of unquestioned honesty,” who serves, in his turn, to maintain the luster of the gang and brings in wealth and power for the sly ones to use.¹⁸

No further studies or consideration into the nature of a civil or political religion are required for those who share this interpretation: it is simply a demagogic expedient to gain the support of the masses. The historian Alphonse Aulard applied this interpretation to the religious manifesta-

tions of the French Revolution, such as the cult of the Goddess Reason and the Supreme Being. He argued that the revolutionary cults were only stop-gap solutions that were imposed by the war and dreamed up to promote patriotism among the masses and to incite them to fight against the Revolution's enemies at home and abroad.¹⁹ Similarly, Guglielmo Ferrero in 1942 interpreted the sacralization of politics as the legitimization of power by surrounding it with "an almost religious fervor that exalts it and confers a transcendent virtue upon it":

This exaltation can only be perceived through an emotional crystallization of admiration, gratitude, enthusiasm, and love around the principle of legitimacy that transforms its imperfections, limits and lack of common principles into something that is absolute and inspires devotion. This fervor and this total, sincere, joyful but partly illusory acknowledgment of the superiority of power causes legitimacy to achieve its complete maturity and highest degree of effectiveness, which then transform that legitimacy into a kind of paternalistic authority.

What are the means for achieving this fullness of legitimacy? There are many devices that can be used, but art has always been one of the most powerful. Painting, sculpture, and architecture did not just cooperate with monarchies and aristocracies of the *Ancien Regime*, but with governments of all times and all places, by presenting the masses with magnificent works that demonstrate the greatness and excellence of power in relation to the mediocrity of the world and people's mundane lives. . . . We should add to these the parades, processions, military reviews, triumphal displays, warrior assemblies, great public festivals, the pomp of great religious, and civil celebrations and other such ceremonies.²⁰

According to this interpretation, the representation of politics through myths, rituals, and symbols can never be considered a religious phenomenon, but has to be explained exclusively in terms of a conscious *invention* of myths and ritual practices of an essentially utilitarian and instrumental nature. They are demagogic expedients needed for finding new ways to establish, preserve, and reaffirm the legitimacy of power in a mass society.²¹

Many historical examples can confirm that this has indeed been the origin and nature of some manifestations of the sacralization of politics. On the other hand, the theory that all the manifestations of the sacralization of politics can be explained by the *crowd manipulation* interpretation is not very convincing, particularly if it is applied to the religious aspects of mass movements, which do not always prove to be simply a means to an end. By restricting itself to utilitarian explanations of the sacralization of politics, the *crowd manipulation* interpretation effectively attempts to resolve in an oversimplified way the weighty and complex question of the

irrational dimension of *faith* and *belief* in mass politics and more generally in human experience as a whole.

THE NEED FOR FAITH

The *fideistic* interpretation of religion, as argued by Gustave Le Bon at the end of the nineteenth century, makes the existence of civil and political religions appear plausible. According to Le Bon, the concept of religion does not necessarily presuppose the existence of a transcendent divinity. The gods are figments of our imaginations: “It was undoubtedly man who created the gods, but he then became subjugated to them immediately after their creation. They are not the products of fear, as Lucretius claims, but of hope, and therefore their influence springs eternal. . . . Of course, the gods are not immortal, but the spirit of religion is eternal. This spirit becomes torpid for a period, and then reawakens as soon as a new divinity is created.”

Le Bon, who studied the psychology of the crowd, considered religion in whatever form it manifested itself to be the expression of an irrepressible human sentiment. Religion originates in the most peremptory of human instincts, namely “the need to submit oneself to a divine, political, or social faith, whatever the circumstances.”²²

This sentiment has very simple characteristics, such as worship of a being supposed superior, fear of the power with which the being is credited, blind submission to its commandments, inability to discuss its dogmas, the desire to spread them, and a tendency to consider as enemies all by whom they are not accepted. Whether such a sentiment apply to an invisible God, to a wooden or stone idol, to a hero or to a political conception, its essence always remains religious. . . . A person is not religious solely when he worships a divinity, but when he puts all the resources of his mind, the complete submission of his will, and the whole-souled ardour of fanaticism at the service of a cause or an individual who becomes the goal and guide of his thoughts and actions.²³

The religious beliefs produced by this sentiment are the primordial force that created and established empires and civilizations.²⁴ Religion’s strength is to be found in its power to mold and transform the character of a human mass by inculcating shared feelings, interests, and ideas in the individuals that make it up. It thus produces a formidable power to generate enthusiasm and action and to channel individual and collective energies toward a single purpose, the triumph of their beliefs: “The majority of historical events were created indirectly by the variation of religious

ideas. The history of humanity is parallel to that of the gods. The birth of new gods has marked the dawn of a new civilization.”²⁵

Le Bon used the example of the French Revolution to back up his interpretation of the sacralization of politics, as the world then saw “what the religious spirit is capable of, given that it really was a new religion that was being established, and its inspiration was motivating an entire people. The divinities that were then flowering were undoubtedly too fragile to last, but while they lasted, they exercised an absolute dominion.”²⁶ He believed that modern society, in which there was a clash between declining traditional religions and mass aspirations to find new divinities and new credos, would be fertile ground for the creation and affirmation of new and powerful secular religions. Le Bon believed socialism to be an example.

Other thinkers who studied socialism during the first few decades of the twentieth century also adopted this kind of approach. When he was studying the sociology of political parties, Robert Michels observed that the masses “experience a profound need to prostrate themselves, not simply before great ideals, but also before the individuals who in their eyes incorporate such ideals. Their adoration of these temporal divinities is the more blind in proportion as their lives are rude.”²⁷ Henri De Man, a scholar and socialist activist, considered the affirmation of socialism as a new collective religion to be based on faith, which was a “psychological need” of the masses. It originated and continually drew sustenance and vigor from an “eschatological instinct” that transformed class solidarity from a purely economic motivation into a “cause for ardor.” De Man added that as soon as this transformation occurs, it is followed by “phenomena of mass psychology that are so little the emanation of a rational awareness of one’s interests” that they can only be described “using the vocabulary of the history of religions and the psychology of beliefs.” The most important of these phenomena is the eschatological instinct, the “nostalgia for better conditions in the future,” which appears as an “absolute good,” and it was this “trend towards the absolute that infused the socialist workers’ movement with its eschatological and religious nature.” According to De Man, this eschatological yearning was “the common and almost Christian basis to all the systems of myths and symbols that express the emotional life of the socialist movement,” commencing with the fundamental myth of the Revolution, which “so powerfully evokes emotions that recall the eschatological visions of the Apocalypse, the end of the world, the Last Judgment, the Kingdom of God, etc.”²⁸

The fideistic interpretation approaches the study of the religious aspects of political movements from the opposite end, because it does not claim that leaders are always alone in the artificial production of political myths and rituals to deceive and control the masses. On the contrary, it accepts that myths and rituals can also be the spontaneous expression of the

masses, produced by their need for faith and beliefs, which they then satisfy by their devotion to a leader or an ideology that promises them well-being and salvation. A civil or political religion, perceived in this manner, is not just an artifice and can actually constitute a new religion that responds to the mass's need for faith and fresh beliefs to direct their lives, as particularly occurs during periods of profound upheaval when long-established faiths are in decline and the hope of a better world becomes more compelling.

SOCIETY'S GODS

The *functionalist* theory of religion developed by Emile Durkheim in 1912 is in part related to the fideistic theory of religious phenomena. He believed that religion "is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church."²⁹ Its function is to elevate people beyond themselves and have them live a superior life in the collectivity to which they belong. Religion is the condition in which the individual, in a psychological state of "effervescence," that is of elation and enthusiasm, transcends himself or herself through deep involvement in the collectivity to which he or she belongs as a result of shared beliefs. In this sense, religious experience "is above all warmth, life, enthusiasm, the exaltation of all mental activities, the transport of the individual beyond himself."³⁰

For Durkheim, religion does not require the presence of a supernatural being, because it is nothing more than the expression of the totality of collective life. The divine is the society itself, and society venerates itself. "Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rituals are ways of acting that are generated only within assembled groups and are meant to stimulate and sustain or recreate certain mental states in these groups."³¹ The individuals who constitute a community feel unified and maintain that unity for as long as they share a set of beliefs and practice the rituals required by those beliefs. "Religious force is the feeling the collectivity inspires in its members, but projected outside and objectified by the minds that feel it. It becomes objectified by being anchored in an object which then becomes sacred, but any object can play this role."³² Religious beliefs express the unity and identity of a collectivity, while rituals are forms of actions that serve to evoke, maintain, and renew the unity and identity of a social group through their reference to sacred entities, which can be objects, animals, persons, or ideas. Shared beliefs relating to sacred objects, such as the flag, the motherland, a form of political organization, a hero, or a historical event are

mandatory beliefs in that the community will not tolerate their rejection or desecration. “For us the fatherland, the French Revolution and Joan of Arc are *sacred entities* and will not allow anyone to offend them.”³³ According to Durkheim, therefore, even systems of collective beliefs, myths, and rituals that are institutionalized so as to reaffirm regularly the identity and unity of a political collectivity are religious manifestations or, more specifically, a secular religion that is not necessarily connected to faith in the existence of a supernatural being. He uses the experience of the French Revolution to show the propensity of a social group, particularly during periods of “collective effervescence,” to create new divinities through the deification of its beliefs. During the early years of the Revolution, under the influence of widespread enthusiasm, there was public support for a new religion with its own dogmas, symbols, altars, and festivities, which spontaneously made sacred such entities as the Motherland, Freedom, and Reason, which originally had been purely secular. The Revolution attempted to gratify officially these “spontaneous aspirations” by establishing the cult of Reason and the Supreme Being.³⁴

Durkheim claimed that the studies into revolutionary cults by the historian Albert Mathiez confirmed his own considerations on the French Revolution, and these studies had in turn used Durkheim’s concept of religion.³⁵ In opposition to Aulard, Mathiez considered revolutionary cults to be spontaneous manifestations of a new religion that originated from the political experience of Revolution. He defined it as a “true religion,” albeit an ephemeral one, because it contained all the fundamental elements common to all religions: *faith*, i.e., a set of obligatory beliefs that are asserted as indisputable dogmas, and *worship*, i.e., a set of symbols and rituals through which the beliefs are manifested. The political essence of this religion was *patriotism* and the messianic expectation of *regeneration*; its dogmas were the Law, the Constitution, Equality, Liberty, and the Sovereignty of the People.³⁶

The functionalist interpretation considers the origin of any religious phenomenon to be a fundamentally spontaneous product of a united collectivity, and therefore it does not exclude the possibility that the birth of new religions that deify society and politics is in fact a religious phenomenon. Indeed, the majority of scholars studying civil religions, perceived as systems of beliefs, myths, principles, and symbolic behavior that express the fundamental values of a society, subscribe to the functionalist theory.

MANIFESTATIONS OF THE SACRED IN MODERNITY

Finally, the existence of a civil or political religion appears plausible, if we refer to the concept of the sacred developed by the German theologian

Rudolf Otto in 1917.³⁷ According to his theory, the sacred, which he considers to be “a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion,”³⁸ is an inexpressible spiritual experience that cannot be understood rationally and occurs in the presence of the *numinous*. This term, which was coined by Otto, refers to the manifestation of an immense, mysterious, and majestic power that, through its enthralling and awe-inspiring nature, invokes a feeling of absolute dependency in whoever experiences it, but at the same time it produces an irrational energy that “engages man’s sentiments, drives him to ‘industrious fervor’ and fills him with a boundless dynamic tension both in terms of asceticism and zealotry against the world and the flesh, and in terms of heroic behavior by which the inner excitement erupts into the external world.”³⁹ Religions originate from the numinous experience of the sacred.

A theoretical presupposition is required in order to claim that the political dimension could never be the stage of numinous experiences and manifestations of the sacred. Throughout history, political power has always been invested with a sacred nature, even when not directly identified with a divinity. According to religious anthropology, absolute power is an essential attribute of the sacred, while political anthropology explains that an aura of sacredness always emanates from those who hold power. In the modern age, the state, having freed itself from the sanctification conferred on it by traditional religion, can appear as a numinous reality and an enthralling and awe-inspiring power that invokes a feeling of absolute dependency. Even modern warfare can be perceived as a violent experience of the sacred and therefore facilitate the formation of new religious beliefs directed toward secular entities, such as the nation, the people, or the race. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Otto’s book on the sacred was published during the First World War and was an immediate success. The Italian philosopher Adriano Tilgher explicitly turned to the theory of the numinous in order to interpret the proliferation of the new secular religions that after the First World War took the place of the religions of Humanity, Progress, and Science, “through which Western civilization attempted to fill the vacuum left in the spirit by the decline of Christianity.”⁴⁰ At the beginning of the Great War, following the decline of nineteenth-century secular religions, the “numinous sentiment,” wrote Tilgher in 1938, “wandered in a state of freedom and purity in search of new objects and terms on which to discharge itself, just as a lightning charge wanders in search of a place in which to discharge itself. Just after the war, it discharged itself on *new* objects: the State, the Fatherland, the Nation, the Race, the Class, which were entities which had to be defended against mortal dangers or one of which everything was expected.”

The period after the [First World] War witnessed one of the most startling outbreaks of pure numinousness ever recalled in the history of the world.

We witnessed the birth of new deities [*numines*] with our own eyes. You would need to be blind and deaf to all current realities if you were unable to realize that for very many of our contemporaries State, Fatherland, Nation, Race, and Class are objects not just of enthusiastic veneration but also of mystical adoration. They are terms belonging to a numinous sentiment because they are perceived as presences that boundlessly transcend daily life and as such they evoke all the contradictory and ambivalent feelings that are to be found within the numinous: love and terror, and enthrallment and fear. They generate impulses of mystical adoration and devotion. . . . The twentieth century promises to add a few interesting chapters to the history of religious wars (which the nineteenth century believed were over): that is my prophecy which in all probability is about to be proven correct.⁴¹

Numinous situations in the world of modern politics occur during revolutions, when politics becomes a place of violent “collective effervescence” and can indeed be a numinous experience. The forces that produce it and manage to successfully dominate it can assume a sacred aura, because they appear as manifestations of a majestic and terrible power. In the modern era, the revolution in itself has become a sacred secular entity in the manner in which it is imagined, desired, pursued, and experienced.

Finally, modernity could be a favorable situation for the birth of new religions, to the extent that it is a period of violent upheavals that destroy millennial certainties and drag humanity into a vortex of continuous change. “The entire contemporary world is again in search of a religion,” Benedetto Croce wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century. He argued that the problem of modern civilization was above all a religious problem:

Religion derives from the need for a concept of reality and life, and for direction in relation to them. Without religion and without this direction, you cannot live or you live unhappily with a divided and confused spirit. Of course, it is better to have a religion that conforms to philosophical truth than a religion based on myth, but it is better to have any religion based on myth than no religion at all. Given that no one wishes to live unhappily, everyone in their own way endeavors consciously or unconsciously to create a religion for themselves.⁴²

During the same period, Durkheim foresaw that modernity would favor the creation of new religions even outside the traditional field of the historical religions, as had occurred in the French Revolution, because modernity produces situations of disintegration, uncertainty, anomie, and continuous agitation. Every society feels the need to reaffirm and renew “the collective sentiments and ideas that form its unity and its personality.”

Now, this moral remaking can be achieved only by means of meetings, assemblies, or congregations in which individuals, brought into close contact, reaffirm in common their common feelings: hence those ceremonies whose goals, results, and methods do not differ in kind from properly religious ceremonies. What essential difference is there between an assembly of Christians commemorating the principal moments in the life of Christ, or Jews celebrating either the exodus from Egypt or the giving of the ten commandments, and a meeting of citizens commemorating the institution of a new moral charter or some great event in national life?⁴³

Modern man had lost his faith in the traditional religions, but his need for religion remained very much alive. However, attempts to satisfy that need, such as the revolutionary cults or the project to establish a secular religion of humanity organized by the positivist philosopher Auguste Comte, who had taught Durkheim, all proved to be short-lived. Because of its irrepressible need, the French sociologist concluded, humankind would never cease to invent new gods and new religions.

In short, the ancient gods grow old or die, and others are not yet born. . . . But this state of uncertainty and confused agitation cannot go on forever. A day will come when our societies will once again experience times of creative effervescence and new ideas will surge up, new formulas will arise that will serve to guide humanity for a time. And having lived during these times, men will spontaneously experience the need to revive them through thought now and then, that is, to sustain the memory of them by means of festivals that regularly recreate their fruits. We have already seen how the French Revolution instituted a whole cycle of festivals to preserve the principles that inspired it in a state of perpetual youth. If the institution quickly perished, that is because revolutionary faith lasted only for a little while; disappointments and discouragement rapidly followed after the first moment of enthusiasm. But although the work was aborted, it allows us to imagine what it might have been under other conditions; and everything leads us to think that sooner or later it will be taken up again. There are no immortal gospels, and there is no reason to believe that humanity is henceforth incapable of conceiving new ones. As for knowing in advance the symbols in which the new faith will be expressed, if they will or will not resemble those of the past, if they will be more adequate to the reality they are meant to translate, this is a matter that surpasses human faculties of prediction and is, moreover, beside the point.⁴⁴

Today many of those studying religious phenomena believe that the modern age is not undergoing an irreversible process of secularization involving the gradual disappearance of the sacred from an increasingly cynical world, but is rather a situation in which there is a continuous

metamorphosis of the sacred in politics and in other dimensions to human activity. The historian of religion Mircea Eliade has observed that the experience of the sacred is not at all foreign to the conscience of modern man who claims that he has now been liberated from ancient religious beliefs and has become “nonreligious man.” This liberation is entirely an illusion for many people, because this “nonreligious man descends from *homo religiosus* and, whether he likes it or not, he is also the work of religious man; his formation begins with the situations assumed by his ancestors.” Modern man rebels against his past and attempts to free himself from it, but “do what he will, he is an inheritor. He cannot utterly abolish his past, since he is himself the product of his past.”

For . . . nonreligious man *in the pure state* is a comparatively rare phenomenon, even in the most desacralized of modern societies. The majority of the “irreligious” still behave religiously, even though they are unaware of the fact. . . . But the modern man who feels and claims that he is nonreligious still retains a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals. . . . Strictly speaking, the great majority of the irreligious are not liberated from religious behavior, from theologies and mythologies. . . . In short, the majority of men “without religion” still hold to pseudoreligious and degenerated mythologies.⁴⁵

In the contemporary age, the sacred has displayed tenacious resistance and an extraordinary vitality.⁴⁶ Secularization disengaged the sacred from institutional religions that had tempered it in their dogmas and rituals, and let it go “wild,” to use the sociologist Roger Bastide’s expression, by which he meant free to find new ways of manifesting itself in every human activity until it is eventually brought under control by other dogmas and rituals. The “death of the established gods” does not at all mean “the disappearance of the establishing experience of the sacred in search of new forms in which to embody itself,”⁴⁷ and the death of God, proclaimed by Nietzsche, “is not necessarily the death of the sacred, since the experience of the sacred constitutes an essential dimension for mankind.”⁴⁸

From this point of view, then, the experience of the sacred does not exhaust itself with the advance of secularization. “What is generally called the ‘process of secularization’ often obscures the savage proliferation of religiosity,” writes the anthropologist Claude Riviere, for whom it is undeniable that “the sacred (*fascinans* and *tremendum*) is a fundamental anthropological dimension, whose domain cannot be limited to that of the established religions, nor even to its manifestations to a sociology of religious practices.”⁴⁹ As has been observed by religious historian Giovanni Filoramo, while it is true “that secularization has deprived traditional religions of a whole series of domains by rendering them profane and autonomous, it is equally true that these domains are once again

creators of the sacred, independent of the traditional religions.”⁵⁰ In a modern society, sacredness therefore constitutes “one of the possible ways of putting socially shared meanings in order and creating some coherence around them. To be more precise, the process of sacralization is triggered when individuals and groups of people confer an absolute value on objects and symbols in order to make sense of their individual or collective existence (they consecrate them and therefore isolate them).”⁵¹ The modern thus becomes in part a “place for the creation of the religious,” in that “while modernity has undoubtedly secularized traditional religions, it is not however irreversibly antagonistic to religion and the sacred in general.” On the contrary, “modernity’s restructuring favors in turn the emergence of rationales and dynamics based on sacredness and religiosity that never disappeared.”⁵² During the period of modernity, other faiths have appeared alongside faith in the supernatural, and these have sacralized different aspects of human activity. The sociologist Salvador Giner has observed that modern times, although apparently in many ways insensitive to the supernatural, have very often replaced it with “social transcendence,” such as

the myths of revolution, nation, new eras, scientism, new man, complete liberation, communion with nature and the universe, eternal health, hedonism as the only way to live, and many others are now forms of transcendence, whether they are separate or joined in various combinations and whether or not they are linked to supernatural religions. Thanks to them, we have encountered a barrier to the process of desecration of the world that started with the Renaissance. These myths are the material on which the secular metamorphosis of the ancients who have returned to life consolidated its position.⁵³

In the modern era, expressions of the sacralization of different aspects of human life have multiplied using history, philosophy, art, and, last but not least, politics. The political philosopher Manuel García Pelayo has written that there are eras or social groups within a particular era that do not perceive politics solely as “an order in which human life has to develop and an essential field like any other, but as the ontological foundation and root of human existence.” Consequently, they expect politics not just to resolve particular problems, but rather “the entire problem of existence”:

In short, by introducing religious practices into politics, they experience politics as a life and means of salvation, either because they believe, as the ancient world did, that salvation, although the work of the divine, is revealed through a political system established by a charismatic figure with a sacred nature or because man, in spite of having lost his belief in God, has not lost

his sense of being an unfortunate soul and he still places all his hopes of salvation in a political doctrine or system. This phenomenon has given rise to what some people call “political religions.” We will not dwell upon the rights and wrongs of this term, but it is at least clear that certain ideologies and certain political movements cannot be fully understood without the assistance of definitions that were originally religious although now translated into non-religious categories.

Modern politics has thus become, according to the religious sociologist Jean-Pierre Sarroneau, “the preferred terrain for the creation and expansion of the sacred in secular societies.”

It is a fact that our contemporaries have tended to direct part of their religious aspirations and passions toward politics, transform political ideologies into myths, and look on many political leaders or dictators as divine and heroic figures. Modern politics is full of “sacred” persons. These figures are both terrifying (*tremendum*) because they possess all the (technical, military and psychological) power of the modern state and have enormous capacity to impose their will and reek destruction, and reassuring (*fascinans*) because they represent a providential force capable of providing protection and safety to modern man who has been uprooted and ground down by the great industrial and urban complexes. Politics has produced the idols of our time. . . . Politics reveals more easily the traditional expressions of religions, namely myth, ritual, communion and faith. Politics have taken on the role of legitimizing the social order that in the past was carried out by religion.⁵⁴

In conclusion, it appears entirely legitimate to consider the sacralization of politics a *modern ieropahany*, that is, a manifestation of the sacred in modernity and to study civil and political religions as new forms of religiosity that originated during the modern era and belong to it. Max Weber, who was very much the theoretician of disillusionment with the modern world, wrote in 1890 that the ancients had not been definitively banished but were to return in another form: “The ancient gods, disenchanting and therefore transformed into impersonal powers, rise from their graves and reassume the eternal struggle between them in the hope of conquering the supremacy of life.”⁵⁵ The experience of totalitarian religions authorizes us to argue that politics was the battlefield where the new gods fought for supremacy over men during the twentieth century. Those who witness the advent of totalitarian religions were certainly convinced of this, and they considered such religions to be a deadly danger to humanity.