

Introduction

THE SACRALIZATION OF POLITICS

THE DOLLAR AS A RELIGIOUS SYMBOL

An American dollar bill, with its portrait of George Washington, is a religious symbol. This assertion may surprise readers. Some might find it extravagant, paradoxical, or just plain blasphemous, because it mixes religion, the maximum expression of all that is sacred, with money, the utterly commonplace object representing all that is profane. Others might think that I am using the dollar as a metaphor for the way in which we have come to treat money as a god. In reality, however, the religious symbolism of a dollar bill has to be seen as something literal.

This can be demonstrated by observing the back of the banknote. In the center, there is the inscription, "In God We Trust." This is the national motto of the United States, which was officially adopted on 30 July 1956 under the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, but it had already appeared in 1862 on a two-cent piece. A slightly different version, "In God Is Our Trust," is to be found in the patriotic song "The Star-Spangled Banner," popular since 1814 and adopted as the national anthem by Congress in 1931. The two faces of the Great Seal of the United States appear on either side of the motto. The seal was chosen in 1776 by Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams and approved by Congress on 20 June 1782 after exhaustive scrutiny. On one side, we find the American eagle with spread wings, with the arrows of war grasped in one claw and an olive branch in the other, while its beak holds a ribbon with the wording of another national motto: "E Pluribus Unum" ("one made up of many"). The sentence consists of thirteen letters, one for each colony that gave birth to the new republic. Above the eagle, there is a constellation of thirteen stars, set out so as to create a figure surrounded by a glittering halo. On the other side of the religious motto is the image of an incomplete pyramid, made up of thirteen layers of squared-off blocks of stone. These blocks represent self-government, and the unfinished state of the edifice signifies that new states can be added to the American republic. The date of the Declaration of Independence is inscribed on the lowest layer of stone blocks in Roman numerals, MDCCCLXXVI. The base of the pyramid is surrounded by a ribbon that bears the inscription taken from Virgil's poetry, "Novus Ordo Seclorum" ("a new order of ages"). The eye

of God looks down from above the sacred triangle, and above that there appears another thirteen-letter sentence from Virgil in pride of place within the heavens, as though the words were uttered by some voice from above: "Annuit Coepit" ("He has approved our undertaking").

To all intents and purposes, the dollar bill is therefore a religious symbol because it expresses a profession of faith and confers an aura of holiness on the people of the star-spangled republic, its origin, its history, its institutions, and its destiny in the world. Although the words and images on the banknote have an incontrovertible religious meaning, it is not clear what religion they are supposed to express. The United States is a country with many religious confessions, and it is perhaps still the most religious of the modern industrialized nations. However, the American republic is not a confessional state, and it does not attribute a privileged status within its institutions to any one religion or church. There is not a single reference to God or divine providence in the Constitution of the United States, which was adopted in 1787. In 1791, the First Amendment to the Constitution guaranteed the freedom of all religious confessions, and explicitly refused to assign the role of Established Church to one particular religion.

In spite of this, the United States officially professes its faith in God, and since the time of the Revolution, the American nation has believed that it has a special mystical relationship with God, one that has been sealed by a sacred covenant. The American people consider themselves to have been chosen by God to fulfill a historical mission for the benefit of all mankind. The Declaration of Independence, which was approved by Congress on 4 July 1776, starts by asserting that the American people wish "to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them," and concludes with an appeal "to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions," while claiming "a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence."

The reference to the American nation's election by God also appears in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Stars and Stripes, an obligatory pledge that was introduced into the school system at the end of the nineteenth century and is recited before lessons can start. On 14 June 1954, Congress decided to add the assertion that the United States is "one nation under God" to this declaration. The appeal to God is also to be found in the most solemn declarations by presidents of the United States. From the beginning, all heads of state have sworn allegiance to the Constitution at their investiture using the formula "So help me, God," and in their inaugural speeches they have invoked God or the Almighty to guard over their country. The first Catholic president, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, started his inaugural speech by declaring that he has sworn before the American people and Almighty God, and he ended by calling for God's

blessing on the American nation, "knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own."

There is not, however, a contradiction between the principle of the separation of church and state asserted by the Constitution, and the profession of religious faith expressed by the motto, symbols, and political rituals of the United States. The reason is that faith in God or the Almighty as expressed in symbols and political rituals of the American nation is the manifestation of a particular form of religion, one that does not correspond to any particular religion professed by the citizens of the United States. It is a *civil religion*, by which we mean a system of beliefs, values, myths, rituals, and symbols that confer an aura of sanctity on the United States as a political entity, and on the country's institutions, history, and destiny in the world.

The American civil religion has its own "holy scriptures," the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which are treasured and venerated like the Tables of the Law. It has its own prophets, such as the Pilgrim Fathers. It celebrates its own sacred heroes such as George Washington, the "American Moses" who freed the "new people of Israel" from slavery under the English and led them to the Promised Land of freedom, independence, and democracy. It venerates its martyrs, such as Abraham Lincoln, the sacrificial victim assassinated on Good Friday of 1865, after the American nation had been subjected to the purifying fires of a cruel civil war to expiate its guilt and reestablish the hallowed nature of its unity and mission. John Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. then became further examples of martyrdom for this civil religion, alongside the figure of Lincoln. Like all religions, this civil religion has its own temples for the veneration of its leading figures, such as the monument to Washington, the Lincoln Memorial, and Arlington Cemetery, where the tomb of the Unknown Soldier is revered as a symbol for the citizens who fell to save their nation. Finally, the civil religion has its sermons and liturgy: the presidential inaugural speeches, Independence Day on 4 July, Thanksgiving Day, Memorial Day when the war dead are commemorated, and other collective ceremonies that celebrate personalities and events in American history turned by myth into a "sacred history" of a nation elected by God to fulfill its particular mission in the world.

The civil religion of the United States derived from Protestantism, and for more than a century it displayed the unmistakable imprint of Puritanism and the biblical tradition. As time went on, however, it began to differentiate itself and became an explicit and direct reference point and a purely civic credo that coexisted with both Christian and non-Christian confessions. Given the freedom that the state accords all religions, the American civil religion respects all traditional religions, whether or not they are Christian; and for their part, the religions pay homage to the

sacred nature of the nation, its institutions, and its symbols. The flag of the United States is displayed in many churches above the altar or pulpit.

THE SACRALIZATION OF POLITICS

Thus we come to this book's central argument. The American civil religion is the first historical example of a *religion of politics* in the modern era. By a religion of politics I mean a particular form of *sacralization of politics* that has occurred in the modern era after the political realm had gained its independence from traditional religion. By taking over the religious dimension and acquiring a sacred nature, politics went so far as to claim for itself the prerogative to determine the meaning and fundamental aim of human existence for individuals and the collectivity, at least on this earth. 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, unchallengeable, and intangible. As such, it becomes the core of an elaborate system of beliefs, myths, values, commandments, rituals, and symbols, and consequently an object of faith, reverence, veneration, loyalty, and devotion, for which, if necessary, people are willing to sacrifice their lives. The resulting religion of politics is a religion in the sense that it is a *system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that interpret and define the meaning and end of human existence by subordinating the destiny of individuals and the collectivity to a supreme entity*.

The sacralization of politics as a modern phenomenon differs from other historical forms of sacralization of political power. Throughout history and since the most ancient times, political power has been shrouded in holiness. It was either identified with the divine or considered its direct emanation, as in the case of the pharaohs of Ancient Egypt. In Greek city-states and republican Rome, the religious dimension was indistinguishable from the city religion: the sacred nature of political power was incorporated into the civic institutions. In imperial Rome, the deification of the emperor personalized the hallowedness of power and was superimposed on the city religion. With the advent of Christianity, the fusion between religion and politics was shattered, giving rise to a new sacralization of power in which the church obtained a spiritual primacy over the state. In Christian monarchies from the Middle Ages until the sovereignty of the people appeared on the scene, the sacralization of power corresponded to the sacred nature of the divine right of kings, which was acknowledged and legitimized by the church, unless of course the monarch was also the head of the church, as in the case of Anglican England. For centuries until the Modern Era, this led to ten-

sions, rivalries, and conflicts between the spiritual power of the church and the temporal power of the monarch, each claiming the primacy of its sovereignty made sacred by divine investiture.

During the Modern Era, the relationship between the religious and political dimensions and between power and sacredness entered a new phase that gave rise to the sacralization of politics, which reflected the affirmation of the primacy of the sovereignty of the state, secularization of culture, the loss of the church's spiritual hegemony in relation to the state and society, the subsequent separation of the church and state, the triumph of the principle of the people's sovereignty and the creation of mass politics. *Civil religions* and *political religions* represent the two main phenomena of sacralization of politics produced by modern society, and these are the categories that we will be using throughout this book. The difference between the two reflects the different attitudes and behaviors adopted in relation to traditional religions and the different solutions they find for the relationship between authority and freedom, and between the individual and the state.

Civil religion is the conceptual category that contains the forms of sacralization of a political system that guarantee a plurality of ideas, free competition in the exercise of power, and the ability of the governed to dismiss their governments through peaceful and constitutional methods. Civil religion therefore respects individual freedom, coexists with other ideologies, and does not impose obligatory and unconditional support for its commandments. *Political religion* is the sacralization of a political system founded on an unchallengeable monopoly of power, ideological monism, and the obligatory and unconditional subordination of the individual and the collectivity to its code of commandments. Consequently, a political religion is intolerant, invasive, and fundamentalist, and it wishes to permeate every aspect of an individual's life and of a society's collective life.

This conceptual distinction, which is so clear-cut in its theoretical formulation, must, however, take into account the existence of the wider variety of sacralization of politics in historical reality. These find themselves in intermediate positions between the two main categories, according to their different political, cultural and religious situations. For example, a civil religion may take on invasive, intolerant, and exclusive attitudes and forms of behavior in particular circumstances, in spite of existing within a democratic system. This differentiation needs to be remembered when examining the attitude adopted by a religion of politics in relation to traditional religion and the ecclesiastical institutions that represent it. A civil or political religion may derive from a traditional religion and may make use of the latter either directly or indirectly in order to develop a system of beliefs, myths, values, symbols, and rituals

that confer a sacred aura on political institutions without subordinating the state to the church, as occurred in the United States, and without establishing a polemical or antagonistic relationship with churches and traditional religions. In totalitarian regimes, a religion of politics may enter into conflict with traditional religions, because it claims the primary role in defining the meaning and purpose of the existence of a certain collectivity and aims to subordinate the traditional religion to its own aspirations—when, that is, it does not want to destroy it altogether.

Sacralization of politics differs from various traditional and contemporary forms of politicization of religion, as in the case of Caesaropapism, whereby political power appropriates and exercises spiritual power through a traditional religion, or of other mergers between politics and religion that, this time, involve the traditional religion absorbing the political dimension or imposing direct political control. Hence, in both analytical and historical terms, sacralization of politics does not include theocracy, which is the historical form whereby politics is subordinated to a traditional religion through the exercise of direct political power; Shintoism, which is the national religion of imperial Japan; the Catholic Church's various political activities such as those in Poland under the communist regime; or even the fundamentalist religious movements that have taken power and apply their own religious principles to society and the state, as occurred in Iran following Khomeini's revolution.

Historically, the sacralization of politics, in the sense I have just explained, commenced with the birth of modern democracy and mass politics. Its origins are democratic, republican, and patriotic. The first real religions of politics appeared during the American and French revolutions as a set of beliefs, values, myths, symbols, and rituals that conferred a sacred quality and meaning on the new political institution of popular sovereignty. Subsequently, the sacralization of politics was given a further impetus during the nineteenth century by various cultural and political movements, such as romanticism, idealism, positivism, nationalism, socialism, communism, and racism, which all put forward global concepts of human existence by adopting various aspects of secular religions intent upon replacing traditional religions. These secular religions could be defined as religions of humanity. The affirmation of national states during the second half of the nineteenth century and during the twentieth century contributed more decisively and directly to the sacralization of politics. Everywhere, these states adopted myths, rituals, and symbols of varying degrees of complexity in order to confer a sacred aura on their political institutions, to exalt the fundamental principles and values of the national community, and to cultivate a collective identity among their citizens, which required them to feel a sense of duty, loyalty, and devotion toward both state and nation. As the principle of national sovereignty

spread to the entire planet during the twentieth century, nationalism became the most universal manifestation of sacralization of politics in the contemporary world and merged with a wide variety of ideologies and cultural and religious traditions. In some cases it acted as a revolutionary force and in others as a conservative one, and it either challenged traditional religions or attempted to integrate them into its own system of beliefs, values, and aims.

The twentieth century has been the most fertile period for the sacralization of politics. The wars and political revolutions that forged the world we live in through the creation of new nations and states, and the liberation and emancipation of populations everywhere, were all carried out in the name of collective beliefs and myths that made politics something sacred and excited faith, enthusiasm, and devotion among their followers to the point that they were willing to lay down their lives. The greatest and most inhuman massacres, which involved the mass slaughter of millions of victims at the altar of deified political entities, were inflicted during the century by political movements that operated very much as fundamentalist and intolerant religious movements. Such movements claimed to determine the meaning and ultimate purpose of existence by distinguishing between humans who were the followers of Good and those who were the followers of Evil. The latter were ruthlessly and ferociously persecuted by every means at the disposal of these movements to the point of their annihilation.

The First World War, which was fought as an apocalyptic struggle between Good and Evil, exalted the nation and intensified the sacralization of politics in its nationalist manifestation. This then favored the creation of the new political religions of fascism and Nazism, while the Bolshevik Revolution, which was another child of the war, engendered an internationalist version of the sacralization of politics, and indeed it attracted an enthusiastic response and proselytized in every corner of the globe. Between the wars, Europe experienced the bewildering spectacles of great seas of people acclaiming the dictators of new totalitarian states as terrestrial demigods. These regimes were the churches of the new intolerant religion of politics that claimed to determine the meaning and ultimate end of individual and collective existence through an obligatory system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols. The perception of fascism and bolshevism as political religions goes back to the 1920s. The concepts of "secular religion" and "political religion" were coined precisely in order to describe the novelty and originality of the totalitarian regimes that sprung up between the two world wars.

Fascism was the first nationalist totalitarian movement that fully displayed the characteristics of a political religion, as it indeed proclaimed itself to be. This was consistent with the irrationalist and mythical prem-

ises of its culture, which were used to establish a system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that deified the nation and state and celebrated the personality cult of "Il Duce" as a living myth. National-socialism, another political religion, did the same. On its altar it placed the Aryan race, the veneration of blood ties, and the Führer, Germany's savior and the messiah of the millennial Third Reich. It encompassed all public life in a complex tangle of rituals and symbols that evoked the ancient myths of the Germanic religion and blended them with the myths of modern racist paganism, which challenged the Christian churches.

However, something similar occurred in Soviet Russia during the same period. There, the totalitarian party professed an atheist and materialist ideology and came into conflict with all religions, which were considered an "opiate of the people." Bolshevism in power transformed its ideology into a dogmatic doctrine, the party into a church, and its leader into an earthly god. Lenin, who resisted the glorification of his person while he was alive, was immediately deified after his death in 1924 by the establishment of a cult around his embalmed body. His corpse was preserved and venerated in a mausoleum built in Red Square in front of the Kremlin Wall, very much in the manner of the ancient saints of the Orthodox Church. The sacralization of his thought, which became Leninism in its dogmatized form, opened the way to the sacralization of the Communist Party and the deification of Stalin, who was the brightest star in the universal communist firmament from the end of the 1920s until his death in 1953. After the October Revolution, Soviet communism recruited adherents in every part of the world without distinction of nation, race, ethnicity, or religion. It fused with a very wide range of traditions and cultures while conserving its original universalism. Its organization, the Third International, was simply the universal church of a political religion, and it continued to exist until the Second World War and had activists in every country and of every race. With this universality of principles and activism, the communist religion was clearly distinguishable from the fascist and national-socialist religions, in spite of the fact that it took on some strongly nationalistic connotations within the different movements and regimes it inspired. Indeed, fascism and Nazism were unshakable in their hostility to any form of universalism or egalitarian humanism, even though they, in turn, had ambitions to transcend the national state and enter an institutional and ideological dimension founded on new imperial communities. Ultimately they remained tied to nationalistic and racist concepts based on the principle of inequality between men, nations, and races.

Though the Second World War led to the definitive destruction of the fascist and national-socialist religions and condemned them to eternal damnation in the collective memory, it did not mean the end of the sacrali-

zation of politics. In the second half of the twentieth century, its intensity and durability varied and manifested itself in some of the old Western democratic states in a more or less explicit and institutional manner as a civil religion that coexisted peacefully with traditional religions. In other parts of the world during the same period, new or revitalized political religions appeared: new leaders were transfigured into living myths and venerated by the masses. Many lives were sacrificed on the altars of deified secular entities so that those entities could triumph. In Africa and Asia, the sacralization of politics was on the whole typical of the new states that emerged from the demise of colonialism. In these countries, the establishment of a system of beliefs, myths, and rituals that sacralized the independence struggle, the founding fathers of liberation, and the dominant party were an integral part of the plan to create unity and a collective identity. That same postwar period saw another phase in the expansion of the communist political religion, which was reinvigorated by pride in a great and powerful empire and the birth of more communist regimes in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. As in the Soviet Union, the new communist regimes that were created in the second half of the twentieth century took on the typical features of a religious institution as they imposed Marxist ideology as an indisputable truth, consecrated the party as the only depository and interpreter of doctrine, celebrated rituals relating to revolutionary events and heroes, and worshipped the supreme and enlightened leader.

From the end of the Second World War until the end of the twentieth century, communism was, together with nationalism, the most universal manifestation of the sacralization of politics in the contemporary world, although its characteristics changed from one communist regime to another and from one period in their history to another. Following the collapse of the communist regimes, communism as a political religion has either disappeared or is in decline almost everywhere. In those countries where it is still in power, its sacralization has been considerably reduced in relation to the past, whereas various forms of nationalism continue to be the most universal manifestations of the sacralization of politics in the contemporary world, although the intensity varies. Everywhere in the world, buildings, monuments, and statues are used for the symbolic representation of the nation, its history, its institutions, and its heroes. Everywhere in the world, the national flag is considered a sacred symbol, and every state has an anthem that exalts the nation's virtues, glories, and immortality in a tone that can only be described as religious. Everywhere in the world, public holidays and majestic ceremonies are on the state's liturgical calendar, renewing and perpetuating the unity and identity of the nation through a ritual commemoration of historical events and personalities.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

I believe that the examples I have just given are sufficient to demonstrate the importance of the sacralization of politics in contemporary history. In recent years, studies of civil and political religions have become increasingly common among historians, of politics and of religions, not to mention sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, theologians, art historians, and historians of social behavior. The interpretation of totalitarian movements and political phenomena as political or civil religions is still a matter of debate and controversy. Some scholars even dispute the very existence of such things; they consider the political phenomena that express secular religiosity through myths, rituals, and symbols to be nothing more than propaganda devices to seduce the masses. According to this point of view, anyone who studies a political phenomenon as a religion either does not know what a religion is or is the victim of an illusion, because he or she believes in the existence of a "never-never-religion," a conceptual equivalent of Peter Pan's island. Even if this were the case, the historian would still not be able to elude the problem of why the victims of a "never-never-religion" (i.e., those who believed in the existence of political religions) have become increasingly numerous, particularly during the period of totalitarian states and movements. When I speak of victims, I am not referring to believers in totalitarian religions but to their adversaries who considered them to be a real and deadly threat to human civilization. As we shall see, these victims included academics with wholly secular mentalities who were disinclined to let themselves be deceived by the illusion of nonexistent realities, such as Bertrand Russell and Raymond Aron. They also included Catholic believers, intellectuals, and militants such as Luigi Sturzo and Jacques Maritain, and Protestant theologians such as Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. Given the competence of these thinkers on religious matters and the reliability of their observations on totalitarian religions, it is extremely difficult to understand how their perception of totalitarianism as a political religion could be the product of an illusion or attributable to their ignorance of what a religion is.

As someone who has been studying political beliefs and myths for more than thirty years, I have dealt with the sacralization of politics in contemporary history and have come across striking examples in the nineteenth-century struggle for Italian unification, in the modernist vanguard during the early decades of the twentieth century, and more particularly in fascism. I wrote an in-depth study of fascist political religion, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, the original Italian edition of which went through several editions and has been translated into English and now French. It provoked a great deal of comment, most of it approving, and

became the model or at least the inspiration for further research into the same field and on the question of civil and political religions. I mention the success of this previous work solely in order to demonstrate the current high level of interest in the sacralization of politics and more particularly the question of totalitarian religions among many academics in various disciplines. Further confirmation of this comes from the creation in 2000 of *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, a journal entirely devoted to the study of these phenomena.

This work is a critical introduction to the study of the sacralization of politics through a combination of historical and theoretical analyses. It is supposed to provide the reader with the essential tools for identifying the general characteristics of the phenomenon by referring to significant historical examples and applying some preliminary definitions. It also aims to specify and distinguish civil and political religions according to differing historical circumstances and various ideological mixtures while identifying similarities, affinities, differences, and special features. The historical examples have been chosen with particular attention to the more exuberant and intense periods of the sacralization of politics, namely the era of the democratic revolutions in America and France, the First World War, and the era of totalitarian states. The preliminary definitions suggest an interpretative framework that could aid the conceptual clarification of a subject that continues to be highly confused. The review of the principle interpretations of the sacralization of politics, with the related bibliographical references, makes no claim to be exhaustive, but the intention is to provide the reader with the essential information for further examination of the questions and problems raised in each chapter, which I will briefly summarize here.

The first chapter deals with the general problem of a secular religion, of which civil and political religions are a particular manifestation, and looks at this in the light of the principal interpretations of religious phenomena in order to verify whether there is a religious dimension to politics *qua* politics and whether it is legitimate to study some political phenomena as civil and political religions. The next chapter outlines the historical background to the more important manifestations of the sacralization of politics in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The third and fourth chapters are devoted to examining the relationship between the sacralization of politics and totalitarian states between the world wars; they combine theoretical analyses and historical accounts using the reports and interpretations of contemporary observers, philosophers, historians, sociologists, political scientists, and theologians. The fifth chapter takes up the historical profile again and deals with the principal manifestations of the sacralization of politics during the second half of the twentieth century. In the final chapter, I attempt to identify the theoretical nature

of civil or political religion in relation to other ways in which the religious and political dimensions come together. To achieve this goal, I formulate definitions, distinctions, and explanations within the different contexts in which a religion of politics can manifest itself, in accordance with the conceptual differentiation between a civil religion, which involves forms of sacralization of politics in conjunction with democratic ideologies and regimes, and a political religion, which involves the sacralization of politics by antidemocratic ideologies and regimes.

The greater attention devoted in this book to totalitarian religions and especially to communist political religions is due to their greater importance in contemporary history. The sacralization of politics achieved its greatest presence and intensity in the modern world through totalitarian regimes. However, it must be pointed out that totalitarianism was not the inevitable result of the sacralization of politics, although the presence of the phenomenon was certainly one of the conditions that made totalitarianism possible. However obvious it might appear, it is also worth clarifying that the study of totalitarianism as a political religion does not imply that this aspect provides the only explanation of its nature and historical significance. The study of both democratic civil religions and totalitarian political ones draws the historian's attention to the political dimension, which is the predominant one in historical reality.

Whereas totalitarian regimes, by their very nature, lead inevitably to the establishment of a political religion (by turning their concept of life into a dogma, deifying the single party and its leaders, and imposing a cult and code of commandments to be obeyed), a civil religion is not always to be found in a democratic regime. Quite possibly, this civil religion will not operate through coercion and an institutionalized system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols. Some people believe that no political collectivity could possibly maintain its unity and identity over time without creating some form of lay religion founded on a code of shared beliefs and civic values, which are needed to integrate the individual into society and to avoid disintegration and increasing internal fragmentation from conflicts of values and interests. This is meant to be particularly true of a collectivity organized on a democratic basis: according to this argument, no democracy can exist without a civil religion that educates its citizens in loyalty to its institutions and devotion to the common good. On the other hand, others believe that the creation of any type of civil religion, however noble its aims and ideals, could constitute a danger to democracy, because it would contain the inherent risk of tempting conformism, intolerance, and discrimination precisely because it is a form of sacralization of politics through a system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols.

This latter problem is briefly referred to at the end of this work, which deals with the religions of politics as they have been experienced in the

past and not as a problem for the present or the future. If by reading this book someone is inspired to dream up a religion of politics or to deplore its absence, this person would be acting contrary to the spirit in which it was written. However, the reader will be entering into the spirit of the work if he or she is encouraged to take seriously all the manifestations of the sacralization of politics, which have for so long been ignored or treated with scathing contempt out of a misplaced desire to demystify. All too often they have been seen as mere propaganda expedients or remnants of past superstitions revamped as political devices.

From a historical and theoretical point of view, the controversies over the existence and nature of civil and political religions, and over the categories used to interpret them, are very probably destined to continue for some time, as always happens with historical problems that concern the meaning of human existence and our judgment of it. A debate about the existence of the religions of politics has nothing in common with a debate about the existence of life on Venus. This is particularly true of the historical experience of totalitarian political religions, which took up so great a part of the history of the twentieth century with consequences that profoundly marked human destiny and our consciousness of who we are. The experiments in totalitarianism were a reality: at the time of their triumph, totalitarian regimes exercised a fascination that equaled the power of a religious movement, and like religions they inspired fanatical enthusiasm, implacable hatred, generous sacrifice, ferocious brutality, hope of redemption, and campaigns of annihilation.

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 Régime*, 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 (*fascians* 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 wreak 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, disenchanted 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.