

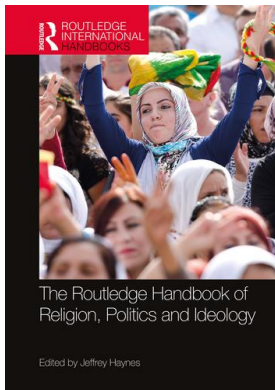
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ITALY

Luca Ozzano

The *Risorgimento* and the kingdom of Italy

To understand the complex entanglement between politics and religion in contemporary Italy, it is necessary first to analyse its historical roots. When the process of the unification of Italy, commonly known as *Risorgimento* (resurgence) started, between the late 18th and the early 19th centuries, the Catholic Church still enjoyed considerable influence on the peninsula. On the one hand, the pope ruled the Papal States, which included today's Lazio region, and most of Marche, Umbria and Emilia Romagna; on the other, as the leader of Christianity, the pope had a considerable influence on the other Italian states.

Because of the fear of losing its territories, and in opposition to the *Risorgimento's* motto "Free church in a free state", aimed at the institutional separation between the religious and the political realm, the Vatican was not particularly favourable to the unification process. This did not prevent some Catholic thinkers from enthusiastically supporting it. The most popular of them probably was Vincenzo Gioberti, a Catholic priest born in Turin (the city which became the centre and the driving force of the unification process). In his book, *Del primato morale e civile degli italiani* (*Of the Italians' moral and civil primacy*), he proposed a solution for the unification process that saw the future Italian state as a federation and the pope as its leader (Gioberti 1846). This political project, shared by other circles of Catholic intellectuals, became known as neo-Guelphism (after the name of the Italian pro-Church parties in the Middle Ages). This faction became particularly enthusiastic in 1846, when they hoped that Giovanni Mastai Ferretti, elected pope as Pius IX, might support their cause: a hope that soon proved misplaced, when the new pope made clear his condemnation of liberalism, modernism and secularism.

The ideological leader of the *Risorgimento* himself, Giuseppe Mazzini, was deeply religious (although, rather than a follower of the Church of Rome, he seemed to see himself as the prophet of a new "religion of humanity" to come) (Verucci 1996, p. 8) and believed that the emancipation of peoples and faith were strictly connected. In his works, he openly invited the nationalist patriots and the clergy to give up their reciprocal hostility and embrace each other, since "religion is a need ... for peoples" and "every *social* revolution is essentially religious" (Mazzini 2005, p. 430). He also conceived in religious terms the transformation of Europe, speaking of a "holy alliance of peoples" to build democracy against the "league of princes" (Mazzini 2005, p. 671). Although a significant section of the clergy was against the process of

unification (not least because it entailed expropriation of the Pontifical States), some Catholic priests (such as Enrico Tazzoli, executed by the Austrians in 1852) were enthusiastic supporters of the nationalist movement and even participated in the clandestine activity of the pro-unification movement. Liberal Catholics also supported the movement, and many of them even shared anti-clerical feelings, believing that the Church needed to renew and to give up its corruption and political involvement to return to its spiritual function and adapt to the changes of society and culture (Verucci 1996, pp. 4–5).

Despite the role played by Catholicism in the unification process, the political elites of the new Italian Kingdom were mostly marked by a rationalist, secularist and often anti-clerical ideology aimed at reducing the Church's influence on society. In 1848, the *Statuto Albertino* (the Constitution of the Kingdom of Sardinia, which in 1861 also became the Constitution of the unified Italian Kingdom) established the separation between Church and state and granted freedom of belief to religious minorities such as the Jews and the Waldensians, a small but influential Protestant group. (Broadly speaking, the influence of Protestant ideas played a significant role in the development of the idea of separation between Church and state among the Italian ruling class, including Prime Minister Cavour) (Conti 2011). The Siccardi laws (1850) further deepened this institutional separation by abolishing ecclesiastical tribunals and the Church's possibility to grant asylum and cancelling tax exemptions for religious buildings. These laws created a polarisation between the Catholics and Prime Minister Cavour and his entourage, which persuaded Cavour to approve even harsher anti-clerical laws, such as the Rattazzi law (1955), which abolished several religious orders regarded as organisations without social utility and confiscated their buildings and property (Verucci 1996). In the meantime, the process of territorial unification also implied the conquest of the Papal States, which culminated in 1870 with the annexation of Rome, which subsequently became the capital city of the Italian Kingdom. The pope refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the latter, withdrew to the Vatican and considered himself a political prisoner. In the following years, there was a lively debate among the clergy and the wider Catholic community about whether believers should participate in elections, both as candidates and voters. The issue was resolved in 1874 when the Vatican made official the *Non expedit* principle, which forbade such participation (Marotta 2011): a circumstance that significantly slowed down the process of the development of Christian political parties in Italy.

In the meantime, however, the Church put into place a strategy of promotion of Christian associationism in civil society, which also sought, from the last decades of the 19th century, to counterbalance the growing influence of the socialist movement. This proved crucial for the development in Italy of the so-called “white subculture” (particularly entrenched in the north-east regions) (Diamanti 2009). In 1874, when the *Non expedit* was made official, the Church also upgraded its social agenda by creating the *Opera dei Congressi* (work of the congress), a hierarchical organisation controlled by the Holy See, which aimed at coordinating the activities of Italy's Catholic associations. In the following years, this further promoted the growth of a wide network of associations, cooperatives and mutual aid organisations (Menozzi 1997, Verucci 1999), a development which, according to Kalyvas's (1996) well-known thesis, inadvertently contributed decades later to the rise of the Christian democracy movement. Indeed, this phenomenon was not simply an economic endeavour but explicitly aimed to create a “Christian society”. This was made clear in 1891 in Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which urged Catholics to defend and spread religious values in society and support the poorest and the workers. This became the basis for the Church's Social Doctrine (Coppa 1995).

During the last decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, anti-religious and anti-clerical feelings were particularly strong in the growing socialist movement (although the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (Italian Socialist Party – PSI) was created only in 1892, organised

socialist and anarchist groups that had existed in the country since the 1860s and 1870s). The members of the latter shared a rationalist and usually atheistic vision of society: some (such as Andrea Costa, who was also a Freemason) with the explicit aim to erase religion from the Italian society; others (such as Leonida Bissolati) with a more pragmatic position, seeing religion as a private matter irrelevant for the socialist struggle (Conti 2011).

The emergence and growth of socialism also deeply affected the Vatican. The new pope, Pius X (1903–1914), put forward the *Il fermo proposito* encyclical in 1905, which softened the *Non expedit* by allowing Catholic participation in those electoral colleges where the victory of an anti-clerical candidate was possible. The creation of a Catholic party was still forbidden. The Catholics' participation was further enhanced by the Gentiloni Pact (1913) that institutionalised the alliance with the moderates in parliament. However, the creation of a “legitimate” Catholic party, the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (Italian Popular Party – PPI), was possible only in 1919, one year after the official revocation of the *Non expedit*. Although led by a cleric, Don Luigi Sturzo, the party rejected the label of a confessional party and showed a significant social and pro-democratic orientation in line with the growing modernist movement within the Church, “which attempted to synchronise Catholic theology with democracy” (Moos 1945, p. 270). Indeed, the party had a mixed constituency, including both traditional and liberal wings, and Sturzo's attention for the poor, and particularly for the conditions of the peasants, drew accusations of Bolshevism from his conservative opponents. Although in Sturzo's case the allegation was exaggerated, it was true that, already in the 1890s, there had been a dialogue between some sectors of the Catholic associational world, and the left, with some Christian groups accepting “the method, the class struggle, and partly also the political realism of historical materialism” (Bedeschi 1974, p. 74).

The new party proved quite successful in the 1919 and 1921 parliamentary elections, garnering in both cases over 20% of the votes. This period, which followed the First World War, and the *biennio rosso* (red biennium) – when Italy was ravaged by mass demonstrations and revolts and seemed on the verge of a socialist revolution – was marked by much political instability. This phase culminated in October 1922, with the Fascist March on Rome and the subsequent appointment of Benito Mussolini as the new prime minister: a situation which quickly ushered in the creation of an authoritarian right-wing regime that ruled Italy until the Second World War.

The fascist regime

The attitude of fascism towards religion was complex and changed significantly during the over two decades of the life of the regime. In the beginning, the fascist movement was marked by a strong revolutionary orientation, also inspired by Mussolini's past as a revolutionary socialist leader, which also included anti-capitalist and anti-clerical stances (in 1910, as a local socialist leader in Forlì, he had promoted the approval of a document declaring the practice of Catholicism incompatible with socialism and forbidding members of the party to take part in religious ceremonies). Such anti-clerical feelings were shared by most of fascism's founders and, more broadly, by other political, cultural and artistic movements close to early fascism, such as the Arditi movement and futurism (Conti 2011). In the 1920s, however, this orientation was largely replaced by a more conservative ideological position, which included a more balanced and nuanced view of religion. This new version of the fascist ideology, in opposition to the *Risorgimento's* focus on the separation between Church and state, identified in Catholicism an essential tenet of the “universal mission” of Rome, in nationalist terms (Scoppola 1971, p. 35). One of the consequences of this change was the *Patti Lateranensi*, a 1929 agreement between the

Italian state and the Holy See, which implied a mutual recognition between the former and the latter, and the restitution to the Catholic Church of some privileges, such as the declaration of Catholicism as the state religion, financial compensation for the annexation of the Papal States, the institution of compulsory religious education in public schools and the endorsement of the Church's position about marriage as a sacrament (Coppa 1995). As a consequence of this, the Church disavowed the PPI – with Sturzo going into exile to the UK and the US – and supported (or at least accepted to coexist with) the regime.

Notwithstanding, the relations between the PPI and the Vatican remained tense. This was because the Church was perceived by the fascists as a competitor for the education of the youth and a dangerous autonomous centre of power parallel to the regime. This was particularly true because the Church, after the rise of fascism, had reorganised its civil society movements, with the creation of *Azione Cattolica* (Catholic Action – AC): an association, organised by age and sex, meant to follow the entire life of a person, just like the regime institutions tried to do. Especially from the early 1930s, when the regime became more explicit in its attempt to monopolise education, this organisation became a bone of contention between the fascist regime and the Vatican (Scoppola 1971, pp. 255–280). Indeed, most of the *Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democracy – DC) leaders who ruled Italy after the fall of the regime had been raised politically within AC and the Catholic university students' associations.

In the meantime, anti-fascist intellectuals were also considering the issue of religion and its role in social mobilisation (also in the context of the analysis of the development and success of the regime). In doing so, they were often influenced by the idealistic philosophies of the time, proposed in Italy by thinkers such as Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile (the latter was deeply involved in the regime, while the former, with his concept of “religion of freedom”, became a point of reference for the regime's opponents) (Croce 1965, pp. 7–40). In this context, some left-wing and even Marxist intellectuals also started to question the possibility of analysing reality along purely economic lines. In doing so, they sometimes reconsidered the role of faith and organised religion. This is particularly the case with one of the main Marxist intellectuals of the 20th century, Antonio Gramsci, who endured life imprisonment because of his role in the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (Italian Communist Party – PCI) and his opposition to fascism. In the context of his well-known theses on the idea of hegemony and the role of intellectuals, he also studied very seriously the role of religion (often with a focus on Catholicism in Italy) not only as a tool for the bourgeoisie's control of people but also as the fulfilment of a need of the human spirit. In this framework, his analysis aimed at understanding how communism could replace religion, not only as a mobilising force but also in terms of beliefs and routines able to give meaning to the everyday life of the common people. For example, one of his *Quaderni dal carcere* (his most important work, written while in jail) is entirely devoted to AC, its history and its organisation; among other religion-related issues, Gramsci also analysed the process that had led the Vatican to withdraw its support of the PPI and to strike a bargain with the regime, after the PPI's rapprochement to left-wing oppositions and Mussolini's clerical turn (Portelli 1976, Gramsci 2014). Of course, this did not imply an acceptance of religion in personal and ideological terms; indeed, Gramsci and the other communist and socialist ideologues remained fiercely atheist in ideological terms, and anti-clerical in the context of the Italian power struggle.

This was not true in the cases of other left-wing activists and ideologues who were active in the last phases of the fascist regime. In this period, a number of Catholics participated in the development of the *Resistenza* (resistance) movement, whose major strands were however represented by the followers of left-wing ideologies. Among the different groups of regime opponents, new syntheses between Catholicism and Marxism also developed. The most significant of the latter probably was the *Movimento dei Cattolici Comunisti* (Movement of Communist

Catholics), created in 1943, which later became the *Partito della Sinistra Cristiana* (Party of the Christian Left). Under the leadership of Adriano Ossicini and Franco Rodano, the group participated in the armed partisan activity against the regime, and after the fall of fascism, it became part of the PCI (where, however, this faction was mostly marginalised because of its religiosity, at least until the 1960s) (Bedeschi 1974, Giammanco 1989). The group's legacy was however deeply influential on Italian politics. In the 1970s, Rodano became one of the main advisors of the PCI leader Enrico Berlinguer and one of the architects of the party's rapprochement to the DC party. Ossicini was actively involved in the centre-left governments of the mid-1990s (Ossicini 1998, Galli 2004, p. 176).

The Republic and the DC hegemony

Although the new republican constitution was a common endeavour of the different strands of the anti-fascist struggle (including Catholics, socialists, communists and smaller liberal groups), the new DC party, which clearly won the 1948 parliamentary elections against an alliance of socialists and communists, became the new hegemonic political actor in Italy. This was partly a consequence of the inclusion of Italy in the western bloc (which made a rise to power of the left almost unthinkable), the DC's role in including democratic institutions previously accepting the fascist regime and the fact that the demise of this latter had left the party "with only insignificant rivals to the right of the working class parties" (Lipset and Rokkan 1967, p. 39). As a consequence of this hegemonic role, the DC developed as a microcosm of Italian society, which included very different groups and ideologies, from right-wing Catholicism to Christian socialism (Lyon 1967). Some scholars contend that the party did not have a unified national organisation. Instead, it was a "confederation of factions", nothing more than "the sum of the organised power of the factions on the ground" (Baccetti 2007, p. 22).

Particularly at the start of DC rule, we can find in the party a very strong left-wing faction led by Giuseppe Dossetti, an AC member and professor of law who had been a partisan and a supporter of the republican cause. With some colleagues (including Amintore Fanfani, one of the future leaders of the party, and Giorgio La Pira, who later became mayor of Florence), he proposed a platform strongly inspired by ideals of social justice and the idea that a strengthening of the state might serve as an antidote against aggressive capitalism. Although he even had some restraints about Italy's adhesion to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation because of his pacifist vision, these stances were not the result of Marxist influence, but the result of a "totalising" reading of the social doctrine of the Church (a position that some regarded as "integrist"). Paradoxically, although some of its positions were close to the ideas of the Marxist left, this faction was also less supportive of state secularism than other DC groups and was quite sensitive to the Vatican's concerns (Malgeri 2005). In the early years of the DC history, Dossetti managed to become a major player within the party, becoming its vice-secretary and gathering the support of about one-third of its cadre. Although Dossetti suddenly withdrew from politics to become a monk in the early 1950s, some of his disciples (also including Aldo Moro, who in the 1960s and 1970s played a major role in the openings to the left parties) later became influential DC leaders with their faction, *Iniziativa Democratica* (Democratic Initiative). In the following decades, this group, along with a more conventional "progressive" DC faction, *La Base* (The Base), was a constant and significant presence in the party (Galli and Facchi 1962, Galli 1993).

As mentioned above, the party was a very complex entity, which also included powerful conservative and even right-wing factions ill at ease with the dialogue with left-wing parties and the plans to expand the state's role in the economy. Between the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s – in a very tense political climate, with many actors afraid of the possibility of a military

coup – some DC factions even coalesced to try to sabotage the projects to include the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (Italian Socialist Party – PSI) in the cabinet, and to rely instead on the votes of the right-wing *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Italian Social Movement – MSI). This project, which seemed for a while to become a reality in 1960 with the Tambroni cabinet, was however foiled by the other DC factions, which forced Tambroni to resign (Galli 2004).

Another somewhat progressive influence on the party was instead carried out by the representatives of Catholic trade unionism, such as Carlo Donat Cattin. Indeed, the hegemonic role of the party in the Italian social and political systems was also made possible by the existence of a wide associational fabric including trade unions, civic and professional associations, entrepreneurial activities and self-help organisations that cooperated with the DC (La Palombara 1964). This system, associated with a “white” political culture, was particularly entrenched in the north-eastern and southern regions of Italy (this latter however marked by underdevelopment and a more family-related culture); while in large areas of central Italy and the developing northern industrial cities, a “red” political culture predominated, based on the PCI (Almond and Verba 1963, Diamanti 2009). This quasi-bipolar system, marked however by the impossibility of a change of government as a consequence of Italy’s international positioning, prompted the definition of Italy as a case of “imperfect bipartitism” (Galli 1966). An energetic scholarly debate also developed around the inclusion of the country in the category of polarised pluralist party systems (according to Sartori’s typology), criticised by some because of the largely constructive role played by the PCI in its consociational relation with the DC (Sartori 1976, Farneti 1993).

A discussion also developed – especially after a partial downsizing of the DC since the 1960s and the need to include the socialists in the government – around the fact that the party really was “the” Italian Catholic party. Some scholars indeed maintained that the political unity of Italian Catholics had indeed always been a “myth” (Pace 1995). It is true however that until the 1980s, no significant Italian party except the DC displayed an open Catholic identity. The only partial exception was the MSI, a small right-wing party that associated a neo-fascist identity with conservative Catholicism (although the party was not alien from neo-pagan and even anti-clerical positions inspired by the early ideology of the fascist movement and other strands of contemporary radical right thought) (Ignazi 1994, 2018).

In the meantime, the Catholic Church and the Catholic world were also undergoing a significant process of renewal and change, which increased with the papacy of John XXIII (1958–1963), who highlighted the role of the service of the Church, seemed to be open to the pacifist movement and softened the Church’s attitude towards communism, opening the possibility of a dialogue. In 1962, he summoned the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which paved the way for a new role of the laity and religious movements within the Church, and innovated the Church’s attitude towards religious liberty and scientific research. Notwithstanding, the Council also showed a Church deeply divided between its conservative and integrist branches and its progressive ones, which made it very difficult to reach a compromise on several issues. The legacy of the Council and the interpretation of the documents it produced was therefore also disputed, with conservatives considering them only as general and not binding suggestions (Garelli *et al.* 2003, Faggioli 2012, 2016). In the following years, this did not prevent the development of an increasing pluralism within the Church, which was mainly brought about by a new active role of the Church in society and the development of new laity-based Catholic movements and civil society associations. Within this associational world, a previously unknown political pluralism was also observable, with the development since the late 1960s of left-wing groups inspired by the Liberation Theology thought, sometimes in open conflict with the Church hierarchies (Tosi and Vitale 2009), and, on the opposite side, of conservative movements such as *Opus Dei* and *Comunione e Liberazione* (Communion and Liberation – CL). This latter, particularly, became

well entrenched in the industrialised areas of northern Italy and developed close connections with the entrepreneurial and political worlds, becoming a powerful faction within the DC (Giorgi and Polizzi 2015).

The party, in the meantime, had partially downsized, and in the 1963 parliamentary elections, it only garnered 38% of the votes (a considerable loss in comparison with ten years before, when the party had nearly achieved a majority of the suffrage). The 1960s were therefore marked by the permanent inclusion of the PSI in government, which inaugurated the “*centrosinistra*” (centre-left) era. This new coalition was initially driven by a strongly reformist agenda, which led in a few years to the nationalisation of electricity production, the creation of compulsory middle school for boys and girls up to 14 years and the institution of the regions (dictated by the constitution but never implemented before). However, it soon became a victim of its internal divisions and quickly turned into a mainly tactical alliance. In the meantime, the DC also had to face the new popularity of left-wing ideas as a consequence of the 1968 movements and the participation in them of many young Catholics. The need to prop up the party’s rule and to face a harsh season of right-wing and left-wing violence even led, in the mid-1970s, to an unofficial co-optation of the PCI into the government (which was engineered on the DC side by Moro and on the PCI side by Rodano, who had become one of the main advisors to the new party secretary, Enrico Berlinguer), which became known as *compromesso storico* (historical compromise). In 1978, however, Moro’s assassination, carried out by the left-wing terrorist group *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades), abruptly put an end to this experience.

That year proved a crucial turning point for the history of relations between politics and religion in Italy, and also for another major event: the death of Pope Paul VI (1963–1978) and the election to the Holy See of Cardinal Wojtyła, John Paul II, born in Poland and fiercely hostile to communism. His figure indeed proved central to the end of the honeymoon between the DC and the PCI and to the promotion of conservative values among Catholics. He also played an innovative role within the Church by further promoting the role of laity-based movements, which flourished during his papacy: hence the nickname “Pope of the movements” commonly associated with Wojtyła (Faggioli 2016).

In the meantime, secularisation progressed in the country, as also shown by landmark legislation such as the legalisation of divorce (1970) and abortion (1978): both upheld by two very controversial referenda in 1974 and 1981. Moreover, although the issue of the recognition of LGBT+ identities and rights was still taboo, openly gay intellectuals, such as Pierpaolo Pasolini, were now part of the public discussion. The referendum on abortion, promoted by the Catholic *Movimento per la Vita* (Movement for Life), proved a particularly challenging test for Italy’s secularism, with a livelier debate at the civil society level than in the political system. Indeed, the small but very combative *Partito Radicale* (Radical Party – PR) was almost alone in defending the new legislation on abortion, while most political forces opposed it or (as also in the case of the PCI) showed a lukewarm stance. Italy was also becoming more plural in religious terms (a trend which increased in the 1990s with a flow of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, particularly Morocco). This was also mirrored by politics, with the appointment of prime ministers not belonging to the DC: the republican Spadolini and the socialist Craxi. This latter also signed in 1984 a revision (*Concordato*) of the 1929 agreement (*Patti Lateranensi*) between the Vatican and the fascist regime: among other provisions, the new document confirmed the abolition of Catholicism as the state religion (already envisaged by the 1948 Constitution), made religious teaching in public schools optional and made possible *intese* (agreements) between the state and the non-Catholic faiths; in the same year, the first *intesa* was signed with the Waldensians (Giorgi 2018).

The 1990s upheaval

The relation between religion and politics in Italy abruptly changed in the early 1990s, when most of the Italian political ruling class was swept away by a widespread political scandal developed around bribery allegations, commonly known as *Tangentopoli*, and by the following popular protests. The DC was particularly involved in this turmoil, also considering that one of its historical leaders, Giulio Andreotti, was also taken to trial because of alleged connections with Sicily's mafia. Although the party still got a plurality of the votes in the parliamentary elections in April 1992 (with almost 30% of the votes), in the following months, it disintegrated. In this context, the effects of the scandals added to the changes created by the fall of the Soviet Union, which had prompted, since 1989, a reform of the PCI, which had turned into a centre-left reformist party, the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (Democratic Party of the Left – PDS), and was no longer considered by many as unsuitable to govern. Moreover, a referendum held in 1993 changed the electoral law into a quasi-majority one, which made the DC's occupation of the centre of the political system much more difficult, despite the party's strenuous efforts (Giorgi 2013).

It was so that in January 1994, the DC officially ceased to exist and adopted the name of the PPI, after Don Sturzo's pre-fascist Catholic party). In the meantime, however, some conservative factions of the party left it to form the *Centro Cristiano Democratico* (Christian Democratic Centre – CCD), allied with the centre-right, while some progressive ones became part of the PDS (Ignazi 2018). The most striking consequence of the demise of the single Catholic party was however the fact that now many other political parties and political entrepreneurs (including the post-Communist centre-left, which mostly abandoned its previous anti-clerical stances) competed to win the votes of Catholics. Some of these, especially in the south, were won over by the right, where the MSI had also started a process of revision, changing its name into *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance – AN). The main recipients of the haemorrhage of votes from the DC were however two new parties: the *Lega Nord* (Northern League – LN) and *Forza Italia* (Go Italy – FI).

The former was created in 1991 as a federation of northern Italian regionalist parties born in the late 1970s and the 1980s to protest against Rome's centralism and immigration from southern Italy (Biorcio 1999). In some regions, particularly Veneto, where a "white" political culture traditionally predominated (Diamanti 2009), they had however started to erode the DC power base, particularly among the provincial middle class. After *Tangentopoli*, this trend escalated, with the LN gaining more than 8% of the votes in both the 1992 and 1994 elections (which, however, in the second case, turned into almost one-fifth of the total seats, as a consequence of the new electoral law), and becoming the largest party in several northern provinces.

The relation between the LN ideology and religion is a complex matter, because on the one hand, the party strongly relied on a middle class provincial electoral basin, marked by a strong Catholic conservatism, ill at ease with the post-Council Catholic Church (a feeling apparently shared by some of the party leaders, as shown, for example, by the participation in 1995 of the then president of the Chamber of Deputies, Irene Pivetti, to an atonement ritual against the construction of a great mosque in the city of Rome) (Longo 1995). It must also be observed that the main ideologue of the early LN, the political scientist Gianfranco Miglio, was also very close to conservative Catholic circles. On the other hand, however, the party leadership also showed at times contempt towards the Vatican (seen as part of "Rome's elite") and adopted neo-pagan rituals and symbols (including the LN symbol itself, the "Sun of the Alps") to try to forge a distinctive northern Italian identity in opposition to the national state (Bertezzo 2011, Guolo 2011).

As for FI, it was the creation of the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, who built his organisation on the structure and the cadre of his enterprises; hence the label “*partito-azienda*” (company party) (Poli 2001) often used by scholars in reference to the early phases of the party. Berlusconi put forward a pro-free-trade agenda, with references to the Catholic tradition, and was fiercely opposed to the post-communist right. This was crucial to intercept part of the Catholic vote, both in the developed northern regions (where it allied with the LN) and the south (where it allied with AN). In this new centre-right coalition (which managed to win the 1994 and the 2001 elections), Catholic movements also played a significant role. This is particularly the case of the conservative CL movement, very entrenched in the Lombardy entrepreneurial world, which in 1995 managed to get its leader, Roberto Formigoni, elected as the region’s president (a post he occupied for 18 years) (Giorgi and Polizzi 2015). The Catholic Church, facing this new situation, also started to play a more active role in the public sphere and public debates, especially after the election of Camillo Ruini as president of the *Conferenza Episcopale Italiana* (Italian Episcopal Conference – CEI, the organisation of the Italian bishops). Ruini supported the idea that the Church should play an active role in national culture and public debates, and particularly in the discussions on rights. Under his leadership, the Italian Catholic Church carried out the so-called Cultural Project, which precisely aimed at widening the role of Catholicism and the Church at the social level (Magister 2001, Damilano 2006, Ceccarini 2009). Ruini even did not refrain from active lobbying on decision-makers when sensitive issues were at stake – as in the case of the mid-2000s debate on the legalisation of same-sex unions (Ozzano 2015, Ozzano and Giorgi 2016).

Religion-related debates in the 2000s

Both because of the changes in the role of religion in the public sphere engendered by the renewal of the Italian political system and the consequences of the 9/11 attacks and the “war on terror”, the 2000s were marked by a number of debates related to religion (or, simply, to controversial issues framed in religious terms by relevant actors). Some of the discussions were related to bioethics, with debates on the beginning of life (particularly in relation to the controversial law, 40/2004, which put very serious limitations on both assisted procreation and stem cell research) and the end of life (with very lively discussions on euthanasia focused on the cases of Luana Englaro and Piergiorgio Welby); morality and sexuality (particularly in relation to the attempts to legalise same-sex unions) and the presence of religious symbols in the public sphere (about the presence of the crucifix in public schools and other public institutions, and the inclusion of a reference to the Christian roots of Europe in the preamble to the draft EU Constitution) (Ozzano and Giorgi 2013, 2016, Turina 2013, Ozzano 2015).

In many cases, however, the debates were related to Islam, the multicultural society and security, face to face with the jihadist attacks in the West. As mentioned above, from the late 1990s, the LN mostly dropped its rhetoric against southern Italian immigrants, vigorously opposing growing immigration from abroad, especially when they involved Muslims. In this decade, the party led the entire centre-right coalition in a fully-fledged crusade against new immigration flows, mosques, the headscarf and Islamic ceremonies, such as ritual slaughtering. Alongside right-wing politicians, a number of intellectuals were also at the forefront of this debate. Among the most prominent was Magdi Allam, an Egyptian-born journalist who became increasingly critical towards Islam and eventually converted to Catholicism, and Oriana Fallaci, a well-known writer and journalist, who after 9/11 wrote a series of pamphlets against Islam, and even provocatively threatened to blow up a mosque under construction near Florence (Talbot 2006, Fallaci 2009, Allam 2010, Ozzano and Giorgi 2016).

At the ideological level, the most striking feature regarding religion was the emergence of two different political discourses based on Catholicism. On the one hand, the official position of the Catholic Church, followed by progressive and centrist Catholic politicians, maintained cautious support for a multicultural idea of society and the welcoming of Muslim migrants; on the other hand, the LN and many anti-Muslim ideologues started instead to use Catholicism as a marker for Italian/European/Western identity in the context of right-wing populist positions strongly opposing multiculturalism and the presence of Muslims, regarded as a threat to Europe's identity and security. In this context, the LN positions on Islam and those on other controversial issues, such as LGBT+ rights, were just different faces of the same ideological perspective, focused on an idealised local community marked by a white, Christian and heterosexual identity, and rejecting every sort of diversity (McDonnell 2016, Ozzano 2016).

As shown above, since the early 1990s, the post-communist centre-left had mostly dropped its previous anti-religious discourses, and its representatives had accepted the striking of alliances with Catholic parties. In the 2000s, this trend progressed, first with the creation of *La Margherita* (the daisy), a new party with a predominant progressive Catholic identity, which also included however liberal and socialist factions: the party proved rather successful, garnering 14.5% of the votes in the 2001 elections (when the party leader, the former mayor of Rome Francesco Rutelli was also the centre-left coalition leader). In the following years, however, the influence of former Prime Minister Romano Prodi, a progressive Catholic with a long career as a state bureaucrat, proved crucial in leading the whole centre-left coalition towards the creation of a single, wide, reformist party. This process culminated in October 2007 with the creation of the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party – PD), a party with a complex identity, which included Catholic, post-communist and other types of identities and factions. In the same period, in the centre-right, Berlusconi also managed to impose a merger between FI and AN, creating the *Popolo della Libertà* (People of Freedom – PDL), a situation that seemed to suggest for a while that Italy was going to become a two-party system. Quite significantly, Catholics deployed powerful factions in both parties. This might also help explain both why religion- and identity-related debates were so prominent in that decade and the weakness in some of these debates of the centre-left coalition (where religion-related issues were often a wedge between Catholics and post-communists), which, for example, prevented the coalition from approving a law legalising same-sex unions in the mid-2000s (Baccetti 2007, Ozzano and Giorgi 2016, Ignazi 2018).

The rise of populism

Between the late 2000s and the early 2010s, Italian politics was again significantly changed by the effects of the global economic crisis, which prompted the rise to prominence of populist orientations. In this context, in the early 2010s, the new *Movimento Cinquestelle* (Five Star Movement – M5S), a grassroots-based party with an unclear position on the left-right continuum, was particularly successful. Although this party was not significantly concerned about religion- and identity-related issues, this was not true for the LN, which went on with its process of transformation into a fully-fledged right-wing nationalist and populist party, which culminated in 2013 with the rise of Matteo Salvini to the leadership of the party. Salvini decided to drop the northern Italian roots of the LN (the name of the party also became simply “*Lega*”) and to adopt a nationalist rhetoric focusing on Christian conservatism and opposition to immigration. In times of economic crisis and the growing role of social media, Salvini's rhetoric proved immensely popular, making the *Lega* the largest party at the end of the decade, with a peak of almost 35% of the votes in the 2019 EU parliament elections (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018, Ozzano 2019, 2020). The *Lega*'s ideology, often referred to as *sovranista* (someone following the ideology of sover-

eighty), now focused on Italian national identity, opposed immigration and the European Union (with an oscillation between hard and soft Euro-sceptic positions) and proposed pro-free-trade economic positions, mitigated however by “Chauvinist welfare” recipes. Quite interestingly, similar political positions were shared by another right-wing party, *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy – FdI), which came from a very different political tradition, as the heir of the post-fascist MSI and AN. Although FdI was led by a woman, Giorgia Meloni, who partly mirrored the French populist leader Marine Le Pen in her re-evaluation of the role of women in the public sphere, FdI was even more aggressive than Salvini's *Lega* on some morality politics issues, for example, by consistently supporting a pro-life platform in relation to abortion (Nadeau 2018).

As for Salvini (although he openly supported conservative Christian initiatives such as the World Congress of Families, held in Verona in March 2019), he preferred to focus mainly on immigration. In this context, as already mentioned, religion and religious symbols represented a crucial tenet of the Western/Italian identity affirmed by the party. During and after the campaigns for the 2018 parliamentary elections and the 2019 EU parliament elections, the *Lega* leader also stood out for his use of religious symbols, such as the Gospel and the crucifix, and open religious references, during political rallies and even parliamentary debates. This choice was harshly rebuked not only by many political opponents but also by the Vatican itself (Molle 2019, Ozzano 2019).

Concluding remarks

To sum up, the role of religion in Italian politics and political ideologies has undergone significant changes in the past two centuries. Particularly, since World War II, it is possible to observe two parallel processes: on the one hand, a significant secularisation of society, particularly in terms of the loss of importance of religion in people's daily lives and a pluralisation of the Italian religious landscape; on the other hand, the Catholic Church is still regarded as an authoritative institution by many Italians, and Catholic factions enjoy leverage in nearly all political parties and coalitions. This implies the decline of religion as a political ideology in many different ways: from right-wing populism to conservatism, to liberalism, to progressivism. Particularly, in today's Italy, we witness the clash of two religion-based narratives: one inclusionary, centred around Pope Francis and progressive and centrist Catholic groups; the other, exclusionary, if not openly xenophobic, centred around the *Lega* and some conservative and right-wing Catholic associations and groups.

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