Political Religion:

A User's Guide

GEARÓID BARRY

A. James Gregor, *Totalitarianism and Political Religion. An Intellectual History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 320 pp., $65, ISBN 0-80-478130-5.

Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes. The Clash of Religion and Politics, from the Great War to the War on Terror* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 557 pp., ISBN 0-06-058095-7.

Lars Bruun, Karl Christian Lammers & Gert Sørensen (eds.), *European Self-Reflection between Politics and Religion. The Crisis of Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 247 pp., ISBN 1-137-30828-3.

Alessandro Orsini, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades. The Religious Mindset of Modern Terrorists* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press 2011), 317 pp., ISBN 0-8014-4986-4.

Emily Greble, *Sarajevo, 1941–45. Muslims, Christians and Jews in Hitler's Europe* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 276 pp., ISBN 0-8014-4924-5.

Yvonne Maria Werner (ed.), *Christian Masculinity. Men and Religion in Northern Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2011), 322 pp., ISBN 9-0586-7873-7.

In an article published in September 1939, in the very eye of the storm of twentieth-century Europe's 'age of extremes', the British historian Christopher Dawson attempted to get to grips with the temper of his times. Opining on what he saw as the failure of nineteenth-century liberal individualism and its deleterious encroachment on spiritual values, he wrote:

> Now the coming of the totalitarian state marks the emergence of a new type of politics which recognises no limits and seeks to subordinate every social and intellectual activity to its own ends. Thus the new politics are in a sense more idealistic than the old; they are political religions based on a Messianic hope of social salvation. But at the same time they are more realist since they actually

School of Humanities, NUI Galway, Galway, Ireland; gearoid.barry@nuigalway.ie

Contemporary European History, **24**, 4 (2015), pp. 623–638. © Cambridge University Press 2015
doi:10.1017/S0960777315000375

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

involve a brutal struggle for life between rival powers which are prepared to use every kind of treachery and violence to gain their ends.[1]

When not researching medieval Christian encounters with the Mongols, Dawson wrote history with a grand narrative sweep such as he admired in the work of the German historian Oswald Spengler. His output has recently sparked a revival of interest, with claims that he was one of most significant Catholic historians of the century.[2] Yet this Augustinian pessimist was only one of a broader band of contemporary intellectuals – not all of them religious apologists – to brandish the label of 'political religion' as a descriptor, and as a moral warning. Seventy years on, the same moral seriousness characterises several of the books under review here, especially those addressing the more terrifying consequences of political religion in its various forms. For as A. James Gregor declares when introducing his intellectual history of *Totalitarianism and Political Religion*, 'the unnumbered dead of the past century' are surely owed some posthumous explanation:

> Amid all the other factors that contributed to the tragedy, there was a kind of creedal ferocity that made every exchange a matter of existential importance. The twentieth century was host to systems of doctrinal conviction that made unorthodox belief a capital affront, made conflict mortal, and all enterprise sacrificial (Gregor, xi).

The paradigm of 'political religion' offers a valuable and indeed sometimes essential framework for the analysis of the books under consideration here. Nevertheless, the concept has its own tangled history and complex historiography. In this article, I propose first to explore the meanings and debates surrounding the model itself and subsequently to offer a critical assessment of the six books in question.

I

No theoretical sophistication is required to identify the superficial resemblances between the 'new' politics of totalitarianism in the 1930s and traditional revealed religion. Both, notably, are marked by a common emphasis on salvation, sacrifice and the reification of foundational sacred texts. Yet working definitions of 'political religion' as a historiographical tool present a more knotty problem,[3] and the

[1] Christopher Dawson, 'The Claims of Politics', *Scrutiny*, 8, 2 (1939), 136–41, here 138.

[2] For biography of Dawson (1889–1970), see James Hitchcock, 'Christopher Dawson', *American Scholar*, 62, 1 (1993), 111–18. See also Bradley J. Birzer, *Sanctifying the World: The Augustinian Life and Mind of Christopher Dawson* (Front Royal, Va.: Christendom Press, 2007) and the on-going series of republications, 'The Works of Christopher Dawson', The Catholic University of America Press, General Editor Don. J. Briel, available at http://cuapress.cua.edu/books/series.cfm (last visited 20 May 2014).

[3] David D. Roberts has given an excellent and extensive discussion of 'political religion' and its uses and disadvantages as an analytical category, to which I am indebted; David D. Roberts, '"Political Religion" and the Totalitarian Departures of Inter-war Europe: On the Uses and Disadvantages of an Analytical Category', *Contemporary European History*, 18, 4 (2009), 381–414.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conceptual problems surrounding political religion are further exacerbated by the fact that the associated concept of totalitarianism has itself been so vigorously contested.[4]

It is the Italian historian Emilio Gentile who is most readily associated with applying the model of political religion to the history of Europe's age of dictatorships (although he was not the originator of the term itself). First formulated as the 'sacralisation of politics' in a highly influential and much-cited book about the affective appeal of the Italian fascist state, Gentile's concept of political religion continues to be influential – without drawing unanimous endorsement[5] – and can offer a valuable framework for a more detailed exploration of the theme and its attendant challenges.

Gentile's four-part definition seeks to address the common philosophical foundations and para-religious functions of totalitarian movements. Firstly, he considers that within a political religion – such as he adjudges these movements to have been – the secular collective entity that defines the ideology (be it class, race or nation) assumes primacy and supreme moral value over the individual. Secondly, as an expression of such a moral monopoly, every individual is bound by obligations to that same sacralised entity of party, nation or race. Thirdly, the political religion is utopian in the sense that a community of the elect, drawn from the sacralised collective, is invested with a messianic mission, one that will ultimately benefit all humanity. The fourth constitutive element of such a political religion is a 'political liturgy, which includes the worship of a personifying individual and the mythical and symbolic representation of the movement's sacred history'.[6] The emphasis within political religion on the affective and aesthetic dimensions of fascism and communism might lead to the conclusion that it represented no more that the instrumentalisation of traditional religion to beguile the masses, 'a currently voguish revamping of an age-old notion', as Ian Kershaw has described it.[7] For Gentile, however, the core of the fascist political religion was 'an anthropological revolution' fuelled by a symbiosis between leaders and the led.[8] If, as scholars such as Stanley Payne argue, fascism was in fact dynamic and 'revolutionary in its own right' in seeking an alternative

[4] Reviewing the recent literature on fascism, for example, António Costa Pinto has written of 'classificatory "essentialism"' and the 'intuitive and dysfunctional use of the concept of totalitarianism'. António Costa Pinto, 'European Fascism: The Unfinished Handbook', *Contemporary European History*, 21, 2 (2012), 287–300, here 298.

[5] Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), a translation of *Il culto del littorio: La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1993).

[6] Roberts, 'Political Religion', 383; Emilio Gentile, 'The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, interpretations and reflections on the question of secular religion and totalitarianism', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 1, 1 (2000), 18–55, here 22. See also, Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, trans. George Staunton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), translation of Gentile, *Le religioni della politica. Fra democrazie e totalitarismi* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2001).

[7] Roberts, 'Political Religion', 382; Ian Kershaw, 'Hitler and the Uniqueness of Nazism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39, 2 (2004), 239–54, here 250.

[8] Roberts, 'Political Religion', 387.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

modernity, its religious elements represented more than mere manipulation.[9] With due caution, we can argue that such political religions bound leaders and the masses in ways other than the 'top-down' model of the 'totalitarian school' suggests.

Gentile's analytical perspective can be extremely fruitful. However, as the opening quotation from Christopher Dawson indicates, political religion is an explanatory framework for the appeal of extremism which must also be understood within its own anguished historical context. In response to the politics of the 1920s and 1930s, this was a concept brought into intellectual currency by a remarkable and varied group of interwar European intellectuals, whose personal trajectories marked their thinking on political religion. Though writing independently, they were united by the conviction that communism, fascism and Nazism insinuated themselves into the religious imagination and lodged there as a poisonous parody of religion and ethics. As Jorge Dagnino writes of the young intellectuals of Italian Catholic Action in the 1930s, these contemporaries certainly grasped the 'absolutism of politics'.[10] Italians such as Don Luigi Sturzo, Germans such as Erich Vögelin and Austrians such as Franz Borkenau and Franz Werfel not only witnessed authoritarian regimes but also – after varying degrees of harassment – often lived in foreign exile from these same regimes. Writing with the authority of lived experience, and the smell of fascism or the Soviet experiment still in their nostrils, they form what we may refer to as the 'witness-theorists' of political religion.

As early as 1926, for example, the priest-politician Sturzo (former leading light of Italy's Christian Democratic Popular Party) was laying the foundations of a liberal theory of totalitarianism applicable to both fascism and communism from his London exile. From the 1930s Franz Borkenau was intimating his growing disenchantment with Marxism in articles defining and warning of different forms of 'revolutionary autocracies' and anticipating his study of *The Totalitarian Enemy*, published in 1940. This catalogue is not exhaustive, of course, for these individuals were not a homogenous group in terms of religious affiliation or national origins: several were professed Christians, for example, but others were not. The priest-cum-politician Luigi Sturzo, as well as the philosopher Erich Vögelin (who left Germany for universities in the United States) were Catholics, whereas Raymond Aron was a secular French Jew. Prague-born writer Franz Werfel, who fled from Austria to France in 1938 before later emigrating to the United States, was also Jewish. A vehement critic of Hitler, Werfel had, in a series of lectures in Berlin in 1932, already identified National Socialism and Communism as 'ersatz-religions or, if you prefer, ersatz for religion', and as 'authentic children of the nihilistic age'.[11]

[9] Roberts, 'Political Religion', 385; Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1919–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 494.

[10] Jorge Dagnino, 'The Intellectuals of Italian Catholic Action and the Sacralisation of Politics in 1930s Europe', *Contemporary European History*, 21, 2 (2012), 215–33, here 233.

[11] Hans Maier, 'Political Religion: A Concept and its Limitations', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 8, 1 (2007), 5–16, here 9: Werfel's biography is extraordinary; an early novel relating to the Armenian genocide of 1915 was widely read, not least in the United States. His final wartime escape to America included a period of sanctuary at the Marian shrine at Lourdes, in gratitude

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

II

These witness-theorists are impressive not just for their exercise in 'applied history' but equally for their personal courage. Their integrity does not automatically mean that their writing was good history, however; nor does it follow that present-day historians apply their concepts with sufficient discrimination.

The most ambitious application to date of the political religion approach comes in Michael Burleigh's twin volumes *Earthly Powers* and *Sacred Causes* on religion and politics in Europe since the French Revolution, the second of which, covering the period since 1914, is reviewed at more length later. In these highly readable (and highly publicised) books, Burleigh argues in plangent tones that secular movements born out of revolution and the Enlightenment endowed themselves with the trappings of religion, seeing the world in Manichean terms and bearing within themselves 'the seeds of potential fanaticism and human misery. They could become religious dogma, without mercy.'[12]

One serious objection to the political religion approach is that it risks obscuring points of difference between the totalitarian regimes. Ian Kershaw, for example, insists on the unique characteristics of the Nazi dictatorship that risk being flattened by generalising explanations such as political religion, obscuring the particularity of Hitler's charismatic authority which drew on, but was not reducible to, the 'populistic exploitation of naïve "messianic" hopes and illusion among members of a society plunged into comprehensive crisis'.[13] Similarly, and without being hidebound by the idea of political religion, Richard Overy's impressive comparative study on *The Dictators* includes taxonomy of what united and divided Nazism and Stalinism, not least the penchant of both for pseudo-scientific utopianism. Overy succeeds in seeking commonalities not an identical fit.[14]

Some of the current directions within the scholarship on political religion may be discerned from *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, the scholarly journal created as a forum by founding editors Michael Burleigh and Robert Mallet in 2000. Even after a name change to *Politics, Religion, and Ideology* in 2011, this journal continues to privilege the exploration of illiberal ideologies, as well as their relationship to violence and to political religion, with an increasing and welcome consideration of topics outside the Soviet Union, Germany and Italy. [15] The application of political religion to the study of terrorism is also a recurring theme.

for which Werfel wrote *The Song of Bernadette* (1941) made into a Hollywood movie in 1943 in which the peasant girl's steadfast faith is pitted against the caution of clerics and the sneering of secularist officials. United States Holocaust Museum, 'Franz Werfel', Holocaust Enclyopedia, http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007049 (Last visited 30 June 2015).

[12] Kevin Passmore, 'The Ideological Origins of Fascism before 1914', in R. J. B. Bosworth, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11–31, here 14.

[13] Roberts, 'Political Religion', 391; Kershaw, 'Hitler and the Uniqueness of Nazism', 250.

[14] Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2004).

[15] John Pollard, '"Clerical Fascism": Context, Overview and Conclusion', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religion*, 8, 2 (2007), 433–46; Zira Box and Ismael Baz, 'Spanish Fascism as a Political Religion (1931–41)', *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, 12, 4 (2011), 371–89; R. M. Douglas, 'Handmaids of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Paul Jackson, in his article on the ideological perspective of the Young Bosnia assassins of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in June 1914, argues, for example, that Gavrilo Princip and his co-conspirators provide an excellent case study of how 'a broad synthesis of socialist, Marxist and nationalist ideologies, alongside poetic resources, each induced the palingenetic condition in the assassins', as they sought national rebirth through assassination and their own predetermined (but ultimately botched) suicides.[16]

The more promiscuous the range and chronology of the topics become, however, the more political religion runs the risk of becoming a kind of reductive short-cut understanding for a globalised age marred by violent extremism and post-9/11 anxieties. The problematic aspect of such a trend is knowing where to draw the line. Is political religion just the preserve of those we deem 'unreasonable', or is it a more protean force? After all, the sacralisation of the nation and nationalisation of God featured in virtually all the belligerent nations during the First World War – and, as Annette Becker has shown, this remarkable syncretism (though resisted by some pacifist Christians) also permeated the general religious imagination.[17] This made it more than just a banal politicisation of religion but arguably a variant of the political religion genus itself.

Moreover, the very genealogy of political religion also raises thorny questions of interpretation. In some recent accounts, practitioners overreach themselves and make claims about the relationship between 'secular religion' and political religion that, if not qualified, could distort and mislead. Emilio Gentile's distinction between *political religion* and *secular religion* is more than just linguistic. Secular religions, while implying ideological commitment, allow a space for the individual that political religion obliterates. This remains a slippery distinction, however, and in Michael Burleigh's study considered in this article secular and political religion can become interchangeable. With similar elisions in mind, Kevin Passmore has also argued that Emilio Gentile tends to make 'any pre-1914 secular religion into a forerunner of fascism'.[18] This bias is further accentuated in the work of Burleigh, who emphasises the left-wing origins of the more lethal political religions in an arc that stretches back to 1789 through Romantic nationalism and the secular religions of the nineteenth century. In his introduction to *Sacred Causes* he explains how, beginning 'with the "political religion" created during the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution', this 'dystopian strain recurred in various guises throughout the nineteenth century'. Indeed, this was a century in which various secular religions (some of which, like

Revolution: Ailtirí na hAiséirighe, Women and Irish Fascism', *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, 13, 2 (2012), 237–52.

[16] Paul Jackson, '"Union or Death": Gavrilo Princip, Young Bosnia and the Role of "Sacred Time" in the Dynamics of Nationalist Terrorism', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 7, 1 (2006), 45–65.

[17] Annette Becker, *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France, 1914–1930* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), translation of *La guerre et la foi. De la mort et la mémoire: 1914-années 1930* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1994); Becker , 'Faith, Ideologies, and the "Cultures of War"', in John Horne, ed., *A Companion to World War I* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 234–47.

[18] Passmore, 'The Ideological Origins of Fascism before 1914', 13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Marxism, had 'morally insane' dimensions) slugged it out with religions for 'ultimate human loyalties' (Burleigh, xi). What Passmore points out in reply, particularly regarding the legacy of the French Revolution, surely holds true for the secular religions of socialism and nationalism more generally: namely that totalitarianism is 'but one of several possible developments that emerged from shared roots, leading in multiple directions as contexts changed'.[19]

A brief excursus into the scholarship on Giuseppe Mazzini's nationalism suggests some of the destinations for these 'multiple directions'. Mazzini himself readily conceded that his nationalist ideas owed a considerable debt to religious sentiment: 'religions die', he observed, 'religion remains' (Gregor, 122). Whether as life-long revolutionary agitator, unbending republican or as the intellectual prophet of the Risorgimento, Mazzini was a seminal thinker, but for the same reason his work is subject to extremely divergent appropriations. The great republican was, for example, hailed for his nationalism by the fascist intellectual Giovanni Gentile, who described Mazzini in the 1920s as 'the harbinger of a collectivistic, industrialising, antisocialist, revolutionary State that would remake the nation' (Gregor, 150). Meanwhile, Mazzini's defence of private property as an inalienable right sealed the divorce between Mazzinian liberals and Marxist socialists, even though both ideologies were counter-hegemonic and both aimed at political transformation. Nationalism was, in fact, synonymous with political liberalism for much of the nineteenth century, as well as being associated with social reform and the expansion of democratic politics. Equally, and by placing Mazzini firmly in a trans-Atlantic constituency of radical democrats and abolitionists, Enrico Dal Lago has recently argued that his 'highly religious, and highly anticlerical view' of politics 'had to do with his "religion of the nation," which different scholars have variously related either to the "civil religion" of Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762), to Saint-Simon's "civic faith," or to a twentieth-century "political religion" of nationalism, even though Mazzini utterly rejected both nationalism and patriotism as aggressive ideologies and practices'.[20] Mazzinian thought also provided an impetus for both violent and pacific political ideas and practices. According to Dal Lago, Mazzini had no hesitation in his recourse to political violence as 'the result of a patriot's commitment to sacrifice his life for the sacred cause of the nation'[21] – and martyrs were indeed intrinsic to this patriotism. As Lucy Riall argues, such concepts of martyrdom resulted not merely from nationalists 'scrounging from the religious vocabulary', but were also, and simultaneously, conditioned by the 'Catholic counterattack' in the pan-European culture wars of the nineteenth century, wherein the fate of papal sovereignty loomed large.[22] Nonetheless, Mazzinian ideas of peace through the confederation of free

[19] Passmore, 'The Ideological Origins of Fascism before 1914', 14.

[20] Enrico Dal Lago, *William Lloyd Garrison and Giuseppe Mazzini: Abolition, Democracy and Radical Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 73.

[21] Dal Lago, *William Lloyd Garrison and Giuseppe Mazzini*, 75.

[22] Lucy Riall, 'Martyr Cults in Nineteenth-Century Italy', *The Journal of Modern History*, 82, 2 (2010), 255–87; for an Irish comparison, see John Newsinger, '"I Bring Not Peace But A Sword": The Religious Motif in the Irish War of Independence', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 13, 3 (1978),

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

republics would become part of the democratic vocabulary of liberal internationalism. In January 1919 President Woodrow Wilson stopped in Genoa during the triumphant European tour preceding negotiations in Versailles, at which the establishment of the new League of Nations was agreed, and stood in the rain to place a wreath at the birthplace of Mazzini.[23] The world-changing 'secular religions' carried great dangers of amoral sacred egotism, to be sure, but they should not therefore be reduced to a type of Romantic idolatry. Political movements to overturn inequality and empire are not synonymous with the hubris and bigotry that feature in political religion.

III

Much about the merits and limitations of the political religion approach is apparent in Michael Burleigh's *Sacred Causes* (2007), whose interpretation has already been touched on, and in the treatment of the topic from a political science perspective by A. James Gregor in *Totalitarianism and Political Religion* (2012). Though the methodology is different, both books are concerned with finding a generic type of totalitarianism.

Burleigh's treatment of the period 1917 to 1945, the high noon of what he calls the 'totalitarian political religions', first recapitulates the thesis that there exists a supra-historical religious impulse in human history which can manifest itself in multifarious forms but which, since the Enlightenment, has metamorphosed into earthly utopianism by means of a process qualitatively different from the politicisation of traditional religion. In Burleigh's view, the reverberations of the First World War acted as a culture shock that propelled, without being solely responsible for, a powerful set of 'pseudo-religious pathologies' including fascism and communism (xii–xiii). Burleigh elides political religion's metabolism of the religious instinct with its metabolism of religious intolerance. In many ways it is a defensible elision, as the history of the century since 1914 shows.

With the help of multiple citations from contemporaries, including both fascists and Marxists, Burleigh mounts a very good case for the prosecution. For the Italian fascists, for instance, the militant orders of the Counter-Reformation became paradigmatic (62) in a self-serving sleight of hand on the fascists' part that confused the church militant with the armed prophet (60). The consideration of the Nazis' bogus national redemption is especially well done. Of all the contemporary liberal critiques we have already identified, however, it is Erich Vögelin's 'short but Olympian essay' *The Political Religions* that is programmatic for Burleigh. Published in 1938, the year in which this German philosopher fled the Nazis, Vögelin's essay also identified

609–28; On the nineteenth-century revival of Catholicism and the transnational resonance of the cult of the pope as a 'living martyr', see Vincent Viaene, 'International History, Religious History, Catholic History: Perspectives for Cross-Fertilization (1830–1914)', *European History Quarterly*, 38, 4 (2008), 578–607.

[23] Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 155.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an ahistorical yearning for meaning that was being met in the surrogate affective community of a worldly political movement that used a spiritual vocabulary (120). Deferring only to 'gods' they had made in their own image and likeness, these ideologues could, in their subjective worldview, twist the worst cruelty and deception to apparently humane ends. Thus, as Burleigh reminds us for the Soviet case, the modes of belief in Stalinist Russia were akin to a theocracy with cycles of confession, purification and public purge.

So far, the argument is convincing. Burleigh deserves credit for considering not only the political religions but equally the responses they elicited from traditional religion. He is correct to point out the Catholic Church's principled hostility to both Nazism and communism in the 1930s, although some reviewers have criticised a seam of Catholic apologia in his treatment of the Spanish Civil War and the wartime papacy, an intrinsically interesting discussion but not one germane here.[24] Curiously, though, having praised allegedly 'unfashionable' anti-communist European leaders of the Cold War era such as De Gasperi and Adenaeur, Burleigh omits any serious consideration of the lasting influence of their brand of Christian Democracy in elaborating the European integration project, as Wolfram Kaiser has more recently done with aplomb (xiii).[25] Political religion also structures Burleigh's examination of the undoubted role of religion in undermining Marxism-Leninism in the Eastern Bloc in the 1970s and 1980s. More recently, historian Philippe Chenaux has intriguingly put a religious gloss on Eric Hobsbawm's 'short twentieth century' as an epochal struggle between the Catholic Church and communism 'from Lenin to John Paul II.' Chenaux's novel and provocative twist on the existing historiography, however, is to conceptualise Marxism as the last Christian heresy, arguing that Catholicism not only competed with communism externally but also underwent an internalised struggle as Catholic progressives – such as the worker-priests – pursued an ultimately illusory 'historical compromise' between the religious and political creeds.[26] Burleigh's consideration of Liberation Theology, a movement that grew out of the Latin American context in the 1960s, echoes this interpretation but is much more partial. These theologians' orthopraxy represents for Burleigh a dubious and heterodox halfway house to political religion, a progressive utopianism the Vatican did well to stymie. Overall, as Burleigh's argument continues to unfold, the category of political religion becomes increasingly – and one might say overly – elastic.

A. James Gregor, meanwhile, though he has written more extensively on Italian fascism, argues that Marxism is the political religion par excellence. Its practitioners

[24] Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005). For a highly critical review of *Sacred Causes* (2007), see Tony Judt, 'Defender of the Faith', *The New York Times*, 11 Mar. 2007. A more mixed appreciation of Burleigh's twin volumes can be found in Paul Jackson, 'Re-enchanting Europeans: Michael Burleigh and Political Religion Theory', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 9, 1 (2008), 123–8.

[25] Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge Unviersity Press, 2007).

[26] Philippe Chenaux, *L'Église catholique et le communisme en Europe, 1917–1989: De Lénine à Jean-Paul II* (Paris: Cerf, 2009), 21–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

subscribe to a 'scientific' reading of history that is quite distinct from the benign civil religion that underpins (American) 'industrial democracy' (4). The sacralisation of popular sovereignty in the French Revolution paved the way for other 'sacralised bases of power' to be tapped, such as class, race or history itself (9). Gregor, moreover, sees the fingerprints of German philosophy on the later departure. Hegelian philosophy 'sacralised the State, made History its medium, and human beings it instruments' (24). Where Hegel led, others followed. Marx and Engels turned Hegel's metaphysics into a scientific explanation of the contradictions of capitalism, but with a cheerful terminus where history would render justice to the downtrodden (67). In the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, Gregor discerns the 'transliteration of the Christian doctrine of salvation' (81). In fact, these rhetorical throwbacks on the part of Marx and Engels to the religious cultures they grew up in are only the beginnings of a case for, rather than sufficient proofs of, Gregor's thesis. Gregor footnotes rather than engages with the arguments about the religiosity of early Marxism. Like many religions, it has a strong sense of revelation, superseding previous incomplete revelations. (Such determinism begs the question, on our part, of whether everyone's script in the sacred drama is subject to a form of Calvinist predestination.) Bolshevism therefore contained a toxic religious sensibility, Gregor argues, quoting approvingly the warning issued in 1906 by dissenting Russian Marxist Nikolai Berdiaev against Lenin's 'religion of human self-deification' (114). Its theology of power was founded on elitism, centralisation of authority and ruthless intolerance of dissent.

Gregor espies a similar dystopian religiosity in Nazism, paying particular attention to the Nazi 'blood myth' set out in Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930), 'the most fully articulate statement of National Socialist ideology' (202). The German Christian Movement it nourished constituted one of the period's most brazen instances of political religion: in this context, Rosenberg's book was taken very seriously indeed at the Vatican. As Hubert Wolf's study of the Vatican archives for the 1930s shows, Rosenberg's book was the subject of intense scrutiny by the guardians of orthodoxy at the Holy Office – descendant of the Roman Inquisition – who could not abide its reification of race and attacked it as part of a political religion the Catholic Church must combat.[27]

A significant difference of emphasis between Burleigh and Gregor's books, however, is their interpretation of up-to-date extremism. Avoiding tabloid taglines about 'Islamo-fascism' and carefully delineating the terrorist networks as a 'caricature' of the faith of the vast majority of the world's Muslims, Burleigh sees such lethal movements as 'a cover version of ideas and movements that have occurred in modern Western societies', assimilating Islamic extremism in some sense to political religion (468). Gregor sees a clearer dividing line, though, as 'religious fundamentalists press politics into service to further their religious beliefs – rather than invoking companion religious sentiments to achieve profane ends' (282).

[27] Hubert Wolf, *Pope and Devil: The Vatican Archives and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press, 2010).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

IV

Political violence and political religion, therefore, appear to be intertwined in several of the books under review. In *Anatomy of the Red Brigades,* political scientist Alessandro Orsini sets out to explain the 'religious' underpinning of the modern terrorist mindset, taking the example of the Red Brigades, Italy's notorious terrorist group that were emblematic of the troubled 1970s. In *Sacred Causes*, and more extensively in his cultural history of terrorism, *Blood and Rage*, Burleigh argues that an ethical and cultural breakdown in the 1960s was one of the conditions for the recrudescence of revolutionary glamour. Its primal will to power was manifest in a roll call of new movements such as ETA, the Red Brigades and the Provisional IRA (Burleigh, *Sacred Causes*, 467–69).[28] Again, political religion is expanded to encompass the history of terrorism.

In similar vein, Orsini's *Anatomy of the Red Brigades* does not hesitate to hector the reader. He rejects as exculpatory the interpretation that a 'blocked society' in Italy – where capitalists and the Christian Democrats exercised a hegemonic monopoly – begat this violent subculture because this is to confuse the lighting fuse with the fuel that propelled the explosion. Instead, he formulates an original 'subversive-revolutionary feedback theory', arguing trenchantly that the sectarian worldview of these 'cults' is self-sustaining (72). Individuals, who were perhaps already marginal in some sense, destroy their individual identity in order to regain existential meaning as part of a group that governs their every waking thought, word and action (262).

Orsini's search for a historical lineage for the Red Brigades is, however, deeply problematic. In his view, the Jacobin Terror marked a particularly sinister turn in the process of sacralised, utopian violence whose spirit also moved Marxism's 'pantoclastic vision' (188) and that of nineteenth-century Russian populism (199). The populists' writings were not just catechetical for the Red Brigades, they also provided a model for their personal behaviour, positing the necessity of an 'inner revolution' through which committed adepts became 'implacable' with themselves in extirpating family ties, as well as the bonds of compassion to the world around them. Much as one would share his repugnance for Red Brigade-style assassins, the tone of sorrowing indignation adopted by Orsini cannot hide the weaker points in his circular arguments, especially in his efforts to nestle the Red Brigades firmly within the tradition of the Italian Communist Party. Rather than being Italian communists who had 'gone bad', the brigade members had simply taken its violent rhetoric at its word. Orsini will have none of the Communists' claims that it was the fault of the Christian Democrats' hegemony and their collusion with the subversive right, quoting brigade members in response (151). The apportioning of moral responsibility here comes across as unbalanced, however. Even though the Italian Communist Party had a comparatively clean record in terms of the type of corruption that contributed to the collapse of the Italian 'First Republic' in 1992, it was indeed capable of being self-serving in its rhetoric. All the same, Orsini could take more seriously the PCI's

[28] Michael Burleigh, *Blood and Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism* (London: Harper Collins, 2009).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

attempt at 'reformation' after 1968, as well as Enrico Berlinguer's move towards a more pluralistic 'Eurocommunism'. He could also fruitfully engage with the possibility of a 'strategy of tension' on the part of the right – which might in turn help to explain, without ever excusing, the persistent nature of Red Brigade violence.[29] There is – especially in Orsini's tendentious reading of Antonio Gramsci – a tendency here to elide the rhetoric of political combat with irreducible bloodlust.

V

Amid the intense and ongoing reflection on political religion in Italy and Germany, it is refreshing to find new works engaging with a broader range of European case studies. The very stimulating volume on *European Self-Reflection Between Politics and Religion* (edited by Bruun, Lammer and Sørensen) and the volume on *Christian Masculinities* (edited by Yvonne Maria Werner) both have their genesis in broad interdisciplinary and international research projects. As such, they succeed in opening up perspectives – especially gender perspectives – which are either overlooked or downplayed both in the monographs reviewed here and in the literature on political religion more generally. The two volumes' geographical focus is a delightful contrast with that of other books under review here, for both sets of essays come with a strong, but not exclusively, Nordic imprint. *European Self-Reflection* involves practitioners in the humanities and theology who participated in a Danish-led collaborative research project exploring European identity in the twentieth century 'between politics and religion' with an eye to 'the ongoing continuities and discontinuities in Europe's *longue durée*' (vii). Eight of the eleven contributors are affiliated to the University of Copenhagen, home to the original research group, the other three being based in Germany, Britain and the United States respectively.

Their focus in this recent volume is emphatically pan-European, and the range of intellectuals examined is exemplary, ranging from Spengler, Barth and Heidegger to the interesting exchanges at the Ratzinger–Habermas encounter in Munich in 2004 on the boundaries of the secular and the religious. As Bruun, Lammer and Sørensen state in their introduction, the First World War altered not only the political geometry of Europe but also its political psychology. 'The war and its cultivation of violence and heroism founded a new mentality of values that defeated democratic initiatives', as they describe it, in a neat paraphrase of the political religions idea (3). Instancing such a shift, Gert Sørensen discusses the reaction of a cross-section of contemporary Italian intellectuals to this crisis of democracy. The anti-fascist Benedetto Croce diagnosed the moral corrosion of the fascist regime in his country and rejected, accordingly, 'the glorification of the principle that puts the state before ethics' (28). Rejecting also the idea of history being moved by metaphysical forces, he advocated instead an 'ethical-political' approach. Croce's *storismo* culminated in the elaboration of a 'religion of

[29] Similar reservations can be found in Brian Sandbergh's review of Alessandro Orsini, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades: The Religious Mind-Set of Modern Terrorists*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013. URL: http://w.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37917

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

liberty', while also completing his intellectual divorce from fascist-inclined Giovanni Gentile. The exiled Radical politician Francesco Nitti, meanwhile, was more direct than Croce in his anti-fascism. A former prime minister and participant in the Versailles negotiations of 1919, Nitti wrote trenchantly against the peace settlement as an Allied power grab – making him, like John Maynard Keynes, one of the most famous and prolific scribes of 1920s treaty revisionism. This, and his stance at the Versailles talks themselves, earned him livid hostility from some in France as an enemy of French interests. For Nitti the intellectual, however, the emergence of a totalitarian state was symptomatic of the war's deleterious effects, which included the development of the Führer-Prinzip that abolished the legal status of the leader, who 'then becomes sacrosanct and untouchable in as much as the leader is lifted above the law.' This cancelled a fundamental precept of democracy, namely 'dependency on law and not on the individual' (33).

Summative essays in the book's final section on post-Second World War Europe strike an ambivalent note about European sensibilities. Birthe Hoffmann gives a haunting evocation of the ruins of Europe's devastated urban landscape in 1945 and the suffering of civilians evoked by the names of cities such as Coventry, Hamburg and Dresden, arguing that 'in the foundation of a new order in Europe based on peace and democracy, the common experience of destruction . . . has played a more important role than any positive common ideas could ever do' (215). Jan-Werner Müller, meanwhile, asks exactly what type of ideology triumphed in Western Europe after 1945. Certainly, the 'post-liberal order' provided a merciful de-dramatisation of domestic politics, in which Western Europeans defined their politics as the opposite of the totalitarianism of the defeated fascists while on guard against the existential Soviet threat from behind the Iron Curtain. Thus the situation of Western Europe can also be described as one of 'constrained democracy', in which individuals often slid into the apolitical consumerism against which the generation of 1968 rebelled (204–5).

Christian Masculinities is also the fruit of an interdisciplinary project, this one entitled 'Christian manliness – a paradox of modernity', based in the University of Lund and sponsored by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation in an interesting example of ethical banking. Considering how Christian men engaged with religious faith in an era purportedly marked by secularisation and the feminisation of religious practice, the contributors in *Christian Masculinities* take an eclectic but fascinating range of examples from across northern Europe, loosely defined to include Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican experiences from Scandinavia to Britain and the Low Countries. In her introduction, Yvonne Maria Werner paradoxically borrows from Hugh McLeod's work on secularisation to insist upon the importance to national identity of 'nationalist religions and religiously shaped nationalisms' and from that of Olaf Blaschke – one of the volume's contributors – to argue, again counter-intuitively, that the period 1830 to 1960 marked a 'second confessional age'. During this time, for all the challenges of liberalism and indifference, 'Christianity in its different denominational forms in many ways continued to serve as the normative basis for society' (9).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Almost unintentionally, therefore, the case studies here fit in with the broader picture emerging from our discussion of political religion. Several discuss variations on a kind of virile Christianity that permitted men to be both religious but also manly, as dictated by the codes of 'hegemonic masculinity' (12). Whether it came in the form of the 'muscular Christianity' of J. A. Eklund, the Church of Sweden's 'Youth Bishop' or the psychological toughness of the Catholic religious orders who manned the lonesome Scandinavian missions, to cite just two of the volume's eight examples, such a Christianity had no fear of being unmanned by anti-religious opponents.

VI

Finally, turning to the Balkans, Emily Greble's excellent book on Muslims, Christians and Jews in Sarajevo during the Second World War breaks new ground by departing from the conventional narrative of wartime Yugoslavia. In contrast, Greble presents the Bosnian capital as a comparatively tolerant urban community in whose war story communist Partisans and Serbian nationalist Chetniks were largely distant actors.[30] Between April 1941 and April 1945, Sarajevo underwent a double occupation – by both the Germans and the Croats – but evaded certain requirements of living in Hitler's empire when the Führer's attention was elsewhere. The collaborationist Ustasha regime in Zagreb (which went under the ironic name of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH)) was guided, as is well known, by a notorious coupling of radical nationalism and reactionary Catholicism that Stanley G. Payne has analysed elsewhere in terms of comparative fascism, with a nod to political religion.[31] Ustasha sometimes proved ineffectual when putting its malign intent into practice over the mountains in Bosnia. Sarajevo still felt the lash, though, whenever these outsiders applied themselves seriously to repression, particularly during the year-long deportation of Jews that began unannounced with joint Gestapo-Ustasha nighttime raids in September 1941. Again, in spring 1945, the Germans tightened their grip on Sarajevo as a fortress city only to vacate the city in a hurry – leaving it to the mercy of unfettered Ustasha squads in those last desperate weeks before the entry of the Partisans. Consciously prioritising the local negotiation of identity, Greble argues that Sarajevo's longstanding tradition of pragmatic pluralism – 'civic confessionalism' – was strained, but not snapped, by the wartime experience (14).

Greble does not engage with the concept of political religion. Indeed, her argument may be read as a silent rebuke to the dominant presumptions that underlie the political religion approach in the scholarly literature in which national identity trumps religion as a marker of identity. Nowhere more than in the Balkans, Greble argues, have discussions of religious identity been 'combined with discussions of nationalism' as if confessional identity were static, thereby creating

[30] For another perspective, see Mark Mazower, 'Under the Ustasha', *London Review of Books*, 6 Oct. 2011, 29–30.

[31] Stanley G. Payne, 'The NDH State in Comparative Perspective', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religion*, 7, 4 (2006), 409–15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an 'over-determined link between religion and national identity' (23). Instead, she insists upon 'the persistence of faith as a code of ethics and the confessional community as a framework for decision making and political alliances' (24). For all its usefulness, political religion is far from essential here. Greble's findings in the archives – which were either bombed or otherwise dispersed during the Yugoslav war of the 1990s – are studiously stitched into the fabric of broader debates and controversies in the historiography, such as the question of church culpability in a variant of clerico-fascism. While this certainly existed, it was far from being the whole story (83). By contrast, while rarely heroic, Sarajevo's civic and religious leaders mostly chose to deflect or delay those aspects of racial policy that offended their sense of civic ties or undermined confessional prerogatives over family life. Unlike elsewhere, Serbs were comparatively safe in Sarajevo and helped run the city. The Sarajevo authorities played ducks and drakes with racist ordinances from Zagreb by certifying as Aryan the 'Muslim Roma' gypsies, a ruse which thwarted Ustasha – at least for a while (17). Greble remarks of Sarajevo newspapers' encouragement of Muslim Roma to wear the fez that the very idea that 'a piece of clothing was enough to denote an individual's racial status mocked racial identity' and allowed individuals to assert their own (93). On the other hand, Ustasha officially afforded Muslims a place in the new Croatia but 'Muslims had to earn Croat status' (125). Not reassured, some Muslims turned to Berlin in November 1942 to appeal for an autonomous protectorate to save Muslims from Croatian leader Ante Pavélić's 'insane regime', as they termed it, resulting in the formation of the Handžar Division, a Bosnian Muslim Waffen SS unit, which recruited 20,000 members by the end of April 1943 (177). It proved a political miscalculation, as the Germans had no intention of reconciling fascism and Islam. Such dubious political amalgamations, far from reviving faith, left a lingering stigma of collaboration that frayed confessional ties and trust networks (244). By the time Tito's independent communist Yugoslavia had been consolidated, the multi-ethnic Partisan struggle – though in fact marginal to Sarajevo for most of the war – came to offer a clear-cut and wholesome narrative of good against evil for Sarajevans to adopt, further legitimating both the Marxist government and the city's increasingly secularised image of itself, until that same tolerance came under shellfire (quite literally) in the siege of 1992.

VII

In August 1929 the exiled Italian priest and politician Luigi Sturzo – an inveterate opponent of political religion and one of our key 'witness-theorists' of dictatorship – wrote a letter in praise of a 'Crusade of Youth'. This Crusade was, in the very same month, to unite marching columns of French and German pacifist scouts, converging on Paris for a youth peace rally held at the Palais du Trocadéro. Scouts from the French Volontaires de la Paix, in military-style uniform and a navy beret emblazoned with the word PAX, met groups of likeminded German youths at various border crossings before a joint pilgrimage through the erstwhile battlefields of Lorette and Verdun.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Moved by the spectacle, Sturzo wrote to its organiser, French Christian Democrat and peace activist Marc Sangnier: 'it is a great good that [in opposition] to an education of hatred and nationalist fanaticism, there operates an education of love and peace. Faith is needed to succeed, and you and your collaborators have faith.'[32]

This exchange between Sturzo and Sangnier points to some fundamental paradoxes of the political religion phenomenon. Political religion was indeed an apt description for the various guises of 'fanaticism' concerned (to borrow Sturzo's phrase), and yet this did not necessarily mean that the 'new' custom-made religions held a monopoly on 'the religion of politics'. The paradoxical militarisation of youth culture manifest in the pacifist Crusade of Youth shows, furthermore, that social regeneration was a ubiquitous concern for fascists and communists but also for their opponents, in all cases endowing youth with a privileged, even messianic, position. As is shown in the reviews above, the dynamic tension between political religion and 'the religion of politics' should also be a fruitful one. For as Jay Winter reminds us, the 'dreams of peace and freedom' in the twentieth century and its 'alternative history' of humanitarianism and emergent human rights bears witness to the power of the sacred and remind us that the sacred is not essentially co-terminus with religion.[33] The history of peace movements – with their various overlapping 'faith-based' constituencies ranging from socialists to Quakers – should prove a rewarding testing ground for such a nuanced history, and it is surely more than happenstance that Martin Ceadel referred to the peace movement's evolution as 'the defining of a faith'.[34]

Religious sensibility has been a presiding concern in all six books reviewed in this essay. Yet as I have also emphasised, it is often difficult to pin down where a political conviction tips over into the sacralisation of politics that gradually edges out grey areas and slides into the arrogance of absolute truth. Building on the foundation laid by Emilio Gentile, Burleigh, Gregor and Orsini all apply political religion both to explain the past century and its ills and equally to warn against the enduring dangers of politics as cult. Their cogent readings of the runes of contemporary European history are valuable indeed once we, in our turn, do not become so jaundiced as to neglect the enduring possibilities for politics to be channelled in the service of causes that can be both sacred and humane.

[32] Sturzo to Sangnier, 29 Aug. 1929, ILS, fasc. 436, c. 20, Istituto Luigi Sturzo, Rome; On Marc Sangnier's Franco-German interwar peace movement and its religious dimensions, see Gearóid Barry, *The Disarmament of Hatred: Marc Sangnier, French Catholicism and the legacy of the First World War, 1914–45* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1–20 and 158–63.

[33] Jay Winter, *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

[34] Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914–45: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777315000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press