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POLITICAL RELIGIONS, APOCALYPTICISM AND THE END OF HISTORY:  
SOME CONSIDERATIONS

In an article written over three decades ago, the Catholic Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce defined the years between 1917 (the beginning of the Bolshevik revolution) and 1953 (the death of Stalin) as the sacred period of secularization.<sup>1</sup> Although this traditionalist philosopher failed to provide a taxonomic definition of “political religion,” the concept was implied in his discussion of Communism, Nazism and Fascism as secular religions. Further evidence of Del Noce’s interest in the issue of “political religions” can be found in his introduction to the (incomplete) Italian edition of *The New Science of Politics* by Eric Voegelin, who first made the idea popular in a tiny book which appeared in 1938.<sup>2</sup> In this introduction, Del Noce went back to Benedetto Croce’s reading of the Second World War as a religious war between Christianity and neo-paganism.<sup>3</sup>

Despite some differences in emphasis, numerous historians consider the years from 1917 (or 1914<sup>4</sup>) to 1945 (or in Del Noce’s case, to 1953) as a single unit. The expression “Thirty Years War” already utilized by Charles de Gaulle in a broadcast

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<sup>1</sup> Augusto Del Noce, *Appunti per una definizione storica del fascismo*, in: Id., *L’epoca della secolarizzazione*, (Milan, 1970), pp. 116-117.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen*, (1938; repr. Munich, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Augusto Del Noce, *Eric Voegelin e la critica dell’idea di modernità*, in: Eric Voegelin, *La nuova scienza politica*, (Torino, 1968), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> At the center of the analysis of Andreas Hillgruber lies the end of the European powers system with its influence over the rest of the world. Hence 1914 is the starting point for the period. See especially Andreas Hillgruber, *Der historische Ort des Ersten Weltkrieges*, in: Id., *Die Zerstörung Europas. Beiträge zur Weltkriegsepoche 1914 bis 1945*, (Munich, 1988), pp. 103-118.

programme in 1941<sup>5</sup> to describe this period was subsequently used by Arno Mayer and Ernst Nolte, by the English First World War historian Michael Howard, and more recently, by Ian Kershaw.<sup>6</sup> The obvious reference is to the wars of religion, which dragged on between 1618 and 1648, devastating and depopulating wide areas of central Europe. Critical to this comparison is the character of crusade for the true faith waged, in the earlier case, between different Christian factions, and in the later case, between opposing ideologies and totalitarian regimes. With the present article I intend to deliver a contribution on the characteristics of this epoch, focusing on the elements of innerworldly religiosity which pervaded politics and culture in Germany and Italy from the fin de siècle until the end of the Second World War. In this frame, particular attention will be paid to the attempts of totalitarian regimes to transcend time and to usher into a non-historical condition that means, into innerworldly eternity.

#### THE MANIFESTATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN CRISIS IN GERMANY AND ITALY

Historical research into National Socialism and Fascism rarely employs a comparative approach with respect to the two regimes. Similarly, it hardly ever touches on the question of how totalitarian movements<sup>7</sup> rose to power in Germany and Italy by their own strength<sup>8</sup> and with a considerable amount of popular support. This support

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<sup>5</sup> A. Prost, Jay Winter (ed.), *Penser la Grande Guerre. Un essai d'historiographie* (Paris, 2004), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Europe's Second Thirty Years War*, in: "History Today", (September 2005), pp. 10-17.

<sup>7</sup> The debate about totalitarianism is still going on. In this article, I adopt the term "totalitarianism", from Hans Maier's definition: "totalitarianism is applicable to all regimes, which overcome the limits of authoritarian rule (or of a temporary limited emergency dictatorship) and establish a lasting, irrevocable reign of violence". Cfr. Hans Maier, *Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs: "Totalitarismus" und "politische Religionen"*, in: Id. (ed.), *Totalitarismus und Politische Religionen*. Vol. I: Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs, Schöningh, Paderborn et al. (1996), p. 250.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfgang Schieder represents a rare exception. See Wolfgang Schieder, *Die Geburt des Faschismus aus der Krise der Moderne*, in: Christof Dipper (ed.), *Deutschland und Italien 1860-1960*, (Oldenbourg, München, 2005), pp. 159-179. This essay is an attempt to revive the *Sonderweg* theory and extend it to Italy. On the influence of Italian fascism in Germany in the final throes of the Weimar Republic, see Wolfgang Schieder, *Das italienische Experiment. Der Faschismus als Vorbild in der Krise der Weimarer Republik*, in: „Historische Zeitschrift“, vol. 262, (1986), pp. 73-125. For comparative perspectives, see:

remained constant in the case of both regimes over a relatively long period of time and dried up only when their military defeat was either imminent or had already taken place.<sup>9</sup>

In part, Germany and Italy achieved their contemporaneous unification into nation-states by joining forces: by fighting alongside Prussia in the war of 1866, Italy obtained Venetia from Austria. Moreover, the defeat of France at the hands of the Prussian army led, on the one hand, to the proclamation of the Second German Empire and on the other, to the “liberation” of Rome and its transformation into the capital of the new Kingdom of Italy.

In both countries, the euphoria over the newly achieved national unity soon gave way to a widespread sense of disappointment, boredom and disgust among those middle class intellectuals who had been the principal advocates of the movement. In the case of Germany, George Mosse analyzed this state of mind forty years ago in his pioneering work, *The Crisis of German Ideology*.<sup>10</sup> There he described the disillusionment felt by university students, schoolteachers and nationalist publishers alike towards a unification that was “only skin-deep” and failed to bring about a higher sense of belonging. Such reactions, in which anti-Semitism was an important bonding factor in a confused panorama of outlandish beliefs and hazardous countercultural practices<sup>11</sup>, were common

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Christof Dipper, Rainer Hudemann, Jens Petersen (eds.), *Faschismus und Faschismen im Vergleich. Wolfgang Schieder zum 60. Geburtstag*, (Vierow bei Greifswald, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> See for example Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in fascist Italy*, (1994; repr. Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 132-152. For National Socialism, see Ian Kershaw, *The “Hitler Myth”: Image and Reality in the Third Reich*, (1980; repr. New York, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*, (New York, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> With regard to the rich collection of sources on the agricultural communes in Germany from 1890 to 1933, see the following pioneering work: Ulrich Linse (ed.), *Zurück o Mensch zur Mutter Erde. Landkommunen in Deutschland 1890-1933*, (Munich, 1983). These communes ranged over a wide spectrum, from anarchism to the Germanic (völkisch) movement. Heinrich Himmler and the camp commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, had been members of a völkisch rural settlement the purpose of which was an ethnic defense of the “German East”. Referring to utopian agricultural communities in the USA in the 19th century, the sociologist Yonina Talmon stressed their translated apocalyptic character, as

in the pre-war period among petty bourgeois fringes. This cultural breeding ground was to become the foundation of what Mosse called “new politics.” New politics questioned traditional concepts of politics and separation between politics and life as well, turning them into an antipolitics where a place was found for such countercultural manifestations as naturalistic mysticism, sun worship, and theosophy.<sup>12</sup>

A similar attitude of dissatisfaction with regard to the hopes of the Risorgimento can be found in various intellectual movements in post-unification Italy. Here, too, the disenchantment resulted in a critique of liberal institutions, the reformism of the workers’ movement, positivist culture, and so on. It is by no means a coincidence that George Sorel’s mythical thought was received with such enthusiasm in Italy<sup>13</sup> (just as the French aristocrat Arthur de Gobineau and the Englishman, Huston Stuart Chamberlain were well received in Germany).<sup>14</sup> Stanley Payne rightly pointed out that in no other country, in the years immediately preceding the outbreak of the First World War, did anti-democratic, authoritarian and elitist thinking flourish as it did in Italy:

The cultural crisis of the fin de siècle had greater impact in Italy than in most other lands. Italian philosophers vied with those of Germany in leading the antipositivist revolt on behalf of neoidealism, while Italian social scientists and theorists such as Mosca, Pareto and Scipio Sighele were international leaders of

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they substituted “perfect time” with “perfect space”. S. Michael Barkun, *Politics and Apocalypticism*, in: Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins, Stephen J. Stein, (eds.): vol. 3: *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, (New York, 1999), p. 444.

<sup>12</sup> Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, p. 1-10. In his important study of 1975, *Die Nationalisierung der Massen*, Mosse identified “new politics” with the liturgical manifestations of the *völkisch* counterculture in the German national and national socialist movements. See George L. Mosse, *Die Nationalisierung der Massen. Politische Symbolik und Massenbewegungen in Deutschland von den Napoleonischen Kriegen bis zum Dritten Reich*, (Berlin, 1975).

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. Zeev Sternhell, *Naissance de l'idéologie fasciste*, (Paris, 1989), pp. 181-219.

<sup>14</sup> For a summary, see Emilio Gentile, *Un'apocalisse della modernità. La Grande Guerra e il Mito della Rigenerazione della politica*, in: “Storia contemporanea” 26, (1995/5,) pp. 733-787.

the new elitist and antiparliamentary doctrines. Nowhere in the world were there more vehement opponents of bourgeois culture, liberalism, humanitarianism, and pacifism. The corollary of aggressive nationalism was held to be strong elite leadership and imperialism.<sup>15</sup>

My intention behind making these observations is not to argue in favor of a similarity between National Socialism and Fascism. Rather, I would like to draw attention to the fact that both Germany and Italy were undergoing a similar crisis of questioning the unified constitutional, liberal State and searching for its radical overcoming. Before the outbreak of war, in both countries the problem of how to give “shape” or “order” to the mass society which had come into being was already being formulated in radical terms.<sup>16</sup>

#### THE EXPECTED APOCALYPSE AND ITS OCCURRING IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The spiritual climate in the pre-war years was characterized by widespread expectations of a palingenetic renewal which should usher in a new age, where the separation between life, culture and politics would be overcome in a higher synthesis.<sup>17</sup> Already in 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche, anticipating the founder of Futurism Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, wrote: “We Europeans confront a world of tremendous ruins. A few things are still towering, much looks decayed and uncanny, while most things already lie on the ground. It is all very picturesque – where has one ever seen more beautiful ruins? – and

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<sup>15</sup> Stanely G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-1945*, (Madison 1995), p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> In the thinking of Alfredo Rocco, the main architect of the Fascist State, the principle of organization seems pre-eminent with respect to the principle of nationhood. See Emilio Gentile, *Il mito dello Stato nuovo. Dal radicalismo nazionale al fascismo*, (1982; repr. Roma-Bari, 1999), in particular p. 180-184. The various theories about the “government of producers” too, like the reappearance of the corporative idea, seem to meet the need to reinstate a lost order and to adapt it to industrial society.

<sup>17</sup> Emilio Gentile, *Dall'apocalisse della modernità alla modernità totalitaria*, in: Marina Cattaruzza, Marcello Flores, Simon Levi Sullam, Enzo Traverso (eds.), *Storia della Shoah*, (Torino, 2005), vol. I: *La crisi dell'Europa: le origini e il contesto*, pp. 229-245.

overgrown by large and small weeds.”<sup>18</sup> In aphorisms that follow, Nietzsche prophesied the coming of “a few warlike centuries”, which “all coming centuries will look back on with envy and awe for its perfection” (ein Stück Vollkommenheit).<sup>19</sup>

The apocalypse of the First World War seemed to confirm the expectations expressed in the spiritual climate of the fin de siècle. In his work *Reflections of a Non-Political Man*, written in 1917 when the reality of the terrible slaughter was already apparent to everyone, Thomas Mann observed that the world had not been more beautiful, or more humane, or gentler, than during the conflict. It was when war broke out, when “peace” was swept away, that Germany became “beautiful”<sup>20</sup> for one moment. In his famous essay, *The Origins and Doctrines of Fascism*, written after the war, (later to become the entry for the Italian Encyclopedia on the definition of fascism supposedly written by Benito Mussolini), the idealist philosopher Giovanni Gentile claimed that Italy had not fought the First World War for Trent, Trieste or Dalmatia, and certainly not for any political, military or economic advantages, but to cement the nation through the shedding of blood, by creating a single thought for all citizens, a single feeling, a single passion, and a common hope, an anxiety lived by all, with the life that is common to all, but which transcends the particular interests of any. Through war, then, stated the Italian philosopher, the nation could be created as every spiritual reality is created, with effort and sacrifice.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York, 1974), p. 310.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, (1918; repr. Frankfurt a.M./Hamburg, 1968) (Thomas Mann, *Politische Schriften und Reden*, vol. I), p. 350. Original inverted commas **WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY INVERTED COMMAS** and italics.

<sup>21</sup> Giovanni Gentile, *Origins and Doctrine of Fascism (1927)*, (2003), p. 2.

According to Klaus Vondung, the author of pioneering studies on apocalyptic interpretations of the First World War, the images of “universal judgment” were omnipresent in the German Reich to such an extent that the outbreak of war in 1914 was interpreted apocalyptically almost reflexively, so as to give it meaning (Sinndeutung). Salvation was to occur on earth and lead to the fusion of the state into a mystical unit, to the extension of the Reich’s sovereignty and to universal redemption by means of German culture.<sup>22</sup>

The war, with its unprecedented loss of life and the liminal experience of the trenches<sup>23</sup> seemed to signify a realization of a divine judgment which would augur in a new dawn. The men of the trench generation presented themselves as the new elite, entitled to enter the leadership of the nation and to give/confer her a new shape.<sup>24</sup> In 1917, the Italian poet Gabriele D’Annunzio evoked the Eucharistic ritual of the sacrifice of blood by the community of the trenches, united by initiatic bonds. In an article in “Il Popolo d’Italia” dated 15 December 1917, and entitled *Trenchocracy*, Mussolini called for a new political order, which would be led by the new aristocracy of the trenches, the true collective embodiment of the idea of Nation.<sup>25</sup> Approximately two years later, the port city of Fiume, occupied by Gabriele D’Annunzio and his legionnaires, would become a fantastic laboratory for the application of the “new politics”, based on mass rituals, neopagan bacchanalia, and charismatic power. At Fiume, D’Annunzio would put into practice the pre-war utopia of a new unity between art, life and politics.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Klaus Vongung, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland*, (Munich, 1988), pp. 132-135, 198-199.

<sup>23</sup> See Eric J. Leed, *No Man’s Land. Combat and Identity in World War I*, (Cambridge, 1979).

<sup>24</sup> Gentile, *La crisi della cultura europea*, pp. 302-304.

<sup>25</sup> Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell’ideologia fascista (1918-1925)*, (Bologna, 1996), pp. 99-100, 109.

<sup>26</sup> See M.A. Ledeen, *The First Duce. D’Annunzio at Fiume*, (Baltimore, Md., London, 1977); Claudia Salaris, *Alla festa della rivoluzione. Artisti e libertari con D’Annunzio a Fiume*, (Bologna, 2002).

## MODERNITY AND THE ERRATIC NATURE OF THE “SACRED”

In order to transform these new ferments into a “political religion”, it was necessary to question the role traditionally played by religion: giving meaning to finite human existence and projecting it onto a transcendental dimension. In fact, only when organized religion was no longer the sole institution able to endow human life with meaning<sup>27</sup> could the quest for the sacred, having become “erratic”, manifest itself as political religion.<sup>28</sup> In his introduction to the collection of essays on “Expectation of salvation and terror,” Hermann Lübbe listed the following religious features of totalitarian regimes: the redeemer role of the totalitarian “*Führer*,” the assignment of the role of prophet and apostle to precursors and propagandists of the political “Gospel;” the interpretation of revolutions according to an eschatological meaning; the sentencing of heretics; the cult of martyrs and relics; the ritual repetition of redemptive facts in a totalitarian calendar (“*Festkalender*”); the increasing ability to endure suffering given the immediate expectation of God’s realm and the techniques of intellectually and emotionally coping with its failure to appear.<sup>29</sup> Referring to Fascism as the prototype of totalitarian religions, Emilio Gentile develops a functionalist model, characterized by the coexistence of the following constituencies: the primacy of faith and myth as mobilizing forces; the

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<sup>27</sup> See Marina Cattaruzza, *Introduction to the special issue of Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions: Political Religions as a Characteristic of the 20th Century*, in: “Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions”, vol. 6, (2005/1), pp. 1-18, and in particular pp. 2-4.

<sup>28</sup> Emilio Gentile, *Political Religions in the 20th Century*, in: Peter Blickle, Rudolf Schloegl (eds.), *Die Säkularisation im Prozess der Säkularisierung Europas*, (Ependorf, 2005), pp. 551-562. See especially p. 555: “Politics became one of the main areas in which the sacred has been transfused into modern societies. In fact, in the realm of modern mass politics, political movements presenting religious characteristics became more and more frequent.”

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Lübbe, *Heilserwartung und Terror*, p. 10. Despite such impressive analytical achievement on “political religions,” Lübbe refuses the use of the concept, proposing instead the concept of “anti-religions.”



hypostatization of myth as the only form of collective political conscience; the necessity of a charismatic leader as pivot of the totalitarian state and interpreter of national consciousness; the imposition of ethical commandments and the development of a political liturgy.<sup>30</sup>

According to Mathias Behrens, political religion is characterized by the identity of politics and religion: political religion intends to be at the same time universal interpretation of the world and universal state. Political religions may be universal religions (like Marxism) as well as “*Volksreligionen*” (National Socialism). Contrary to Christianity, in political religions, the “*Führer*,” the party, the law of history, etc., do not take the place of the church, but of God himself. This fact proves the inner-worldly character of political religions.<sup>31</sup>

Following his announcement that “God is dead”, Friedrich Nietzsche alluded to an age that was to have nothing in common with the preceding ones: “What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us- for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.”<sup>32</sup> Max Weber too, strongly influenced by *The Gay Science*, held that his age was characterized by the schism between knowledge of reality and attribution of meaning to life in human society,

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections on the Question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism*, in: “Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions,” vol. 1, 2000/1, pp. 18-55, here p. 40.

<sup>31</sup> See Mathias Behrens, “*Politische Religion*” – eine Religion? *Bemerkungen zum Religionsbegriff*, in: Hans Maier and Michael Schäfer (eds.), “*Totalitarismus*” und “*Politische Religionen*.” *Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs*, Paderborn/München/Wien/Zürich: Schöningh 1997, pp. 249-69, primarily p. 259. Behrens also rejects the use of the term for non-transcendent religious phenomena.

<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 181. See also Eric Voegelin, *The Murder of God*, now in: Id., *Modernity Without Restraint* (The collected works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 5), (Columbia and London, 2000), pp. 278-289.

so that the task of scientific investigation was simply to subtract a finite portion of this infinite reality from that “meaningless infinity”<sup>33</sup>. The German sociologist declared, “The absolute infinitude of this multiplicity is seen to remain undiminished even when our attention is focused on a single ‘object’ – for instance a concrete act of exchange, and this already happens as soon as we make a serious attempt to describe all the individual components of this individual phenomena, let alone when we try to explain it causally. All the analysis of infinite reality which the finite human mind can conduct rests on the tacit assumption that only a finite portion of this reality constitutes the object of scientific investigation, and that only it is “important” in the sense of being ‘worthy of being known.’”<sup>34</sup> This was his way of expressing the tragic schism characteristic of modern existence, once “disenchantment” with the world had been accomplished.<sup>35</sup>

In the Weimar Republic there were sects of “Germanic” inspiration as well as openly neopagan movements. In 1924, the Franciscan monk Erhard Schlund wrote: “The war of Christianity against Teutonic paganism did not end when Saint Boniface felled the holy oak. Even after the general victory of Christendom and the conversion of the Germanic tribes, the battle continued in the form of guerrilla warfare, in the souls, in the beliefs, in the religious customs and even within the individual himself, and there were

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<sup>33</sup> See H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness & Society. The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890-1930*, (1958; repr. Brighton, 1979), pp. 308-309.

<sup>34</sup> See Max Weber, *Die “Objektivität” sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis*, (1904), ora in: Id., *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, (Tübingen, 1951), pp. 146-214, here p. 171. The principal part of this famous essay deals with the problem of separating and distinguishing knowledge of social phenomena from value judgments.

<sup>35</sup> On this topic, see also Luciano Pellicani’s pertinent remarks in: Luciano Pellicani, *Modernizzazione e Secolarizzazione*, (Milano, 1997), pp. 100-101.

still men who preferred Wotan to Christ. Today it would seem that after centuries of skirmishes, we find ourselves once again with an open battle.”<sup>36</sup>

The Italian state had placed itself “against” the temporal power of the Church and its political elites were secular if not actually anti-clerical. Freemasonry itself, which had such an important role to play in the Risorgimento, is interpreted by some scholars as one of the earliest manifestations of the quest for salvation outside the confines of traditional religion.<sup>37</sup> I do not mean to imply that there is a direct and necessary connection between these movements and the political religions of totalitarianism, but that in both countries the traditional faith had been sufficiently shaken to allow the emergence of forms of religion or para-religion that lay outside the traditional faiths. Additionally, in order to gain power, political religions needed some fatal weakening in the structures and institutions of the State, which occurred in Italy in 1922 (with the not particularly edifying display of the Italian government’s toleration of the mutiny of the Fiume legionnaires) and in Germany after the world economic crisis, between 1932 and the beginning of 1933. In Tsarist Russia too there was a great cultural ferment, accompanied by a radical questioning of the Orthodox faith and experimentation with new beliefs, which sometimes found expression in the deification of the individual. Such movements

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<sup>36</sup> Armin Mohler, *Die konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932. Ein Handbuch*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, (1949; repr. Darmstadt, 1994), p. 138.

<sup>37</sup> For further bibliography, see Antonio Panaino, *Rito e ritualità nella tradizione massonica tra storia e antropologia*, in: Gian Mario Cazzaniga (ed.), *La Massoneria* (Storia d’Italia – Annali 21), (Torino, 2006), pp. 753-770. According to Panaino, however, Freemasonry does not possess certain elements essential to revealed faiths, such as its own theology, a specific plan for individual and collective salvation, and a rite which might be called sacramental, soteriological and antagonistic to those put forward by the single religious confessions. It does, however, possess elements proper to a spiritual and transcendent reality (initiation rites). *Ibid.*, p. 756.

then came together in the faith in the “new Soviet man”, professed by Trotsky, Lunacharsky and Gorky, among others.<sup>38</sup>

Some important inputs to the challenging historical problem of the rise of totalitarianisms in countries such as Russia, Italy and Germany can be found in the final pages of Eric Voegelin’s *New Science of Politics*, where, beginning with his key concept of contemporary Gnosticism<sup>39</sup>, the German-American political scientist explains how this post-Christian Gnosticism – understood as a radical, salvific immanentism – was gradually radicalized over a millennium. Thus, in Voegelin’s view, a more radical form of Gnosticism set apart later revolutions from the earlier ones, like the English and American revolutions. Further, Voegelin suggests that the coming of National Socialism into power is the epitome of radical Gnosticism: “...in an environment without strong institutional traditions, [the German Revolution] brought for the first time into full play economic materialism, racist biology, corrupt psychology, scientism and technological ruthlessness – in brief, modernity without restraint ”<sup>40</sup>. Although Voegelin was later to distance himself from the concept of “political religion” due to its ambiguity<sup>41</sup>, he must

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<sup>38</sup> See Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams. Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, (New York/Oxford, 1989). On the antecedents of this faith present in Russian terrorism and populism during the second half of the nineteenth century, with cogent and illuminating references to how the phenomenon is represented in the works of Dostoevski, see Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers. Religion & Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War*, (London 2005), pp. 276-310.

<sup>39</sup> On the concept of the gnostic attitude in Voegelin, as the founding principle of modernity, see Hans Otto Seitschek, *Exkurs: Eric Voegelin’s Konzept der “Gnosis”*, in: Hans Maier (ed.), *Totalitarismus und Politische Religionen*, vol. III: Deutungsgeschichte und Theorie, (Schöningh, Paderborn et al., 2003), pp. 237-245. Regarding the redemption of man through his own efforts and the divinization of society as cornerstones of modern gnosis, see p. 243.

<sup>40</sup> Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (1952), in: Id. *Modernity Without Restrain*, p. 241.

<sup>41</sup> See Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, Ellis Sandoz (ed.), (Baton Rouge, London, 1989), p. 51.

be credited for his insight into radical immanentism and not a sheer mimetic takeover of elements of traditional religions by politics as the core element of political religions.<sup>42</sup>

In a recent article, Emilio Gentile explained how political messianism and millenarianism, based on revolutionary faith and the myth of regeneration, are the primary sources tapped by political religions. The main cultural trends of the 19th century, which include the idea of progress, historicism (universal history as universal judgment for Hegel), positivism and Marxism, were political eschatologies designed to sacralize history and humanity. The First World War – for many, a personal experience of a religious nature – created a space for new manifestations of “collective effervescence” among the masses.<sup>43</sup> Oskar Jaszi, the Hungarian minister for minorities in Count Karoly’s liberal government, noted the atmosphere of excitement, fraught with millenarian expectations, on the eve of the coming to power of Bela Kun’s republic of councils:

It was not the first time that the devilish spark flickering within Marxism had caught fire. Like every true mass movement, to begin with, it spread with powers similar to that of a religion. We were constantly witness to animated discussions in the streets, in cafés, in theatres and at public lectures, where men with a feverish look in their eyes and dramatic gestures prophesied and discussed the coming of a new world order. The days of capitalism are numbered, world

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<sup>42</sup> Such a connotation of radical immanentism has gone unnoticed by many critics of the concept, who deny the existence of the phenomenon on the basis of the fact that in political religion, there is no imaginary participation of “gods or other normally non-observable beings”. In: Stanley Stowers, *The Concepts of “Religion”, “Political Religion” and the Study of Nazism*, in: “Journal of Contemporary History”, vol. 42, (2007/1), p. 15. See also Ernst Piper: “Did the State, the ethnically purified People’s community, thus become ‘a new Realissimus’ as postulated by Eric Voegelin’s successor Klaus Vondung, or National Socialism an ‘internalized religion’? The hypostatization of the state is not in doubt. But what is questionable is whether this leads to something which can be sensibly described as religion. It seems to me that the National Socialists rejected religion altogether. They were not prepared to tolerate loyalty to a higher being outside the State they controlled, however private those loyalties. They felt uncomfortable with anything based on aura, luminosity and the transcendental. Adolf Hitler wanted nothing which transcended the Third Reich”. In: Ernst Piper, *Steigammn-Gall, The Holy Reich*, in: *Ibid.*, p. 56. Besides the bizarre claim that the National Socialists had deified the State (while there are countless statements by Hitler and other Nazi leaders postulating the Volk’s superiority over the State), it is debatable whether Hitler’s immanentism is in itself in contradiction with an interpretation of National Socialism as political religion.

<sup>43</sup> Gentile, *Un’apocalisse della modernità*, pp. 768-787.

revolution is advancing apace, and Lenin will soon unite all the workers of Europe into a single revolutionary union. In the minds of these people the new divinity was alive: the faith in the inevitable dialectic of economic development, which would bring about the fall of evil capitalism, and with the irresistible force of the laws of nature – divine laws! – bring about that new society dreamt of by all the prophets, that country of peace, equality, and brotherhood – communist society.<sup>44</sup>

This vivid description **efficaciously reproduces** the apocalyptic expectation, spread in Hungary at the eve of the Republic of Bela Kuhn, that the day of universal judgment and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth were imminent.

In 1920, having experienced the Bavarian Republic of Councils, the liberal journalist Fritz Gerlich<sup>45</sup>, which will convert to Catholicism in 1931, wrote *Communism as the Doctrine of the Thousand-Year Reich (Der Kommunismus als Lehre vom Tausendjährigen Reich)*, which included the following chapters: “Orthodox Marxism as Chiliasm”, “Marxism and the Doctrine of the New Pentecostal Miracle”, and “Chiliasm in Practice”.<sup>46</sup> Here, Marxism is repeatedly described as a religion of salvation for this world (eine auf das Diesseits gerichtete Erlösungsreligion). From this perspective, political religions may be seen as a manifestation (and perhaps the most radical and complete) of the erratic form assumed by the “sacred” in the age of secularization.<sup>47</sup> Fritz Gerlich was imprisoned after Hitler’s rise to power and killed at Dachau, at the same time

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<sup>44</sup> Oskar Jaszi, *Magyariens Schuld, Ungarns Sühne. Revolution und Gegenrevolution in Ungarn*, (München, 1923), pp. 69-70.

<sup>45</sup> See Michael Schäfer, *Fritz Gerlich 1883 – 1934. Publizistik als Auseinandersetzung mit den „politischen Religionen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophie an der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München) (Munich, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> Fritz Gerlich, *Der Kommunismus als Lehre vom Tausendjährigen Reich*, (Munich, 1920).

<sup>47</sup> See for example Hans Maier’s remark: “This (the concept of “political religion”) reminds us that religion cannot easily be eradicated from society, and that where this attempt is made, religion reappears in unexpected and unforeseen forms”. In: Hans Maier, *Political Religion: A Concept and its Limitations*, in: “Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions”, 8, (2007/1), p.15. In particular, see Emilio Gentile, *Le religioni della politica. Fra democrazie e totalitarismi*, (Roma-Bari, 2001), pp. 22-23.

when an attack was launched on the SA (the so-called “Night of the Long Knives”) between June 30 and July 1, 1934.<sup>48</sup>

## TOTALITARIANISMS, APOCALYPTICISM AND THE END OF HISTORY

All forms of totalitarianism which appeared after the First World War reconceptualized time. Reconnecting with those palingenetic expectations which had pervaded the experience of the trenches, the totalitarian movements advocated a sort of “end of history” by means of its coming to pass (*eschaton*). As Eric Voegelin pointed out, an eschatological interpretation of history destroys “the oldest wisdom of mankind concerning the rhythm of growth and decay that is the fate of all things under the sun”<sup>49</sup>. The similarity with the Christian apocalyptic vision is striking here: the arrival of God in the world sets in motion the transition to the “final things” and thus to the end of time.

In Fascism, this state of coming to pass is represented by the re-proposition of the Roman Empire into a super-temporal, and at the same time, dynamic dimension which connects the past with the future.<sup>50</sup> In the already quoted article on fascism in the “Enciclopedia Italiana”, the duo Giovanni Gentile-Benito Mussolini defines the fascist man as “an individual who is both nation and homeland, and moral law, who binds together individuals and generations into a tradition and into a mission, who suppresses the instinct of life being limited to short-lived pleasure in exchange for making of duty a higher life, *free of the limits of time and space*: a life in which, by sacrificing himself, by

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<sup>48</sup> See *Prophetien wider das Dritte Reich. Aus den Schriften des Dr. Fritz Gerlich und des Paters Ingbert Naab O.F.M. Cap. Gesammelt von Dr. Johannes Steiner*, (Munich, 1946), p. 10.

<sup>49</sup> Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, p. 223.

<sup>50</sup> Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, p. 121-131; Id., *Fascismo di pietra*, (Rome, 2007).

sacrificing his own particular interests, by his own death, the individual can realize that purely spiritual existence in which his value as a man lies”<sup>51</sup>.

In Soviet communism, the victory of the proletariat was seen as having brought about the end of the class struggle and thereby the end of history (since history was understood as nothing else but the class struggle). According to an insightful remark by Klaus Vondung, the time of communism should not be considered any longer “historical time”, since the stage of perfection reached would make any further change impossible.<sup>52</sup> We should also bear in mind the apocalyptic nature attributed first by Lenin and then by Stalin to the two World Wars, viewed as signs of the imminent, worldwide victory of communism. In 1920, in his introduction to the new edition of *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin wrote: “The period of Imperialism is the eve of the socialist revolution. This statement has proved true on an international scale since 1917.”<sup>53</sup> In effect, the establishment of the Bolshevik government in many of the territories of ex-Tsarist Russia and the setting-up of the socialist bloc at the end of the Second World War seemed to validate such expectations. The fact that the prophecy of Lenin on the “imperialistic war” being the eve of the socialist revolution came true played a formidable role in legitimizing the Soviet regime’s salvific projection on a worldwide scale.

Finally, in the case of National Socialism, the new age was characterized by the rediscovery of the laws of nature (social Darwinism) and of blood (racial politics). The creation of the “millenarian Reich” would bring about the end of history as an open-

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<sup>51</sup> Benito Mussolini, *La dottrina del fascismo. Con una storia del movimento fascista* di Gioacchino Volpe, (repr. Roma, 1937), p. 2; my italics.

<sup>52</sup> Vondung, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>53</sup> Vladimir Ilic Lenin, *Der Imperialismus als höchstes Stadium des Kapitalismus*, in: *Werke*, vol. 22, (Berlin, 1960), p. 198.



ended process. Time would be marked out by the procession of generations of “good blood” in a chain opening out towards infinity. Michael Burleigh found in this generational chain the principle of eternity peculiar to the natural religion of National Socialism.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, Claus-Ekkehard Bärsch, who wrote an in-depth study of the political religion of National Socialism<sup>55</sup>, holds that “the national socialist religion contains fragments of a new theology, inasmuch as it creates a new connection between religion and politics. This connection is not based on the traditional distinction between man and God, or between cosmos and society on earth, but rather on the symbiosis between “Arian humanity” and God, or on the sacralization of the Volk”. Although Bärsch regards the immanentization of the National Socialist religion as partial, he too comes to the conclusion that “the Arian believer” attains immortality by being part of the racial nucleus of his own people.<sup>56</sup> On Bärsch’s view, in National Socialism the immortality of the race is linked to the belief in the immortality of the soul: “In this way, death as eternal non-being is deprived of its thorns.”<sup>57</sup>

Heinrich Himmler himself said in a 1942 speech that it was by means of the chain of ancestors and descendents that the people were “destined to have eternal life through blood” (blutlich das ewige Leben haben).<sup>58</sup> Of some significance here is Heinrich Himmler’s visionary passage, which, written in 1944, discusses the form of the future advancement of the ethnic-racial borders in the German Reich: “We and our children will

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<sup>54</sup> Michael Burleigh, *Die Zeit des Nationalsozialismus. Eine Gesamtdarstellung*, (Frankfurt a. M., 2000), pp. 299-300.

<sup>55</sup> See Claus-Ekkehard Baersch, *Die politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus. Die religiöse Dimension der NS-Ideologie in den Schriften von Dietrich Eckart, Joseph Goebbels, Alfred Rosenberg und Adolf Hitler*, (Munich, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 367, 370, 378.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 378.

<sup>58</sup> Bradeley F. Smith, Agnes F. Peterson (eds.), Heinrich Himmler, *Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945*, (Frankfurt a.M./Berlin/Wien, 1974), p. 160 (from a speech delivered to SS officers in Berlin on June 9, 1942).

succeed, year by year, from generation to generation, in readying our peasant convoys and setting off from the territories in our possession behind the military lines, in order first to build bridgeheads a few hundred kilometers away and then to settle in that territory, driving away the previous inhabitants. This is our task.”<sup>59</sup> This quotation seems to allude too to an understanding of history as a monotonous repeating of the same handling, where there was no place for new and not yet experienced occurrences.

In the case of Fascism, the reference at the base of the new vision of time is a phenomenon that actually existed in the past (George Mosse observed that, as far as fascism was concerned, history was the only reality<sup>60</sup>). In the case of Soviet Communism, this reference is given by a supposed “law of history” and in National Socialism, by “the eternal laws of nature”. It might therefore be argued that in the latter two cases, the break with the historical time belonging to the past is more radical, and that the “unveiling” character assumed respectively by the apocalypse of revolution and by the monstrous racial massacres perpetrated by the Nazis in the course of the Second World War is more evident.

Almost half a century ago, Mircea Eliade stressed the anxiety of modern man thrown into history and expelled from the cyclical time of the archaic age, which allowed him to recommence his existence periodically, by means of cyclically abolishing time and celebrating rites of collective regeneration. In his view, only the Christian faith, open to “salvation”, can save modern man from the terror of history, attributing to mankind a freedom based on the existence of God.<sup>61</sup> Only Christianity would allow men to find

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<sup>59</sup> Smith, Peterson (eds.), Heinrich Hummler, *Geheimreden*, p. 246.

<sup>60</sup> George L. Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe. The Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, (1961; repr. Boulder and London, 1988), p. 352.

<sup>61</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History*, (1954; repr. Princeton 1991).

some kind of transhistoric meaning in the tragedies of history, even though this meaning is not always apparent to mankind given its contingent state. According to Eliade, it is no mere coincidence that the myth of the “eternal return” was proposed by Nietzsche almost at the same time as he announced the “death of God” and was taken up again by the supporters of the “conservative revolution” during the restless years of the Weimar Republic.

Focusing on the incompleteness of revelation, Eric Voegelin argued in a similar vein in the short essay *The Gnostic Mass Movements in Our Time*.<sup>62</sup> Referring to Hegel’s vision of history, Voegelin noted that in the Hegelian philosophy of history the revelation of God in history is made fully comprehensible: “The validity of the construct depends on the assumption that the mystery of revelation and of the course of history can be solved and made fully transparent through the dialectical unfolding of the Logos ”,<sup>63</sup> stated Voegelin. He came to the conclusion that “The factor Hegel excludes is the mystery of a history that wends its way into the future without our knowing its end”.<sup>64</sup> It is not by chance that Voegelin named Hegel the “greatest of speculative Gnostics”.<sup>65</sup> The aspiration to transcending linear, infinite time and hypostasizing a condition beyond history, which we have ascertained in totalitarian regimes presents similar aspects of radical immanentism like Nietzsche’s “eternal recurrence of the same” or Hegel’s unfolding of the Logos and seems to point to a crucial element of political religions which should surely deserve more attention than it has obtained up to now.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Ersatz Religion – The Gnostic Mass Movements of Our Time* (1960), in: Id., *Modernity without Restraint*, p. 308.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, in: Id., *Modernity without Restraint*, p. 272. On the apocalyptic character Hegel’s Phenomenology see Thomas J.J. Altizer, *Modern Thought and Apocalypticism*, in: *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, pp. 325-359, particularly pp. 329-339.