

POLITICS AND RELIGION IN ITALY: A CATHOLIC HISTORY

Abstract

The paper looks at the historical and contemporary role of Catholic Church in Italian politics. Over the last sixty years Catholicism has played an important role in Italian society. The paper identify three ways in which Catholicism interacts with Italian public life: as a peculiar version of “civil religion”, through Catholic inspired political parties and the Church intervening directly in specific public debates. After identifies the change of political role of the Catholic Church in the last decades the paper recognize the main challenges for this particular relationship in the next future.

Key Words: politics, Italy, civil religion, Catholic Church

In order to understand the bond between religion and politics in Italy, we must not lose sight of one essential fact: Catholicism plays today – as it has done in the past – a basic role in defining Italian national identity and in political equilibrium. Trust in the Church can be observed from many indicators from affiliation to the Catholic Church (which, according to various surveys, involves more than 80% of the population) to attendance at the teaching of Catholic religion in school (88.5% of children) to the level of taxes which are donated each year to the Church. It is worth dwelling for a moment upon this last point because it is also particularly significant from a political point of view. In Italy there is a system whereby contributors may donate a portion of their taxes (eight-thousandths) to the Catholic Church one those churches/ religions which have signed an agreement with the State or to the state; and since 2014 another portion (two-thousandths) to a political party. A comparison of the relative success of these mechanisms is remarkable: in 2014 37% of taxpayers chose the Catholic Church - as against 7% to the State, 3% to other religions – and only 0.04% to political parties. This suggests that among people in Italy the Church is massively more popular – and perceived as more “useful” – than political parties.

The interweaving between Catholicism and politics in Italy date from the Edict of Milan in 313 AD. Throughout the Peninsula’s troubled political history, the Church and Catholicism have been a determining factor in political vicissi-

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tudes, and according to some historians they held up to unification of Italy. This dominant position was doubtless aided by the absence of significant numbers of faithful of other religions and the inability of the Protestant Reformation to cross the cultural-geographical barrier of the Alps despite the closeness of Italy to epicenters of the Reformation such as Germany and Switzerland. The lateness of unification did not prevent all Italian states from being Catholic after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. We should also bear in mind that despite long periods of foreign domination by rulers of different religions (for example, the Arabs in Sicily and the Byzantines in Central and Southern Italy), these did not leave significant, lasting traces in the country's religious identity. Thus Italy has historically managed to avoid religious "contamination", and the presence of non-Catholics religions is mostly limited to small Jewish communities in some main cities and the Waldensians (an Evangelical church) in some Western Alpine valleys. Thus religious homogeneousness was for a long time one of the (few) common cultural characteristics in a peninsula which had been for a millennium-and-a-half divided by languages, culture and economics situation: fissures which still today a century-and-a-half after unification – can be seen in Italian society. In the post-unification period, with a weak national identity, common Catholics religious belonging was one of the few common identity elements. In the First Republic, 1946 to 1993, the close relationship was embodied in Christian Democracy (CD), a Catholic-inspired political party, independent of the Holy See, which uninterrupted ruled the country from 1948 to 1993. The collapse of the First Republic as a result of a series of public corruption scandals known collectively as "clean hands" also meant the end of the Christian Democracy: it split up into a number of small parties while its leaders and electorate repositioned themselves in other – centre-right or centre-left – parties. Thus Catholicism, in addition to losing a clear political point of reference, lost influence in the public sphere. Nevertheless, the relationship between religion and politics in Italy is not limited to the existence of Catholic-inspired parties but also includes other dimensions such as the Holy See's direct intervention in the country's political vicissitudes and Catholic subculture's surrogate role in "civil religion".

All research on religion in Italy confirms that Catholicism is still the religious point of reference for most Italians. Yet there are signs of slow but inexorable change in the country's religious sentiment, seemingly influenced by the religious and cultural transformation of Western society. These changes are brought about mainly by globalization which has favored transnational cultural exchanges, on one hand bringing to Italy a significant number of foreigners from non-Catholic environments, and, on the other, making it easier for Italians to have access to teaching of other religions. Secondly, the gradual process of individualization has produced undoubted privatization in religious belief, practice and belonging. In the last half-century, this has led many Catholics to view religion from a more intimate, private point of view, preferring to follow their own faith

itinerary, in some cases conflicting with the Church's official orthodoxy. If we add that both phenomena are situated in an increasingly secularized context where religion plays a diminishing role in the dynamics of public life, it becomes clear that the public role of Italian Catholicism is weaker and less rooted than a superficial analysis reveals. In spite of these considerations, the fact that Catholicism remains today the country's religious point of reference, and to talk about the relationship between religion and politics in Italy it is necessary to understand the complex, blurred set of relations which exists between Catholicism and Italian society. Another element that should not be forgotten that religion today still has an impact on Italian politics, and this does not apply to a perception limited to scholars and intellectuals but shared by the population: an extensive 2007 national survey (NRI 2007) reveals that 67% of 16-74 year-old Italians told that "religion in Italy strongly influences politics". Data concerning the diffusion of Catholicism in Italy leave no room for doubt about the fact that is one of the basic elements for understanding the country's society, culture and politics, a Catholicism shot through by differences and containing various spirits which typify it. According to the 2007 NRI survey, only 22% of Catholics are such by personal conviction and actively. Another 32% are Catholic from personal conviction but always actively, so which is to say faithful who attend religious ceremonies when they decide, discontinuously. Affiliation for ethnic and/or cultural reasons account for another 35%: here the role and the importance of Catholic culture in Italian identity play a crucial part. This persistence is in same ways surprising in a society dominated by the "imperative of choice" where traditions are increasingly losing their meanings. Finally, even in Italy there is a segment of the faithful fiercely critical of the Church's dogmas and therefore interprets its affiliation to Catholicism in an autonomous, personal way. It is a small proportion of the total (10%) but it is in tune with contemporary sensibility. To complete the picture, apart from the 81% Catholics, 5% belong to other religion and 14% have no denominational affiliation. These differences help us to understand that the variety of Italian Catholicism renders it little monolithic and capable of intercepting different sensibilities of the population, a quality which has inevitable repercussions on the political dimension.

Such a historical, cultural presence makes it clear that Catholicism is one of the interpretative keys for understanding not only the relationship between religion and politics but also the whole political situation in the Italian context. In this sense we can identify three ways in which Catholicism interacts with Italian public life: 1. As a peculiar version of "civil religion"; 2. Through Catholic inspired political parties; and 3. The Church intervening directly in specific debates affecting the life of the country.

Catholicism as civil religion?

The first way to connect Catholicism with Italian politics is to think of it as a version of "civil religion" (Rusconi 1999; Garelli 2011), an expression referring to the set of collective practices, symbol, rituals, values and terms by means of which nations "sanctify" their political spheres. This phenomenon lies outside the sphere which is conventionally defined as "religious" and comes about in order to take advantage of religions unifying force in a society without being saddled with the institutional problems connected with a established religion (Gentile, 2007). In the majority of cases, civil religion draws its symbology from one or more religions. The most striking example is the Unites States, the contours and social implication of whose civil religion have been sharply drawn by Bellah (1967). In this case symbols and rituals can be traced to the Judeo-Christian tradition and emerge clearly during great rituals of the Republic such as the swearing-in of a new President.

And is it possible to talk about civil religion in Italy? How can it be interpreted? Italian debate about the subject has always rotated around the claim that there is no clear civic sense. This makes Italy culturally and politically more fragile than many other Western countries. Indeed both past and recent Italian history underline the predominance of specific individual interest over general collective ones, and scarce attention paid to the *res publica*. Furthermore, the Republic is weakened by the absence of shared national symbols, of faith in institutions and founding myths. In other words, Italy lacks a set of beliefs, public discourses and liturgies, rites of memory and historical narration whereby "the State is imprinted in the minds of his members, especially younger and those recently acquired" (Walzer 1996, 106).

This "historical" weak has led many scholars to ask themselves the reasons for this situation. Among these is Robert Bellah who, in his analysis of modern Italy, has detected five type of civil religion: Liberalism, Catholicism, Socialism, "activism" and the fifth – most widespread – type named "religious ground bass".

The presence of the first four types would produce division in national identity, impeding the formation of a common one. The last (religious ground bass), on the other hand, would indicate Italians' tendency to identify with particular small groups instead of devolving a unitary sense of national belonging (Bellah 1974, 447). Anthropologists have expressed similar formulae, connecting the absence of "civil religion" with the country's "cultural backwardness": having been dominated for a long time by "family values" and a tendency towards "subordination and fatalism" (Tullio-Altan and Cartocci 1995), it is therefore incapable of developing public conscience or loyalty towards the country's institutions. Yet there are other expert who claim that Italians' deficit of public sense is not due to the population's lack of civic spirit or excessive prevalence of family values but to their inclination to practise civic virtues more in the private than in the public

sphere because their sense of belonging is more strongly felt at the local (often communal) rather than at regional or national level. Yet other authors reveal that civic behaviour is seen especially in particular conditions (e.g. states of emergency) and is not "directed towards the public dimension or institutions" (Garelli 1999, 179). Finally, among the many examinations of this topic, there are some who impute this lacuna to the little investment made by successive political parties over the years in order to form patriotic republicanism (Rusconi 1997).

The issue of the responsibility of politics in this sector has today returned to the centre of public debate. Various intellectuals have identified the lack of public identification with state as the main cause both of the Second Republic political and moral crisis and the problems of combatting an economic crisis which by now has lasted two decades. These reflections show that when faced with a nation in serious trouble (from the economic, employment, political and ethical point of view), politics has advanced technical-economic-type solutions or made (populist) appeals for a "war against our enemies" (variously identified as the European Union, political costs, tax evasion, foreigners). But in order to reach its objectives, and restore the country social and economic health, the political system and the ruling classes would need the assistance of a "civil religion" (De Luna 2013) which today would need to be built up from scratch. That is to say that "civil religion" is an essential resource not only for keeping the country united at all times but also for tackling the most difficult challenges Italy has faced in its history.

In any case how, simply, would "civil religion" be applicable in Italy? It really implies a set of shared values, public rituals and symbols capable of uniting the population, of interpreting and augmenting a sense of collective belonging. This does not exist in Italy. First of all because the national history is riddled with deep divisions. Secondly because it is not easy to fuel national identity in atmosphere of profound social and economic crisis. Thirdly because the myths and symbols we are talking about must be point of reference for the whole population. What is more, the Western democracies which have most built up their "civil religion" (say the United States and France), with long-term gains, have seen them spiral into crisis in late modernity, given that they are less-and-less unifying, less-and-less shared in increasingly plural, fragmented societies.

In the Italian "civil religion" debate, references to the Catholic religion's active, dynamic presence often appear as a backdrop; indeed, according to some commentators, the very existence of the Church as a powerful institutional structure makes the birth of any variant of "civil religion" in Italy impossible (Rusconi 1997). This states the obvious: the elaboration of any such project in Italy would inevitably run against the troublesome Catholic presence in the public domain (De Luca 2013, 5). Interpretation such as these on one hand encourage doubts about whether it is plausible to apply the "civil religion" concept to Italy and, on the other, may explain why Italy has over time preserved a certain degree of social cohesion despite the lack of any cultural characteristics perceived as shared by the

whole national community. In other words, the basic hypothesis is that the absence or weakness of civil religion in Italy is due to the particular configuration of Italian culture, characterized as it is but the co-existence of different subcultures, each of which has supplied its "followers" with a symbolic apparatus sufficient to satisfy their needs of social and political belonging. Among the many political-cultural subcultures cohabiting in the country, there are three main ones: Catholic, Communist and Liberal. Traces of all three can be found in the Constitution of the Republic (De Luca 2013, 131), characterized by some common traits which are nevertheless insufficient to create total national unity.

In this sense we may talk about "composite civil religion" in Italy, Catholicism being one of its components. Particularly in the past twenty years the balance of subcultures has broken down because of the weakening of their rootedness on the country. In this scenario, while the Communist and Liberal subculture seem to have disappeared, Catholicism – albeit retrenched – seem to have fared better and continues to exercise strong influence on the country's identity. One only has to walk into any public-school classroom to see a crucifix – not the national flag, the Republic symbol or a portrait of the President, but a crucifix. And anybody who has run into a wall of impassioned public opinion. The presence of the Church probably reassures Italians from the identity point of view, making the formation of a republican identity more difficult but at the same time reducing some of the more pernicious effects its absence would imply.

Catholic political parties

The post-unification period (1861-1914) opened up a deep divide between the Church and the Italian state. To complete the process of national unification it was necessary to conquer the papal States, which was achieved by the capture of Rome in 1871. In this belligerent atmosphere, Pope Pius IX proclaimed his "Non expedit" whereby the Holy See imposed upon Italian Catholics not to participate in the political life of the newly-unified state. Thus Catholics did not appear on the country's political scene until after the end of World War I (1918). This situation lasted few years: Catholics were again expelled with the rise of Fascism (1922), the end of the parliamentary regime and the signing of the Lateran Treaties (1929). In this first Concordat between the Italian state and the Holy See, in exchange for economic and legal concession the Vatican gave its support to the regime, no longer backing Catholic political parties which opposed Fascism. The end of World War II, in contrast, opened a phase of flourishing Catholic presence in the country. This was a result of the important role played by associationism and the clandestine Catholic parties in the Resistance, first against Fascism and later (1943-45) against the Nazi-Fascist occupation. This role was embodied in the Christian Democracy (i.e. *Democrazia Cristiana* in Italian), a party which was independent of the Holy See although clearly expressing democratic Christian

values – and which governed Italy – as it has mentioned above – uninterruptedly from 1948 to 1993.

The political power of the Christian Democracy (henceforth CD) in post-bellum years was strengthened not only by the international situation and the threat of Communism but also by their ability to encompass various sensibilities within the Italian Catholic World. According to a definition by its leader-founders, Alcide de Gasperi, CD is “a centrist party which look to the left”. It was the issue of Catholic social experience gleaned between the XIXth and XXth centuries. Thus DC put forward a social model alternative to both Capitalism and Communism. CD ideology referred to the principles of Christian democracy and aimed to holding together employers and workers, the individual and the community, wealth and its redistribution. In this way it could present itself as a point of reference for different social groups. Political Catholicism split at once into three great streams representing different interests and social needs. Becoming gradually consolidated, they were responsible for CD’s long-term success. The first stream was the progressive where Catholicism’s social aspiration were most keenly felt and where more attention was paid to the themes of solidarity with society’s poorest. The central stream, seeking a balance between economic development and social solidarity, tended rather to govern autonomously or form alliances with other parties, whether lay or liberal. Then there was the right wing, more intent on defending Catholic values against the advance of Communism, expressing more conservative political positions.

The Reconstruction of post-bellum Italy was carried out in an atmosphere of solid social texture and a stable political context. One reason was that the country’s subcultures (Catholic, Communist, Liberal) possessed – despite their ideological differences – deeply-rooted common values and aimed at creating a harmonious civil and democratic climate after the dark day of the Civil War (1943-1945). Of course this does not mean that there was not social or economic conflict in a period marked by rapid, profound economic and social transformations, but they did not have a disruptive effect. Nevertheless, over time the necessity of defending one’s own, and one’s subculture’s, interest gradually led all parties of the First Republic to govern increasingly by means of a system of patronage, thereby causing grave phenomena of corruption and incompetent public administration. This “modality of managing politics” came to an end when the country could no longer afford the economic inefficiency produced by the parties patronage system. Then there was the indignation of public opinion, triggered by a series of trials and scandals in the early 1990s (evocatively labelled “Clean Hands”) which brought about the collapse of the First Republic and the of the CD. The result was an explosion of its various components and its leaders rather set up smaller Catholic parties or joined other – conservative or progressive – political formations. This meant a sudden end to the decades-long Catholic political leadership of the country. From that moment Catholic forces had to get

used to constant compromises with other parties on matters of ethics, politics and economics. As we shall see in Section 3, this weakness led the Church to intervene directly in the Italian political scene.

Today the situation of Catholic parties is as follows: most members of the old CD have repositioned themselves in the main centre-right or centre-left parties; some have joined more right-wing or more left-wing parties; and a minority set up centre parties, of which the only one still surviving is UDC, a small and politically uninfluential party. However, the Catholic identity remains a common characteristic, latent but still keenly felt by many politicians who started their careers in the CD. It came out very clearly in the election of the present President of the Republic, in January 2015, where the votes of Catholic parliamentarians from both sides of the House converged on the name of one of the main members of the ex-CD, Sergio Mattarella.

Direct intervention by the Catholic Church

Direct intervention of the Catholic Church in Italian political affairs has been the norm since the Papal State ceased to exist as an independent structure with national Unification, losing its temporal power and its political role in the Peninsula. As we have seen, there followed a period for detachment from political affairs, first with the "Non expedit" proclaimed against the nascent Kingdom of Italy, then with the 1929 Lateran Treaties (a reciprocal non-interference agreement with the Fascist Regime) and finally after the war with the "political delegation" of the defence of Catholic interest and values at the national level to the CD. Yet the end of the CD created a scenario in which the Church had to change its position so that Catholics would not become irrelevant in an increasingly pluralistic society. Even before the end of the CD, defeat in the referenda to abrogate divorce (1974) and abortion (1981) had shown up the Church's weakness on orienting the country's public opinion. Thus in the early 1990s the idea grew, on the part of the Catholic hierarchy and some associations, of trying to invert the tendency by a new, direct self-promotion of the Church. The basic question upon which this project was founded was: if there is no doubt that the majority of Italians are Catholic, why then did only one-third of the population follow the Church's voting indications on divorce and abortion? Why should the Church not oppose the relaxation of mores, the ethical crisis, the dissemination of a radical-libertarian culture, moral disorientation and woolly thinking in a society at risk of losing its bearings.

These questions and reflections gave rise to a programme based primarily on the idea that, even in an age of greater cultural and religious pluralism, Catholic affiliation is still widespread throughout the population; it must be well represented and better directed. Secondly, Catholicism offers the country a valuable contribution not only as regards religious institutions but also education and

welfare. Despite this role, the Catholic voice turns out to be weak and with little influence on public opinion. Therefore it is necessary to invest this social, cultural and relational capital to increase the weight of Catholic demands. Thirdly, it is necessary to find a unifying principle to avoid disorientation and fragmentation in the Catholic world. This principle can be identified in the convergence of all Catholic components in "irrevocable values" – such as life, family, education, solidarity, religious freedom – which are capable of regenerating the national social and moral fibre. Finally, Catholic renewal and cultural involvement are necessary in order to face up the ethical challenges taking shape on the horizon, caused by scientific progress which is constantly raising the barrier, above all concerning the conception of life itself. This is a particularly fertile field where the Catholic world can become involved in a debate to enrich public discussion and, at the same time, counterbalance other orientations and opinion-makers. In other words, Italian Catholicism too should help to define new situations and make its contributions of thought and experience to the many problems of advanced modernity. In so doing, it would completely reverse the cultural delay and comprehension problems of social process which characterized the Catholic subculture of the 1970s and 1980s, leading to defeat in the abortion and divorce referenda.

This set of action and guidelines was called "Cultural Project", the initiative launched by the CEI (Italian Bishops' Conference) in the mid-1990s to emphasize the political – as distinct from spiritual – dimension of religion. It goes without saying that it caused a furore not only in lay circles but also among Catholics who feared that it was an attempt to conceal old temptations (from fundamentalism to the chimera of a new hegemony) and would involve the Church itself and the Catholic world in a role which is not properly theirs. Nevertheless, not least because of the lack of viable alternatives, these indications have stood the test of time and are still today the most influential "ecclesial policy" in the Italian context.

Thus in the face of an enormous ethical vacuum and urgent demands for meaning in Italy in recent decades, the Catholic world has had to present publicly its proposals and convictions, without suggesting uniformity of choice or orientation, resuming and re-interpreting its heritage of ideas and experience. This strategy of greater public presence and communicativeness on the part of the Italian Catholic Church has triggered an intense period of militancy among bishops and Catholic groups particularly in tune with this line of action.

Therefore in the past 15-30 years the national public arena has been crowded with great religious demonstrations, expressions of a faith which tends to reveal itself more in open squares than in churches. Italian participation in these religious events has been habitually high, both for those organized by the Vatican (such as the Jubilee year in 2000 and World Youth Days) and by national ecclesial groups (canonization of local saints, Eucharistic congresses, important meetings of Catholic associations and so on). In line with this objective the Italian Bishops' Conference has initiated an intense job of updating programmes and public

communications in order to involve local churches in their areas of specialisation (family, catechism, youth, work, solidarity and others). Furthermore, the CEI has not lost the chance to defend publicly and support national values and unity, considered endangered by the crisis of civic spirit and the popular success of parties (e.g. the Northern League around the turn of the Millennium) basing their electoral popularity on local interest and the idea of seceding from the country. In addition, the Church has repeatedly appealed to politicians to face up to the problems of unemployment and precarious employment in a period of profound economic crisis. Nevertheless, the fields where Catholicism's public presence has been most clearly in evidence are inherent to ethical questions and the public role of the Church: for example, the defence of the family, the bioethical dimension, the lay status of the State and Religious pluralism.

This is how the Church and Catholic groups directly entered the problems and situations generated by advanced modernity and imposing the creation of new rules acting on both the private and public dimensions.

In short, the "Cultural project" aims not only at communicating the Catholic viewpoint in given areas more and better, but also at defining the Catholic proposal better in individual sectors. In order to do this at both national and local levels over time various committees and panels of experts and scholars were set up to go into the depth and help to argue the Catholic case for various "hot issues". These orientations became visible through a series of mass mobilisation supporting Catholic positions, such as the Family Day (organized in 2007 by the Forum of Family Associations) attracting more than a million people to defend the family as based on "a stable union of a man and a woman open to a natural generation".

Aside from the ethical dimension, many other public battles were fought by the Church and groups of the faithful in defence of "Catholic values", among which we may recall maintaining the crucifix in public places, the religious meaning of feast-days better known by lay-consumerist-type celebrations, and the introduction of references to Christian roots into the European constitution to remind people of the contribution religion has made to all of society.

Today the force of the "Cultural project" seems to have calmed with a papacy increasingly detached from the vicissitudes of Italy and new social problems such as the economic crisis and the growing population of foreigners. It is no accident that the Catholicism Church's positions are more concentrated on welcoming immigrants and demands for greater social justice than on defending those values which are considerable "irrevocable values". Yet the "Cultural Project" continues to influence Italian society: in a certain sense it remains latent in public debate, to come to the forefront suddenly on special occasions. For instance, in June 2015 a new Family day was held in Rome in defence of the traditional family, again drawing a million participants (according to the organizers; 200,000 according to the police).

Religion and politics in Italy: a changing scenario

The theme of this article is the relationship between religion and politics in Italy. Up to now, however, we have spoken only for the complex relationship between the Catholic religion and politics. It is useless to deny that discussing this theme in Italy today perforce means defining it in Catholic terms, yet over the past decade the situation has been slowly changing, above all because of the growth of non-Catholic communities consequent upon the arrival of significant numbers of foreigners. While this is still a minority phenomenon, there is a little doubt that Orthodox and Muslim voices are beginning to be headed in public debate. For now there are few national exponents of these religions, and they limit their interventions mainly to the defence of religious pluralism and general right of new immigrants. In this context the most active appear to be Muslim exponents campaigning for the building of mosques and places of worship, the right of woman to wear a veil in public places, and making state schools more pluralistic. Yet so far “immigrant” religions have taken an interest only in representing foreigners’ rights. Up to now non-Catholic religions have made only tentative efforts to take part in broader political debate with subjects of interest to the whole population; but there is a little doubt that the situation will change in the coming years when communities of other religions – mainly Orthodox and Muslim – take root in Italian society and represent a significant quota of the population. Then we shall probably enter a new phase where representatives of these religions also express opinions on general subjects such as ethics and morals – or even on more strictly political issues.

Another factor of change is relations between Italian bishops and the Holy See. When the tradition of Italian popes was broken, by the election of the Polish Pope John Paul II, the Church embarked upon an internationalisation process leading it to look further away than Italy and Europe. The transformation accelerated with the arrival of Pope Francis, whose actions reveal little interest in Italian see-sawing. The distance is clear when we look at the heated 2015 debate about changing the rules for choosing the CEI (Italian Bishops’ Conference) president. Paradoxically, the Pope wanted the president to be independent of the Holy See and to be elected directly by Italian bishops while some Conference members wanted to maintain the system in force whereby the vote was merely advisory and the Pope nominated the president directly. The significance of the debate becomes easier to grasp if we consider the reasons underpinning the two positions: the Pope wished to break up the privileged bond which had always united the Italian bishops to the Holy See while, on the contrary, the prelates wanted to maintain it. At the time of writing the question has not yet been settled but, if he so wishes, the Pope may make his position prevail and the Italian Church may see its special relationship with the Holy See scaled down.

Thirdly, Italian society now has to face new problems resulting from perma-

nent crises, and so the role of the Church is once again changing. In a community where interest has gradually shifted from ethical and cultural matters to everyday contingencies represented by serious economic, employment and social difficulties which the country thought it had overcome, even the role and involvement of religious structures is redirected; above all in dealing with the serious problem presented by the arrival of significant numbers of foreigners, where the Church is in the front line not only in welcoming but also in increasing people's awareness of the necessity of accepting diversity. Thus the struggle against the country's political forces is changing. Whereas in the 1990s and 2000s the ethical-issues battle led many centre-right exponents to sympathize with the Church, now the situation seems to have been inverted. The right-wing have more than once attacked the Church's position in favour of welcoming immigrants. This is particularly true of the Northern League, an extreme right-wing party with a strong anti-immigrant component. What's more, in a period in which many Italians are experiencing rapid impoverishment and find themselves in a situation of grave social fragility, parishes are attempting to interpret Catholicism's social dimension, a vocation which no longer seemed to make sense in the "society of wellbeing" but has returned to the forefront with a bang with the profound crisis which Europe, especially Italy, is undergoing.

Despite these undeniable transformations, there has been no diminishment of religion's public role in Italy. Once the Italian case seemed an exception among Western democracies which were increasingly secularised and where the phenomenon of religion was becoming more and more private and marginal. Yet now that Casanova's (1994) prophecy about religion making a comeback on the public scene is becoming reality, Italy may be better equipped than many other countries to deal with the turbulent situation which is rattling Western societies – often partly in connection with the religious dimension. For example, if we compare Italy with neighbouring France, the European country with the clearest separation between religion and politics, we observe that perhaps the presence of Catholic Church in Italy is a stabilising element permitting the moderation of some extreme positions which could negatively affect society's social cohesion. In this sense Italy's particular version of civil religion – partly represented by the Catholic subculture – seems to hold out better when outright civil religions start off on the road the profound crisis. By taking up, on the one hand, conservative positions on themes such as sex education and the adoption of children by homosexual couples and, in the other, more progressive attitudes towards the necessity of wealth distribution and welcoming foreigners, the Italian Church demonstrates marked autonomy from politics. This is a source of strength: in this way it becomes an independent, authoritative point of reference for society. But, at the same time, some of the Catholic Church's battles look anachronistic vis-à-vis contemporary sensibility: questions of sexual morality, same sex marriage and abortion.

Many Italians feel it only right that the Church should do "its job", although

we should remember this does not mean either uncritical acceptance or total rejection of the positions it adopts. This is clear from a recent survey (NRI 2007) in which no fewer than 66% of interviewees stated that it is right that “Catholic Church should strictly adhere to its principles without being influenced by prevailing opinions”, at the same time expressing the opinion that “one can be a good Catholic even without obeying the Pope’s or the Church’s instructions on sexual matters” (73%). Therefore the Church remains a transversal point of reference in society, both in the deep, widespread Catholic subculture and as an institution not only creating reflection on the complex ethical and moral themes but also, on a daily basis, contributes to welfare, to education and helps to make daily lives on many Italians less harsh. The absence side of the coin is that this great influence has had a great cost, paid by the state in its political history. The Church’s influence delayed the process of national unification. Its intervention often caused (fortunately curable) fractures in the country’s political life. In the near future the excessive presence of the Church could again be a factor of weakness, obstructing – for example – acceptance of religious pluralism and the possibility of making some subjective choices conflicting with Catholic morality (to give some examples, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, assisted heterologous procreation).

Today it is difficult to see how things will work out – whether the Church’s imposing presence in coming decades will turn out to be an element of strength or weakness for the country. It is, however, reasonable to suppose that in Italy religion and politics will stay closely linked, with the Catholic Church continuing to play a central role in Italy’s political and social life.

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ПОЛИТИКА И РЕЛИГИЈА У ИТАЛИЈИ: КАТОЛИЧКА ИСТОРИЈА

Сажетак

Овај рад се фокусира на историјску и савремену улогу Католичке цркве у италијанској политици. Током последњих шездесет година католицизам је играо важну улогу у италијанском друштву. Овај чланак идентификује три начина како се католицизам меша у јавни живот Италије: као јединствена верзија „цивилне религије“, кроз католички инспирисане политичке партије и кроз директно мешање Цркве у јавне дебате. Након што идентификује промену у политичкој улози Католичке цркве у последњим деценијама, овај чланак препознаје и главне изазове овог односа у будућности.

Кључне речи: политика, Италија, цивилна религија, Католичка црква

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