

CHRISTIANITY, POLITICS, AND SECULAR RELIGIONS

This special issue began with a workshop organized by the Research Institute for Politics and Government at UPS on 20th November, 2020. The original aim was to explore the historical roots and conceptual problems of secularization, but – as a growing number of scholars from the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Poland, and Hungary joined the conversation – it gradually developed into a more general investigation of modern political ideologies and their relationship to Christianity. The present selection contains contributions on secular and political religions, the concept of human dignity, the role of the Catholic Church in Europe, and the idea of the Empire in a both historical and contemporary setting.

William T. Cavanaugh’s *The Splendid Idolatry of Nationalism* poses the question whether we live in a secular, disenchanted world as Max Weber once argued, or quite to the contrary, in a world where new religious forms take the place of Christianity, as Émile Durkheim supposed about nationalism. The question, however, is not to be answered by any superficial reading of the authors, for there is sufficient evidence that even Weber did not speak of the rise of the modern state as a complete break with the sacred.

In a more particular historical context, as Valerio Severino’s “*Civil*” and “*Purely Civil*” in *Early Unified Italy* argues, the national festivals of the nascent state in the 19th century always combined secular and religious elements, expressing a secularization of religious symbolism and a sacralization of politics, which also supports the claim that the idea of the nation-state has never been a truly profane one.

The modern dictatorial regimes appeared as the most powerful political religions, which is the topic of Hans Otto Seitschek’s *Totalitarianisms as Political Religions in the 20th Century*. It is also here that we witness the sharpest conflict between traditional religions and their modern counterparts, which also supports the paper’s conclusion that “political religion” or rather “political messianism” is a more appropriate category to describe such regimes than totalitarianism.

The terms “secular religion”, “political religion”, “political messianism”, and many others nevertheless remain disputed. Tamás Nyirkos’s *The Proliferation of Secular Religions* even suggests that any meaningful distinction between these and other, “real” religions is

impossible, and that is why the current ideological struggles of the West can no longer be translated into the traditional dichotomy of the secular and the religious.

The difficulties of separating the secular state from its religious and moral foundations was also a central topic for the great German jurist Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, whose work is analyzed in Ferenc Hörcher's *Natural Law, Human Dignity and Tradition*. The fact that in order to make universal claims legal norms need external anchors like the concept of human dignity and natural law shows the enduring political importance of the theological. As the paper points out, the traditional justifications of natural law remain particularly important for the conservative perspective.

Natural law is also historically important for the understanding of contemporary human rights. However, as Bogdan Szlachta's *The Catholic Church in Liberal Democracy* shows, the ancient and medieval concepts of *ius naturale* and *lex naturalis* changed into something else in modernity with which they only have the name in common: an individualistic interpretation of rights, up to the point when even the Catholic Church has abandoned the traditional primacy of truth over freedom in favor of the rights of the human person.

It therefore remains dubious whether today's dominant religion is that of nationalism, the cult of the individual, or something bigger than both. As Phillip Blond's *Empire, Nationalism and Christianity* puts it, universals (from the notions of ruling gods to those of self-evident rights) are fundamental to political legitimation and social order, so to successfully defend Christianity, order, and conservation, we always need a not less but more universalistic approach than our opponent.

Read together, the studies collected here offer a strong argument in favor of reconsidering a radical secularist thesis, claiming that even today, when the West experiences a radical decline in the number of churchgoers, and public discussion tends to punish references to conventional truths and universal values, it is hard to frame the Western political experience without Christian political theology.