RELIGION AND POLITICS: THE ITALIAN CASE

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The Role of the Church and Religion in the Public Sphere

Any discussion on the relationship between religion and politics in Italy must still today include an analysis of the dynamics existing between the world of politics and the catholic religion (and its church) due to the preeminent role it has long held in the country. In fact, if it is true that on one hand Italy today is in all respects a pluralistic country where all religious faiths have the right to exist, on the other hand it must be remembered that not only is the Vatican, the centre of world Catholicism, in Rome and that the vast majority of Italians still today profess catholic affiliations but also that the tradition of catholic hegemony in Italy is not without its consequences.

Whilst maintaining its role of extreme importance in national dynamics, the presence of religion in general (and Catholicism in particular) in the public and political sphere in Italy has profoundly changed over the last 60 years. In order to understand its present importance, it is necessary to go back to the situation the country found itself in at the end of the Second World War, characterized by the fall of the Fascist regime, the difficult and delicate passage towards parliamentary democracy, an economy on its knees and the principal infrastructures devastated by the conflicts between the Anglo-American Allies and the Nazi-Fascist armies.

Catholicism and Politics in Post Second World War Italy: From Hegemony to Pluralism

In the years bridging the 1940s and the 1950s, the role of the church and the catholic religion in the life of the nation is enormous, from a religious, social and political point of view. It was an age of churches packed with worshippers, religious vocations filling seminaries, Azione Cattolica attracting a large number of young militants intent on deepening their religious faith and testifying it in society. As regards the political situation, the catholic electorate mostly identified itself in the Christian Democratic party, thanks to the pulling force at this level of the capillary
and dynamic network of the parishes, where many future party organizers originated. In this context, after the memorable electoral victory of 1948, the Christian Democrats (CD) lead the national modernization process, carrying out decisive social reforms (such as the agricultural reform) and promoting industrial recovery: Italian and foreign investments enable the reconstruction of a modern infrastructure network; important industries, automotive, petrol and chemical, begin to pick up again, and consumption is on the increase, as is a marked internal migration from the South to the North of the country. In short, this is the famous Italian economic miracle.

The overall social climate reflects the solidity of the system, with any conflicts being reabsorbed without significant upheavals, certainly also due to the fact that the principal subcultures in the country (Catholic, Communist, Liberal) – apart from their ideological differences – nurture shared values and civil coexistence. In this process, the catholic world takes on a leading role not only because the majority of the population adheres to Catholicism in a convinced and active way, but also because the managerial class (political, economical and ecclesiastical) of catholic extraction demonstrates to be up to handling the challenges of the moment. In those years a particular model of society seems to establish itself, defined by the historian Arturo Carlo Jemolo as “an unexpected realization of a Guelph state one hundred years after the decline of neo-Guelph aspirations”\(^1\), whilst other commentators defined it as a “new modern Christianity”\(^2\), that is to say, a Christian inspired social project capable of overcoming the limits manifested until then by Capitalism and Communism.

However, between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s as the economic boom draws to a close and the economic and political crises strike the country, a phenomenon clearly emerges that had been predicted by the most perceptive observers at the very moment catholic hegemony reached its peak: the diffusion, also in Italy, of the processes of secularization, and with them those changes in mentality and customs that had already been seen in more advanced nations. The search for immediate happiness becomes the new goal, religiosity returns to the private sphere, the great surge of catholic associations seems to peter out and the flows towards the churches and the

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