CHAPTER 2
Political Religion in Twentieth-Century China and Its Global Dimension

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There are different ways of conceptualizing the relationship between religion and politics in twentieth-century China. One is to examine the religious policies of the state or political organizations. In this case, the political and the religious are treated as more or less autonomous spheres.1 Another is to look at the overlap between the two, in particular at the ways that politics became ‘religionized.’ This approach has evolved into a burgeoning field of research over the past two decades, with studies coming under different labels such as ‘political ritual,’ ‘political (or personality) cult’ or ‘political religion.’2 Of these, ‘political religion’ goes furthest in undermining the binary conceptualization of religion and its ‘other’ as diametrically opposed categories.3 If the process of modern state-building, in China as elsewhere, is to be linked to processes of secularization,4 then what constitutes the secular needs complicating. For some of the modern political ideologies that emerged in early twentieth-century China not only underpinned state expansion, but impinged on the creation of what Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer have recently referred to as “a self-consciously ‘religious’ field,” which they argue was to a considerable extent a political project.5 While it makes sense to conceptualize the emerging forms of mass politics, authoritarianism and totalitarianism as new “affective regimes”6 competing with the established ones of religion, this alone is not sufficient. For it glosses over the stunning parallels between totalizing ideologies and religion, notwithstanding the fact that the former—

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in an irony of dialectics—were often adamantly anti-religious. The concept of political religion can help clarify how the modernizing state as well as modern political organizations not only impacted on the religious field, but how their prescriptive ideologies also became part of that field and must therefore be studied as religious phenomena in their own right.

This is not to say that political religion is the same thing as religion proper. Indeed, this is a matter of debate amongst proponents of the concept, with some scholars using the religious terminology only metaphorically or by way of analogy, while others argue that political ideologies constitute a new form of religiosity based on modern manifestations of the sacred. The German-born political scientist Eric Voegelin (1901–1985), one of the founding fathers of the concept, holds that the state is not simply a secular institution and that some of its features must be defined as religious. Tracing the development of political religion from antiquity to Communism and Fascism in the 1930s, Voegelin regards modern political religions as strictly inner-worldly, which distinguishes them from at the ‘trans-worldly’ redemptive religions (though not necessarily from non-redemptive religions). Political religions are thus at the same time a product of secularization and an attempt to overcome it. Following the dissolution of the Christian ecclesia, they seek to create a perfect inner-worldly community by offering a renewal that Voegelin calls “apocalyptic,” by which term he refers to a perceived need to overcome the forces of evil (be they the bourgeoisie, supposedly inferior races or others) as a prerequisite to attaining social redemption.

This apocalyptic dimension is equivalent to what students of Fascism have called ‘palingenesis’: the notion of a (national) rebirth from a state of crisis, which derives from Christian soteriology, but can likewise be applied to matters secular. It is important to note, however, that this utopian dimension of political religion, which promises the creation of an idealized community through an epic struggle, is not incompatible with claims to scientific rationality. In fact, as Voegelin has argued, such modern “apocalyptic revelations” often pretend to be scientific, while in his view they are in fact “myths”

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8 For the former cf. Aron (1957) and the otherwise useful chapter by Riegel (1999); for the latter Gentile (2006).
10 Ibid., pp. 50–52 and 59–61.