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ARTICLE

Christian democracy as political spirituality: transcendence as transformation—Italian politics, 1942–1953

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Abstract

This article deals with the transformation of Catholic politics in Italy between 1942 and 1945 and the emergence of Christian Democracy as the dominant political party in the postwar years. It analyzes how Catholic politicians turned from reactionary critics of democracy to its champion. The article foregrounds a dimension that has not been given sufficient attention in scholarly works on political Catholicism and Christian Democracy, namely the religious content of thought. In the experiences of politicians and thinkers living through Fascism and war, transcendence and spirituality emerged as new markers of certainty that came to re-direct and ground democracy. Our conceptual argument is that Christian Democracy can be understood as a distinct form of “political spirituality,” *pace* Foucault. The article further shows how this political spirituality became “applied” in a series of ways in the immediate postwar period.

Keywords: Christian Democracy; democratic transition; political spirituality; religious politics; war experiences

In December 1942, a few months before the fall of Benito Mussolini and the end of fascism, groups of Italian Catholic politicians and intellectuals under the direction of Alcide De Gasperi founded the *Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democracy, DC). In a few years, the party became the country’s dominant political force and the largest of all Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe—and in the world. The party won the first parliamentary elections in 1948 and confirmed its leadership position with the elections of 1953. In the crucial post-war years, it articulated and developed political-institutional and socio-economic platforms that ushered Italy into a stable democratic age. It implemented a welfare state and articulated a specific response to the challenge of post-fascist democracy. In the 1950s, it significantly contributed to the founding of the European Community. It stayed in power until 1992–1994

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—the longest period of party rule in Western European history. Without a doubt, Christian Democracy in Italy is one of the most remarkable experiments in modern European politics.

In retrospect, this remains something of a puzzle. Sociologists have always considered Europe the bastion and forerunner of secularization and the separation of politics and religion, with the twentieth century standing as the culmination of this process. And yet, one of the most powerful political forces of twentieth century Europe was a distinctively Christian political movement. How to understand this paradox?

While there is no shortage of works that deal with particular aspects of the rule of Christian Democracies in countries like Italy, Germany, and the Benelux countries, Christian Democracy is still one of the most understudied and poorly understood political cultures in Europe and beyond. This applies particularly to the English-language literature. Luckily, in recent years an emerging scholarship in English has recognized the need to understand Christian Democracy and Catholic politics in a deeper vein (Pombeni, 2000; Gehler et al., 2001; Caciagli, 2003; Conway, 2003; Kaiser, 2007; Müller, 2011, 132–8, 2013; Mitchell, 2012; Chappel, 2018; Kosicki, 2018; Invernizzi Accetti, 2019; see also review article by Forlenza 2019a; Taylor, 2020; Driessen, 2021, 2014). While this article remains indebted to this emerging literature, it wishes to add a stress on an experiential, existential, and spiritual dimension that was a decisive factor in the shaping of Christian democratic politics. Thus, the aim of this article is to take seriously the question: How was a spiritual search for new meanings translated into a distinct political vision?

To answer the paradoxical emergence of a powerful Christian political movement in the middle of the twentieth century, there still reigns a tendency in the existing literature to adopt a strategic perspective that ultimately sees Christian Democracy as instrumental in stabilizing the postwar democratic order in a conservative and moderate vein, thus proposing an overly secular and ideological reading of its emergence (Ginsborg, 1990; Warner, 2000, 2013; Caciagli, 2003; see, e.g., Müller, 2011, 132–8, 2013; Chamedes, 2019, 235–70). In short, the “Christian” adjective was not that religiously laden, after all. In these accounts, Christian Democracy emerged as a useful and flexible “container” that could incorporate pretty much any content to reach the masses and counter the communist alternative. Such an instrumentalist reading of Christian Democracy is of course not irrelevant. Pragmatism was always a feature of Christian Democratic politics. While problematic, a reduction of Christian Democracy to power politics and strategic pragmatism in the wider Cold War setting captures at least an element of Christian Democracy from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, when the party became led by people whose political worldviews had not directly matured through the experience of fascism and war. However, for the generation of Christian Democrats who came into power in the aftermath of the war—the focus of this article—an instrumentalist reading is in our view grossly misleading.

We cannot simply reduce the emergence of Christian Democracy to an electoral strategy that superficially injected democracy with ethical foundations, disregarding the content of religion and the historical experiences from which such a democratic opening was created. Catholic thinkers were not “second-hand dealers” of ideas, as Jan Werner Müller has argued.¹ They were, rather, “first-hand” thinkers and frontline political activists. Nor were they simply readers of any text. They were existentially

committed to translate the ethos of the Gospels into a guiding device for a reconstructed political community. It is useful here to invoke Arpad Szakolczai's notion of "reading-experiences," understood as the formative "encounter with a certain work that struck a chord with personal experiences," generating an intellectual drive (Szakolczai, 1998, 212).

For scholars who have worked on political Catholicism and Christian Democracy in Italy, this is not completely new. Especially Italian scholarship on the topic has foregrounded the relationship of politics and religion that animated the politics of Christian Democracy.² Pietro Scoppola has time and again conceptualized the deep spiritual dimension of De Gasperi as a "spirituality of conflicts" (Scoppola, 1981; see also Durand, 1984; Acanfora, 2015). Other scholars—Giovagnoli (1991, 95–6), Moro (2018), Acanfora (2007, 2011), Formigoni (2016), and Pombeni (2013)—have foregrounded the Christian inspiration that informed and nurtured Christian democratic political culture and the "religious" language that the party forged vis-à-vis its rivals, especially the communists.

Recognizing these important contributions, we here want to take a step further and propose a different and more theoretically informed view on the religious dimension of Christian Democracy. Our conceptual argument is quite simply that Christian Democracy must be understood as a "political spirituality." With political spirituality we refer to the much-contested concept introduced in the late 1970s by Michel Foucault. Foucault wrote a series of articles for Italian and French newspapers, reporting from the spot on the revolutionary situation in Iran in the fall of 1978. In an article written for *Le Nouvel Observateur* in October 1978 and titled *What are the Iranians Dreaming About?* he described the political imaginaries of the protesters as tied to a "political spirituality" (now in Afary and Anderson, 2014, 203–9). Here, Foucault did not provide a definition of what he meant by the term. However, in an interview given in May 1978, on the absolutely central questions of "what is history" and "the problem of truth", he said:

How can one analyze the connection between ways of distinguishing true and false and ways of governing oneself and others? The search for a new foundation for each of these practices, in itself and relative to the other, the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false—this is what I would call 'political *spiritualité*'. (Foucault, 1991, 82)

Foucault was heavily criticized for his writings on Iran (not least due to the political development in Iran under Khomeini), and perhaps because of this did not return to the concept. However, in our view, it captures something essential about a spiritual dimension of modern politics, whose applicability should not be reduced to the Iranian context.

As we read Foucault's extremely condensed statement, political spirituality involves a reflexive searching for a "new way," but one that draws on pre-existing repertoires of tradition and cultural meanings from where an endogenous political project can be formulated. It ties together self-governance with political rule on the true/false axis. Political spirituality involves both transcendence and conversion. It involves new techniques of self-transformation, new capacities, new possibilities for

regimes of truth to emerge—a movement of creation and re-creation. Political spirituality is therefore practice, experiences, and invention, rather than solid beliefs.

Applying this term to Christian Democracy adds a deeper dimension to the religious aspect so far discussed in the literature. What we are dealing with here is not simply a religious inspiration, or a “political use of religion” (Acanfora, 2007); nor is it a pre-existing religious background that became “the inner source of action” (Scoppola, 1981); nor was it a deep faith nurtured by the sacred texts as the basis of an “inspired politics” (Durand, 1984); nor so the desire to translate “unalterable principles of truth” (Giovagnoli, 1991, 96) into politics and into history. Political spirituality, we argue, does not imply a set of pre-defined set of religious beliefs that can be applied to the political realm, a politics informed by religious conviction, or a political action grounded in religious faith. We imply the term “political spirituality” instead to refer to a transformative experience in which people committed to politics, aware of the creative dimension of their commitment, seek a new way to establish a regime of truth (and falsehood) and a regime of self-governance, each by and through the other. This is something else than basing political action on religious doctrine; and it has little to do with separating and distinguishing truth and falsity based on a set of pre-established convictions. We are referring, in other words, to a transformative activity that involves an open searching moving beyond itself: a challenge to the relations of government and truth that, while anchored in “traditions,” at the same time puts into question one’s own lifestyle, convictions, and epistemological regimes. In the historical juncture which we examine this rediscovery of a sense of the spiritual invested Catholic politics with a new intensity: it was not just about changing society, but about changing people, starting from themselves. We are of course not claiming that every single Christian Democrat was infused with spirituality in the same way or to the same degree. But we do claim that the spiritual concerns were a main driving force behind the establishment of the party, and that a widely shared political spirituality significantly influenced the party’s policies once in power.

Empirically, we focus on a series of important collective and individual documents written in the period but also on personal testimonies, diaries, and letters by some of the main protagonists. We argue our case by placing the decisive shift in Catholic political culture and the emergence of a distinctive Christian Democratic political spirituality in two periods: between 1942 and 1945, during the war, and in the first years after the war, from 1945 to 1953. The first period saw the development of a distinct political spirituality. The second period saw this political vision institutionalized in a series of ways that we will exemplify, severing a tight connection between spirituality and applied politics. Before we proceed to our two main sections, we briefly need to rehearse how Catholic intellectuals encountered democracy and political modernity during the 1930s, in the context of fascism.

Living through fascism

The history of Catholicism during the fascist period is well-documented. Yet it is necessary to remind of some major trends of the period, as it would pave the way for later developments. In 1926, the fascist regime dissolved all political parties, including the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (PPI, Italian People’s Party), Italian Catholics’ first

experiment in mass politics, founded in 1919 by the Sicilian priest Luigi Sturzo with an appeal to “all strong and free men.” The Vatican had maintained a highly conflictual relationship with the PPI, calling it the “least bad” of all Italian parties (see Molony, 1977, 47–8).

The Lateran Pacts signed by the fascist regime and the Vatican (Pollard, 2008, 85–7; Pertici, 2009, 99–152) re-established the power and the diplomatic standing that the Church had lost when Italy seized Rome in 1870. It also institutionalized the model of Catholic action in politics for the years to come. Religious, cultural, and social activism of laity must be conducted under an umbrella organization, *Azione Cattolica* (Catholic Action), strictly controlled by the hierarchy. The conventional date for Catholic Action’s birth is 2 October 1923, when Pius XI approved the new structure of the organization. Until then, Catholic Action had been a loose network of initiatives, its name being simply a generic brand for Catholic activism in society. With the 1929 agreement, Catholic Action was ordered to remain apolitical, while members of the association could still act in the public sphere as individuals.

At the same time, Catholic Action continued to function as essentially the only non-fascist organization in Mussolini’s totalitarian state—despite the Duce’s repeated efforts to restrict its activities. The two intellectual branches of Catholic Action—the FUCI (Federation of Catholic University Students) and the *Movimento Laureati* (Association of Catholic Laureate and Professionals)—functioned as cultural and formative spaces aimed toward the re-Christianization of Italian society, spaces that eventually would create openings for a political imagination beyond fascism.

For the younger generation of Catholics who came to maturity in the interwar period, fascism was by no means a replacement of their Catholic thought or identity. They were simply part of a social and political reality dominated by a fascist state and a fascist society. Fascism was the political normality that surrounded them. Sturzo’s political experiment, annulled by fascism, was not really an active reference point or alternative to fascism—not yet, at least. Catholicism was not a political investment in any direct sense. At the same time, there were some evident convergencies between Catholic values and fascist thought and practice, which made the two not only compatible but to some extent part of a seemingly cohesive worldview. This involved, first of all, anti-Communism and anti-materialism. It also involved a “corporatist” view of man and society. In short, to many young and less young Catholics fascism appeared both as a force alternative to the threat of atheistic Bolshevism and to the “degeneration” of liberal democracy, all of which originated in what they defined “the false principles of 1789” (as quoted in Moro, 1979a, 465–8).

Indeed, in the 1930s, the young intellectuals of Catholic Action (also known as *fucini*) endorsed almost all of the policies enacted by the Fascist regime, from the demographic battle to the invasion of Ethiopia and the proclamation of the Italian empire (1936), which seemed for many of them to herald a time in which Catholic Italy would play a leading role in a new world order (Dagnino, 2007, 2012, 2017). Many of them were also members of the Fascist University Youth (GUF).³ The *fucini* had a mostly positive view of the regime’s anti-capitalist and corporatist economic policies, and other aspects of fascist politics which resonated with the tradition of Catholic social thought. Some of the *fucini* worked for the regime’s economic agencies. The economist Amintore Fanfani, a professor at the University *Cattolica*

(Milan), joined the fascist Party in 1933, endorsing the regime's socio-economic policies. Corporativism was seen as a "third way" between liberal-capitalism and communism which, he thought, suited Catholics and fascists alike. Fascist doctrine was, in his view, "not contrary to faith and morale," and therefore Catholics must "elaborate and apply it" (see also Fanfani, 1936, 1937; quoted Galli, 1977, 17; Ornaghi, 2011).

For large constituencies of Italian Catholicism fascism was the normal and best possible socio-political model for the preservation of Christian values (Scoppola, 1973; Gentile, 2006; Formigoni, 2010, 105–44; Moro, 2020). Socialism and Soviet bolshevism represented the major threat. This, however, did not deprive young Catholic intellectuals of independent mentality. Their aim was to create or re-create a vital Catholic culture. In the 1930s, this certainly did not mean to build democracy, rather to "correct" the regime (Parisella, 2001, 144). However, in their search for new cultural inspiration, many young Catholics started to engage with an eclectic combination of cultural references, shaking Italian Catholicism from its provincialism. Jacques Maritain's "integral humanism" and Emmanuel Mounier's philosophy of personalism would become the moral and intellectual compass in this search, which was not limited to Italy (Moyn, 2015, 65–100). From the late 1930s, an increasing number of Catholic intellectuals started to take distance to fascism. This meant, as we shall see, to re-activate Catholicism in a political vein, completely outside—and eventually against—fascist ideas, doctrines, and practices. But for many the real and decisive change came with the political and existential crisis that the war ushered.

War experiences and "learning how to think politically": 1942–1945

Between 1942 and 1945, the Catholic intellectual and political *milieu* became an incubator of ideas and proposals on the political and social order of post-fascist Italy, developing a rich and articulated *Catholic democratic political project* in clear discontinuity with the premises of their political and cultural traditions (Scoppola and Traniello, 1975; Casella, 1984; Moro, 1988; Campanini, 1997; Scoppola, 1997, 26–31).

At the beginning of the war, there was still a convergence between fascism and Catholicism. However, as the war proceeded, a "crisis of meaning" hit hard Italian Catholicism (Moro, 1998; Traniello, 2007). It was becoming increasingly clear to Catholics that fascism could not be the carrier of Christian values and principles. To an increasing number of Catholics, the war meant a revelation that fascism was its main enemy. They started to realize that violence and disdain of the person were not infantile illnesses of fascism but rather the most profound essence of the regime. And that the illness was incurable.

Indeed, for many Catholics, the war became lived as a deep existential and political crisis, but also an opportunity for moral and spiritual redemption (Taviani, 1988). And yet, how could they face this new situation? The past did not offer them any reference points. They knew little, if anything, of the pre-fascist democratic politics of Christian inspiration. They had been taught that the Church was indifferent and equidistant to every political regime. They had not been educated to "understand" fascism as Giuseppe Dossetti and Giuseppe Lazzati, two young intellectuals of the *Cattolica*, put it in the postwar era (see Dossetti quoted in Spreafico, 1989, 720; Lazzati, 1989).

The opening of the democratic horizon: 1942 as threshold moment

In the middle of this political and existential crisis, however, something new started to emerge. The crucial point here is that religion and faith provided Catholics not only with psychological refuge, consolation, and a meta-ideological meaning to understand incomprehensible events, but also with a path to the future. 1942 can meaningfully be identified as the decisive turning point.

In his famous 1942 Christmas radio-message, Pius XII urged Catholics to act: “the call for the moment is not for lamentation but action; not lamentation over what has been but reconstruction of what is to arise and must arise for the good of society.” This was an exhortation to action; but it was also the realization that the new historical conditions *required* a qualitative transformation in the Catholic attitude to politics. Commenting on the radio-message, Guido Gonella, who had been a *fucino* in the 1930s, wrote:

Regeneration will not come from the economic or from the political, but from the spiritual, from the internal sap of the plant—a nourishment that the external conditions can favor but not replace completely.... The renewal of society based on spiritual foundations paves the way for a radically new orientation of the social order—and therefore of all social and political institutions. The question is to define a supreme spiritual principle, which will inspire a new form of social and political organization. (Gonella, 1944, 282)

From 1941 to 1942—*before* the papal authoritative intervention—the Catholic *milieu* had showed important signs of vitality. This included not only the return to the generation of Catholic pre-fascist politicians, including De Gasperi, back on the terrain of active politics, but also almost febrile activities of conferences and working groups on political-social themes at the *Cattolica* (Pombeni, 1979, 78–96; Fanello Marcucci, 1982, 31–59; Bocci, 1995; Torresi, 2017, 236–43).⁴ In January 1943, Sergio Paronetto, wrote in a letter to his future wife:

I seem to discover a distinction, if not a real barrier, between words and doing, between gossip and life, between free ideas and effective and living ideas. And my position, my vocation, seems very clear to me: which is on the side of doing, with the cross, if you like, of acting. (quoted in Torresi, 2017, 311)

Paronetto (1911–1945) was a typical representative of the “second generation” of Catholic political thinkers: those who were too young to be involved in politics before fascism and had been educated during the dictatorship (the “first generation” of Catholic politicians refers to those who, led by Luigi Sturzo, had founded the *Partito Popolare* in 1919). He was a former *fucino* and a leader of the *Movimento Laureati* and in 1934 had become a manager of IRI, the Institute for the Industrial Reconstruction, the public holding company established in 1933 by the fascist regime to restructure and finance the banks and private companies that went bankrupt during and after the Great Depression.

A crucial issue in the passage from the war to post-war reconstruction was the role of intellectuals. Ultimately, young Christian democrats felt called upon to indicate how to act within post-war modern mass society, elaborating the link between spirituality and the building up of a democratic and free society. Paronetto expressed his sentiments in this regard during a private audience with the Pope on September 24, 1943. According to his own notes, Paronetto had sustained that “the subject of the relationship between technology and morals, between us technicians and moralists is a very important subject for the future, for the new order.” He had identified the heart of the problem in the fact that “the technicians close themselves in technicalism, the moralists and theologians are superficial and do not know the technique.”⁵ It was necessary to heal the rift between technical knowledge and moral knowledge, in order to build a new Christian-inspired order. The settlement of this rift would come to fruition in the concrete operations of applied politics, allowing for the diffusion of a new mentality.

One crucial interpreter of the spirit of the Gospels into “technique” was Alcide De Gasperi. In his so-called “political testament” which he wrote between 1942 and 1943, De Gasperi referred to Paul’s letter to the Galatians (5:13) to stress the necessity to root freedom in a Christian ethos:

Today everyone feels that the personal, evangelical sense of justice, “treat your neighbor as yourself,” is the vital principle of Italy and of the world and the indispensable premise of that social solidarity which must inspire peoples and governments and which we oppose to the race, class, or party myths of state totalitarianism. Only under these conditions of fraternity “vos in libertatem vototi estis” [were you called to be free] says Paul. (De Gasperi, 2008, 2829–49: quote at 2836)

In this specific letter, Paul addresses recent converts in a political environment marked by rivalling ideologies and beliefs and firmly grounds the Christian answer in freedom—of being *called* to freedom. For Paul, this calling implies a duty to “serve one another humbly in love.” De Gasperi’s understanding of freedom remained rooted in this paulinian reading throughout: we are called to freedom, and freedom is to serve, through love. To De Gasperi, this was the only conceivable way to avoid any form of totalitarianism.

In his efforts toward a Christian restoration, Giorgio La Pira—a young Catholic intellectual who became a member of the Constituent Assembly under the banner of Christian Democracy—wrote in a similar vein:

the statute of technology was a body of rules so well thought out as to allow its connection with the whole human order, which starts from the material, crosses the political, enters the spiritual and is crowned in God.

To La Pira, without this ordering of profession and technique within an anthropocentric and theocentric finality of the social body, civilization had fallen into ruin and decayed in materialism, war, and totalitarianism. But, concluded la Pira “the ax is

placed at the root; all we have to do is uproot the bad tree to put the good tree in its place” (La Pira, 1943).

Reflecting on the new order to come, Laura Bianchini—a member of the *Movimento Laureati* who joined the Resistance in her town (Brescia), and who would become one of the few women elected in the Constituent Assembly in 1946—wrote in 1944:

What would be the use of the new institutions, the new forms of government, the new mechanisms of international law if men...were not themselves animated by a new spirit.? Morals are not reformed if consciences are not reformed; and peoples are not reformed if persons are not reformed.

For Bianchini the goal to which the Christian-inspired antifascist rebellion aspired was an “inner disarmament,” the only viaticum for a global, deep, radical, lasting peace. Indeed, the only existing value that could build a new culture was “love”:

For this we can fight and die, kill and be killed without hatred and without violence, but only for indomitable and sanctifying love. Because if hate destroys, love builds up. And it is for this love that we want to return to the cult of the most basic and human and ordinary social virtues: truthfulness, goodness, loyalty, respect, generosity, recognition of mutual merits ... And it is again for this love that we want to reawaken in our consciences the profound meaning of man’s moral life. (Bianchini, 1944a)

Bianchini saw with clarity that “all the evils and sins of the social order have their root in a disorder in the personal life,” and “personal disintegration is at the basis of social disintegration.” As she concluded in a 1944 article: “In short, a spiritual action is needed” (Bianchini, 1944b). As a partisan writing under pseudonym (Battista), she returned to the need of a spiritual revolution: “Let us never forget that the modern world is a broken engine and that only the spirit can get it going again,” as she wrote in one article, followed up in another:

The concrete, luminous, demanding presence of the spirit has almost completely withdrawn from our world. They fed us empty words; they have closed us in a circle of lies, of soulless habits. Where will we fix our gaze[s] to find a direction? The imperative of the present hour is: to reaffirm the dignity of the human person... The last European movements that have called themselves revolutionary have all been revolutionaries against the spirit ... We must now invoke the only legitimate revolution, that of the spirit ... It is a permanent revolution which will last as long as humanity... The truth, which is light in the intelligence, becomes fire in the heart that welcomes and cherishes it. (Bianchini, 1944c)

Rebels for love

There are many other personal testimonies of such transformative experiences. It was the tragic experience of war and imprisonment in a German camp that urged Giuseppe Lazzati to commit to the “spiritual animation of the temporal,” using here the words of Maritain. His decision to act in politics was the consequence “of the cultural concerns which moved us” in the years of the war, “allowing us to pin down precise programmatic points.” Lazzati decided to “establish a cultural commitment destined to prepare Catholics to think politically.”⁶ The experience of deportation and life in the concentration camp meant for Vittorio Emanuele Giuntella a profound “religious experience,” a conversion and a desire to change and reconstruct the world starting from the moral and spiritual dimension as the ineliminable basis (Giuntella, 1979, 259–95). Internment was likewise a transformative experience for Entico Zampetti, who in his diary wrote:

If God wanted these three years to pass in this way, they have not passed in vain. The formation, or rather, the transformation of my character and my conscience is a fact that the naive “I” of a nineteen-year-old man could not even imagine at the time. (quoted in Vecchio, 1997, 287–8)

It was the war that convinced Dossetti and many other young Catholics to abandon Catholic intransigence in favor of direct involvement (Giuntella, 1981; Pavone, 1991, 169–89; De Rosa, 1997). For many, this meant to join the antifascist Resistance, and thus to collaborate with communists and socialists (Dossetti, 1995; on the relationship between Catholics and Marxists in twentieth century Italy, see Saresella, 2019). It was the war events that convinced Telesio Olivelli, long loyal to fascism, to become “a rebel for love,” as he wrote in his diary. This meant to live the struggle against fascism as a “moral revolt,” a liberation from fascism understood not only as an external force but also an attitude that came from within: an existential struggle that required a personal sacrifice. It was Olivelli who coined the phrase, “rebels for love” in his famous “A Rebel’s Prayer,” which became the Catholic pendant to the communist song *Fischia il Vento* [“The Wind Blows,” based on the Russian *Katiusha*] and known by every Catholic partisan. It ends like this: “Of the Peace of Armies. Lord who bears sword and joy, hear the prayer of us, rebels for love.”⁷

The *fucino* Ermanno Gorrieri wrote to his mother on November 1, 1942, a few months before joining the Resistance:

My thoughts about the future have slowly transformed. I do not feel called simply to be a pharmacist all my life: I feel called for something higher, there are so many truths to study and delve into, so many ideas to diffuse, so much work to do toward the *Christianization of the world*.⁸

A Catholic partisan from the Veneto region echoed in 1943

There should be no illusions. If there will be rebirth, it will have to come from us...For this reason, every individual’s duty is to improve himself first of all

morally. In this troubled period we have witnessed a fearful immorality which has invaded both the highest and the most intimate spheres. Therefore a tenacious and courageous campaign for a profound moralization of society will have to be carried out. Only if individuals are healthy will there be a healthy society: otherwise nothing good can be expected. (quoted in Fantelli, 1965, 86–7, note 61)

Democracy re-anchored

With his radio-message of Christmas 1944 on “the problem of democracy,” Pius XII expressed a favorable predisposition towards the values of democracy and the dignity of the person against every form of totalitarianism: “the democratic form of government appears to many as a postulate of nature imposed by reason itself.” The words of the pope were cautious and much less advanced than the elaboration of Catholic intellectuals (Ruffilli, 1980, 29–42; Traniello, 1990, 178–9; Chamedes, 2019, 237–41). Yet, they resonated with what was already happening on the ground, as Catholics found in Pius a confirmation of their democratic and antifascist choice. In 1945, a Catholic activist, soon to be elected as a DC member of the Assembly Constituent in June 1946, wrote that “democracy in this radio-message is elevated to human dignity,” seeing it as a legitimation of “Christian democracy in a universal sense” (Giordani, 1948, 567). Aldo Moro, who would also soon enter the ranks of the party, reflected on the 1944 message in an article of January 1945:

The essence of democracy is in the recognition of the dignity of the person, of his rights within society, of the responsibilities that such a conscious participation in the exercise of power entails. Freedom is not an arbitrariness, it is not oppression, it is not the fiction of deceptive popular mystics, it is instead the substance of moral life, the weight of conscious and lucid decisions, of contributions to be made, of controls to be established in view of the common good. (Moro, 1982a, 110)

From a Catholic point of view, democracy must be infused with a spiritual, transcendental meaning to protect it from the totalitarian threat. This call for spirituality pervaded the narrative of Christian democrats from the war to the post war years, revealing a conception of politics subordinate to a higher aim: the salvation (not only in a religious sense) of the human being. The call for spirituality pervaded a number of Catholic reflections on democracy and post-war order such as Olivelli’s Christian inspired socio-economic “reconstructive program” based on a “revolution of the spirit,” or Fanfani’s thoughtful pages on “person, goods, and society” in a “renewed Christian civilization” (Fanfani, 1945, 1957; Giuntella, 1981, 124).

Aldo Moro’s articles published on *La Rassegna* and *Pensiero e Vita* in 1943–1945 reveal his abrupt change of mind about fascism (see, e.g., Moro, 1982a, 1982b, 50–2, 60–2, 88–90). The “spiritual” and cultural roots of fascism, and not only its institutional dimension, had to be pulled up, as otherwise freedom and liberty would remain “incomplete” and only lead to a new form of fascism. A lasting solution could only be found at the level of spirituality. As he said in 1944, in a writing aptly entitled “spiritual crisis”:

We have inherited a sad legacy of an impoverished spiritual life...fascism was a time of moral decay, of weariness of spirits, of loss of the values of life, of diminished or lost possibilities of understanding between men... Moreover, it is not an Italian crisis, but a European and global one...We will overcome this crisis, fighting, together with the whole world, anguished yet confident, aware of our error and eager to overcome it, with the only efficient weapon to overcome our disorientation: a higher and brighter vision of life, generator of moral energies necessary to achieve our higher purpose. (Moro, 1982a, 14–6)

Moro urged Catholics to step forward in the rebuilding of the nation: only Christianity and Catholics could offer the “spirituality” that democracy needed (Moro, 1982a, 31–3, 75–7).

From the reconstructive ideas to the Camaldoli Code

During the last years of the war, Catholic intellectuals started to elaborate their concrete plans for the new democratic Italy through a myriad of activities and meetings. Two crucial documents were produced, circulating secretly since Spring 1943 and publicly after the fall of fascism. *The Reconstructive Ideas of Christian Democracy* was elaborated by De Gasperi in collaboration with other *popolari* and young intellectuals such as Paronetto. The *Ideas* echoed central aspects of Maritain’s thought, from the value and dignity of the “person” to the central principle of “political liberty,” reaffirming Christian values as the basis of democracy in Italy and peace among nations.⁹

However, the most important such Catholic document was the so-called *Code of Camaldoli*, written by members of the *Movimento Laureati* and intellectuals of the *Cattolica* who met in the Tuscan monastery of Camaldoli, in the very same days that fascism collapsed (July 1943). Meetings continued regularly in the following months in Rome, until 1945 when the *Code* was finalized and published (*Per la comunità Cristiana*, 1945). The final document, inspired by Maritain and Thomas Aquinas, represented “a *summa* of thought on society, on the economy and on the State in the light of Catholic doctrine” (Parisella, 2001, 145; see also Campanini, 2006, 402–4). The introductory part of the code was emblematically entitled “premise on the spiritual foundation of social life.” Here the centrality of the human person was reaffirmed as an irreducible value that precedes any claim by the State. Democracy and spirituality: the former without the latter was meaningless. The seven thematic cores of the Code included the major themes on which a Constitution of a democratic country had to be based, from daily life to the international order. The Code affirmed the intervention of the state in the economy as well as, in an anti-totalitarian key, the dignity of the person and its primacy over the state. It claimed that that ultimate aim of a political community was solidarity, social justice, and defense of freedom. The Code did not lack references to pontifical documents such as the social encyclicals or the radio messages of Pius XII, and to the encyclicals *Non abbiamo bisogno* (1931) and *Mit brennender Sorge* (1937) of Pius XI.

From 1945 onwards—when Catholics became the dominant political force of post-fascist Italy under the banner of the DC—these visions would be institutionalized in a variety of ways.

The post-war period: institutionalizing spiritual democracy, 1945–1953

The layers of meaning that had emerged in the Catholic elaboration of a spiritual democracy in the period 1942–1945 had a direct impact on post-fascist Italian democracy (Forlenza and Thomassen, 2016, 181–6; Forlenza, 2019b). The *Camaldoli Code*, together with De Gasperi's *Reconstructive Ideas*, directly inspired the socio-economic reforms launched by Christian Democracy in the late 1940s–early 1950s, such as the housing development scheme (a law by Fanfani), the introduction of “progressive” taxation by minister of Finance Ezio Vanoni (one of the Camaldoli's), the Agrarian Reform and the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno* (public investments in the South) (Forlenza, 2010, 2017).

One of the first and most tangible embodiments of the call for spirituality was the Italian Constitution. The Constitution was a theme that Catholics started to debate with effervescence even before the end of the war, generating a profusion of ideas which put Italian Catholicism vis-à-vis political modernity (*Costituzione e Costituente*, 1946; Moro, 1979b; Casella, 1987; Pombeni, 2006). Catholic-inspired thinkers and politicians (such as Dossetti, Fanfani, La Pira, Moro, Gonella, Taviani, Umberto Tupini, Camillo Corsanego) played a pivotal role in the writing of the Constitution in collaboration with socialist and communist politicians. They were successful in inscribing a Maritain's inspired “personalist” worldview into the wording and spirit of the first section of the Constitution (Founding Principles, articles 1–12). The language of natural law and personal dignity provided a secure foundation for human rights and representative democracy in a way that liberal, pre-fascist legal positivism could (and had) not, a post-liberal democracy, with distinct spiritual foundations (Pombeni, 1996; Scoppola, 1980; Thomassen and Forlenza, 2016).

Lazzati wrote in 1947, while active in the Constituent Assembly, a short book titled *The foundation of any reconstruction*, a memory and reflection on his own war experience (he was an internee) with a view to action in the present:

While the politicians at the peace table look for the formulas that should give the world the tranquility of order, I feel more than ever the truth of the scriptural word: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain (Psalm 126).” It is not only a matter of material boundaries to be established, of political rights to be defended, of new legislation to be implemented as much as...to repair the ruins of the past, to remove, indeed, the root of all evil which is sin. More than ever, therefore, I feel that Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, is the only solver of all the immense difficulties of the present hour. But with the same evidence I feel that Christ works through Christians.

Lazzati underlined that he did not imply miracles to intervene or modify the course of events. Christ is a revelation that must penetrate the thought and action of people facing the dramatic challenges before them, as a responsibility and vocation in the here and now:

By tending to tomorrow I measure the responsibility that weighs on Christians in the present moment... The future that opens up before us, full of unknowns,

will be what we would like the past to have been if we are what we ought to be: living gods in Christ, in thought and action in conformity with Him, indeed His thought and action as members of Him, the Head, “who completes everything by himself” (Eph. 1:23). Only by undertaking the effective revelation of Christ: “in order to present every man perfect in Christ” (Col. 1,28) will we be able to work on the only foundation that God has laid, Christ, to work with fruit for the reconstruction of the person and the family, of national and international society in the name of civilization. (Lazzati, 1975, 145)

Applied spirituality in post-fascist Italy

The Constitution set a frame. Catholic politics in the first years of democratic Italy remained intensively motivated by spiritual concerns. Spirituality here needs to be understood not as an intimate, internal, and a-political quasi-mystical essence but rather as a combination of culture, lived experience, and mentality that concretely came to shape political conduct and policy decisions. In this exact Foucauldian sense, spirituality for the Catholic politicians who engaged the tremendous task of Italy’s reconstruction meant to translate their internal life into the political sphere, “an apostolic, missionary, and compassionate commitment” (Giovagnoli, 1991, 94). Only applied Christianity through a Catholic-inspired party could ensure Italy’s political, spiritual, and moral renewal.

Spirituality for De Gasperi meant to operate within politics with the conviction that democracy has its origin in the values of the Gospels.¹⁰ While de Gasperi’s days of Prime Minister were obviously burdened with pragmatic tasks, he always gave importance to prayer and participation in the Mass every morning. If De Gasperi would always employ a sober and rational political vocabulary, in his speeches, writings, personal notes, and diaries there are evident references to the Bible and to the *Imitatio Christi* which served him to illuminate political-social and mundane questions (De Gasperi, 1981, 93). It is well-documented that he was particularly attentive to the Book of Job (Scoppola, 1981; Durand, 1984; Acanfora, 2015). This is perhaps the section of the Old Covenant most pervaded by a sense of transcendence of God’s plans—that man can never fully comprehend. “In the democratic system,” De Gasperi said in 1950 “a political-administrative mandate is conferred with a specific responsibility.” He continued: “at the same time there is a moral responsibility vis-à-vis one’s own consciousness, and the consciousness to make decisions must always be illuminated by the doctrine and teaching of the Church” (De Gasperi, 1990, 243). In 1948, De Gasperi delivered an emblematic speech in Brussels, where he stressed the spiritual roots of his democratic conviction and the idea that democracy, to remain democratic, can only be Christian. Democracy, he said, could not be reduced to a formal “regime of institutions.” It must become instead “an inner philosophy which is nourished not only by rational elements in the common interest, but also and above all by the ideal elements which pervade the spiritual and sentimental traditions and the history of the nation” (De Gasperi, 1948; see also Tognon, 2017, 191).

Spirituality for Dossetti and other politicians and intellectuals of the “second generation” meant to inject the new democratic cultural of postwar Italy with the ideas of

Maritain and Mounier, striving for the realization of Christian values in the state, in the economy, and in society write large (Pombeni, 1979; Galavotti, 2013). For Paronetto, spirituality meant to measure socio-economic issues in their own right, albeit firmly rooted in a Christian conscience and in what he defined once and again as the “ascetic of the man of action” (the title of a posthumous collection of his writings).

For the southerner Aldo Moro, spirituality meant the need to create a “party for the Mezzogiorno” which, through the agrarian reform, could respond to the call of the Gospels in favor of the impoverished peasants of southern Italy, liberating them from centuries of subjugation (Moro, 1955). This also meant to fight for, as he wrote in 1947, echoing Maritain, an “integral” democracy based on the “demands” and “resources” of human beings, and inspired by Christianity, the only force that could enrich the “cold ... myth of a *political* democracy” with “humanity and justice” and a superior vision of liberty (Moro, 1982b, 124–7).

For Fanfani, spirituality meant to place the economic dimension within a broader ethical horizon in which the struggle against poverty, unemployment, and the lack of housing was ascribable to a Christian vision of the duty to assist the poor.¹¹ As a Minister of Labour, Fanfani proposed a remarkable plan of popular housing, which became law in 1949 (the “Fanfani Law”). Housing was perceived as a form of Christian charity. Filiberto Guala, who was presiding over the committee for the implementation of the plan, wrote in 1951:

The conception of the plan started from the vision of the hardship of many thousands of unemployed people affected not only physically by the lack of daily bread, but also in spirit because they are deprived of work as a complement to their personality indispensable to any Christian social action of reform. (Guala, 1951, 30)

Policies on such tangible issues as work and housing in the decisive years of the post-war period remained firmly rooted in a spiritualistic and personalistic language. Giorgio La Pira, member of the Constituent Assembly and mayor of Florence (from 1951 to 1957, and from 1961 to 1965) was deeply committed to the struggle for peace in the world, and the first western non-communist politician to visit the Soviet Union (1959). For him spirituality meant to meet the “expectations of poor people” and act in “defense of poor people,” as the titles of his two most famous articles recite (La Pira, 1950a, 1950b). Accused, not least from conservative Catholics and from the Vatican for being a “white communist” and a “statelist,” he made the following remark to Florence’s town council (September 24, 1954):

You don’t have a right to tell me: Mr. Mayor you should not care about the beings without a job (fired or unemployed), without a home (evicted), without assistance (the elderly, ill, children, etc.). This is my fundamental duty: a duty that does not have space for discrimination and that before my position as mayor of the city... derives from my consciousness as a Christian: what is at stake here is the very substance of grace and of the Gospels. (the text is in La Pira, 1988, 445–56)

Conclusion

At a first glance, Christian Democracy in the post-war period might indeed seem like a useful container into which one could throw almost anything. De Gasperi together with leading Christian Democrats insisted on democracy, human rights, and a sort of controlled capitalism, recognizing the need to increase production and encourage the growth of a private sector to become the motor of economic growth. They insisted, at the very same time, on the primacy of family and community, on housing policies in the cities and loan systems and agrarian reforms in the countryside. What a hodge-podge of conservatism, liberalism, and socialism! What an ideological confusion!

But such a reading fails to recognize the spiritual sources that guided the only apparently pragmatic-relativistic political measures taken by the Christian Democrats—in Italy as elsewhere. Their democratic vision was never an empty signifier with no real ideological core. For Christian Democrats their political measures were not contradictory, nor were they pragmatic reconciliations of conservative, liberal, and socialist ideologies. They were rooted in Christianity. They were rooted in a *Christian* democracy. The adjective was no mere decoration. It was the animating source of inspiration, the glue of their political action. Christian democrats sincerely believed that through these measures Italy's socio-economic conditions and the life of the poorest would substantially improve. They believed that in a Christian democracy citizens would be allowed to act and create value outside the strict control of the state. Their embrace of democracy and a reconfigured political modernity stemmed from Christian principles and religious motivations—in fact, from the Evangelical call to charity.

This article has foregrounded the irreducible religious and spiritual dimension of Christian democratic politics. Christian Democracy emerged in the midst of World War II as a political force committed to building an integral, spiritual democracy. It was not simply an ad hoc model that could secure a transition to liberal democracy. It emerged as a distinct political vision. The political and existential crisis engendered by the war provoked a reflexive re-reading of the Gospels in a critical historical juncture, and with lasting effects. This involved a rediscovery of a sense of the spiritual that pervaded not only single personalities and party leaders but an entire generation of politicians who found themselves in a genuine limit situation (Wydra, 2015, 4–7, 23–6).

Christian Democrats succeeded in formulating a political model that reincorporated transcendence as a legitimate perspective of truth and reason, re-anchoring democracy, justice, and freedom in a religiously argued ethos. Our analysis has thus highlighted the importance of a nascent spirituality for imagining a democratic new order and the manner in which a political spirituality came to inspire political thinking and action in Italy's transition to democracy.

The political thought of Christian democrats emerged as ideational crystallizations of human experiences, a transformative figuration in which political thought and action become guided by a spiritual inspiration. Indeed, Catholic political thinkers and activists eventually came to perceive their role to go beyond what Eric Voegelin in the *New Science of Politics* described as performing an “elementary representation,” e.g., fulfilling a political function within an administrative apparatus

conferred via institutional and electoral procedures. However, they also came to perceive their political role as tied to an ethos of the Gospels that involved a commitment to transcendental values, hence performing what Voegelin recognized as an “existential representation” (Voegelin, 1952).

Christian Democracy cannot be understood as an essentially cosmetic operation which translated a pre-packaged liberal language and made it digestible to a Southern European population for whom Christianity and religion still played a huge role. Catholics in Italy turned democrats not only because they read Maritain, but because of their experience with fascism and war and their intense reflections on this experience. The transformational powers that flow through meaning and experience cannot easily be reproduced or emulated, nor can they be grasped within an analysis that narrows the discussion to ideological battles and strategic games within the institutional order. Politicians and intellectuals put in question their established worldviews and values, articulating a vision of the political order based on a spiritual dimension.

The transcendent inspiration at stake in this political spirituality is therefore something else than a reference to a given and pre-established religious worldview. For thinkers and politicians living through World War II, transcendence was no abstract or vague idea, glittering in the horizon. It instead emerged as a new marker of certainty that could ground and direct the democratic experience, without simply reverting to a liberal order which had proven itself defenseless against the threat of totalitarian regimes. Transcendence is transformative at the very same time as it is affirmative, or to put it even more directly: transcendence *is* transformation. It is in this sense, we have argued, that Foucault’s notion of political spirituality is applicable to Christian democratic politics as it established itself in the middle of the twentieth century.

Notes

1. Borrowing from Friedrich von Hayek, Müller’s book on political ideas in twentieth century Europe focuses less on “high philosophy” and more on the thought and influence of “in-between figures,” or statesmen and politicians-philosophers, constitutional advisors, bureaucrats with visions—what Hayek would define as “second-hand dealers in ideas” (Müller, 2011, 3).
2. Among many others and in addition to the works cited below, see Pombeni (1979); Giovagnoli (1996, 1991); Scoppola (2003, 1977); Formigoni (2008a, 1996); Acanfora (2013); Menozzi (2019). For the time after the end of Christian Democracy, see also Bailey and Driessen (2017); on the Antonio Gramsci’s sophisticated reading of Catholicism, see Forlenza (2021).
3. Already by 1929, over 50% of the FUCI members were concomitantly members of the GUF; throughout the 1930s many *fucini* participated in the *Littoriali*, the cultural activities sponsored by the regime (Moro, 1979a, 81).
4. See also the survey on the faith published in the Bulletin of Studium on September–October 1941 in Archivio Storico dell’Istituto Sturzo [hereinafter: ASILS], Fondo Gonella, b. 99, f. 5.
5. ASILS, Fondo Sergio Paronetto, b. 1, f. 5, sf. 1; see also Torresi (2017, 367–8).
6. See the diary written by Lazzati during the imprisonment, now in Dossier (1993). Quotes are from Lazzati’s interview by Magri (1984).
7. The “preghiera” was published in *il Ribelle*, a clandestine leaflet founded Olivelli and other partisans of his town (Brescia) on March 26, 1944.
8. The letter is in Archivio del Centro Francesco Luigi Ferrari, Modena, Carte Gorrieri (italics added); for other testimonies and memories, see Crivellin (2000); Lanzardo (1989, 201–58).
9. The *Ideas* are in Atti e Documenti (1968, 1–8).

10. For a biography of De Gasperi, see Craveri (2006), and more specifically on the years of transition to democracy, see Formigoni (2008b).

11. On the Fanfani housing plan and the “Italian” model of welfare, see Fanfani e la casa (2002).

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