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Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion: Definitions and Critical Reflections on Criticism of an Interpretation

EMILIO GENTILE
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This essay presents a synthetic account of the author’s interpretation of fascism as a modern, nationalist, revolutionary, anti-liberal and anti-Marxist phenomenon that he has elaborated on the basis both of original research and of an innovative redefinition of the concepts of totalitarianism and political religion and their interrelationship. Having demonstrated the incoherence of some negative critiques that have given a distorted account of this theory, it engages with the principal constructive criticisms that have been made of it. This leads to further clarification and refinement of the thesis that totalitarianism constitutes one, but not the sole, expression of the sacralisation of politics in the age of modernity.

To be a historian is to seek to explain in human terms. If God speaks, it is not through him. If He speaks to others, the historian cannot vouch for it. In this sense the historian is necessarily secularist. Yet, with equal force, nothing human is alien to him, and religion, whatever else it may be for true believers, is profoundly human.

Cushing Strout, The New Heavens and New Earth

An Interpretation in Three Definitions

Ever since the last decade of the twentieth century, there has been growing scholarly preoccupation with the problem of totalitarianism and political religion. This fact is proved by ever more numerous publications on these subjects, as well as by the founding of the journal Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions in 2000. In the first issue of this journal I had the opportunity to expound my interpretation of the
relationship between totalitarianism, secular religion and modernity, viewed as the expression of a more general phenomenon I defined as the ‘sacralisation of politics’. This term I define as ‘the formation of a religious dimension in politics that is distinct from, and autonomous from traditional religious institutions’. As a concrete historical example of the link between totalitarianism and political religion, as well as of the relation between the sacralisation of politics and modernity I also referred to Italian Fascism. For the reasons I explored in depth in my studies on the Fascist ideology, party and regime, I believe that the experience of Italian Fascism – which, as is well known, gave rise to the very concept of totalitarianism – is to be located within the sphere of totalitarian experiments. In the same way, as a result of specific research done in this field, I also believe that fascism belongs to the sphere of modern manifestations of the sacralisation of politics.

My interpretation of fascism as a form of both totalitarianism and political religion has given rise to criticism of various kinds, not confined to reservations about the way these concepts are used in my research. It contests the very validity of these concepts as instruments of analysis in the interpretation of some phenomena within contemporary history. In this sense, a critical reflection on the criticism of my interpretation of fascism as both totalitarianism and a political religion – the subject suggested to me by Roger Griffin as the editor of this special issue of TMPR – will hopefully make a useful contribution to the discussion of these questions.

I must stress that my interpretation of fascism as a totalitarian phenomenon does not derive solely from my historical studies, but also from my revision of the concept of totalitarianism via a critical reconsideration of the main theories of totalitarianism appearing after the Second World War. The term ‘totalitarianism’ can thus be taken as meaning:

an experiment in political domination undertaken by a revolutionary movement, with an integralist conception of politics, that aspires toward a monopoly of power and that, after having secured power, whether by legal or illegal means, destroys or transforms the previous regime and constructs a new State based on a single-party regime, with the chief objective of conquering society; that is, it seeks the subordination, integration and homogenisation of the governed on the basis of the integral politicisation of existence, whether collective or
individual, interpreted according to the categories, myths and values of a palingenetic ideology, institutionalised in the form of a political religion, that aims to shape the individual and the masses through an anthropological revolution in order to regenerate the human being and create the new man, who is dedicated in body and soul to the realisation of the revolutionary and imperialistic policies of the totalitarian party, whose ultimate goal is to create a new civilisation beyond the Nation-State.

Although this definition may appear to be a lengthy one, it arises from a deliberate choice of how to present the phenomenon. In this way, I intend to highlight the reciprocal connection between all the elements contributing to my concept of totalitarianism, both essential and complementary, so as to represent, in so far as a theoretical definition permits, the historical reality actualised by totalitarian regimes during the twentieth century. In my opinion, this reality cannot be theoretically identified with any of its constituents in isolation from the others. The elements comprising my definition of totalitarianism are the revolutionary party, the monopoly of power, a political religion, the conquest of society, an anthropological revolution and expansionist ambitions. These elements are thus to be considered interconnected, both logically and chronologically, within a dynamic and dialectical relation. This is the reason why my interpretation of totalitarianism differs from those theories that base their definition mainly on the institutional notion of the ‘totalitarian regime’. I believe, indeed, that by its own nature totalitarianism is a continuous experiment in political domination, which is why I believe that the very notion of the ‘totalitarian regime’ has to be viewed essentially from a dynamic, not a static, point of view, and has to be defined bearing in mind specific historical circumstances in which totalitarian experiments were born and put into practice, even when they do not appear ‘perfect’ or ‘completed’.

One of the constituents of my definition of totalitarianism is ‘political religion’, a term by which I mean:

a type of religion which sacralises an ideology, a movement or a political regime through the deification of a secular entity transfigured into myth, considering it the primary and indisputable source of the meaning and the ultimate aim of human existence on earth.
The essential characteristic distinguishing ‘political religion’ from ‘civil religion’ is the extremist and exclusive nature of its historical mission. For example, political religion does not accept coexistence with other political ideologies and movements; it denies the autonomy of the individual while affirming the primacy of the community; it sanctifies violence as a legitimate weapon in the struggle against those it considers internal and external enemies, and as an instrument of collective regeneration; it imposes obligatory observance of its commandments and participation in the political cult; while dealing with traditional or institutional religions, it either assumes hostile behaviour, aiming at their complete elimination, or tries to establish a relation of symbolic coexistence with them in the sense that political religion aims at incorporating a traditional religion in its own system of beliefs and myths, attaching to the latter an instrumental or auxiliary function.

According to this definition, the concept of political religion does not refer solely to the institution of a system of beliefs, rites or symbols; it also relates to other fundamental aspects of the totalitarian experiment, that is, to the conquest of society, the homogenisation of the society formed by the governed, an anthropological revolution, the production of a new type of human being, and even to the ambitious expansion and construction of a new supranational civilisation.

The concepts ‘totalitarianism’ and ‘political religion’, understood in the terms outlined above, are two of the constitutive elements of my interpretation of fascism, which I have synthesised in the following definition:

fascism is a modern political phenomenon, which is nationalistic and revolutionary, anti-liberal and anti-Marxist, organised in the form of a militia party, with a totalitarian conception of politics and the State, with an ideology based on myth; virile and anti-hedonistic, it is sacralised in a political religion affirming the absolute primacy of the nation understood as an ethnically homogeneous organic community, hierarchically organised into a corporative State, with a bellicose mission to achieve grandeur, power and conquest with the ultimate aim of creating a new order and a new civilisation.

The elaboration of this interpretation began in the early 1970s. It has developed during a period particularly conducive to progress in the comparative study of fascism, and has given rise to the topics
and problems that are now at the very centre of historical research and theoretical discussion, including the current reawakening of interest in the problem of totalitarianism and political religion. This progress consists of the continuous enrichment of our empirical knowledge by means of historical research; of substantial revisions in our understanding of topics and problems, our methods of analysis, and of our perspectives and interpretations. The renewed concern with achieving progress in the analysis of fascism has developed within three main fertile periods that we can characterise according to the type of approach, topics and problems prevailing in each phase.

The Three Periods of Renewal

The first period, lasting from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s, was characterised by extended empirical scholarship and new attempts to elaborate a general theory of fascism consistent with the new knowledge produced by empirical research. One of the most important results, if not the most important, was the gradual tendency to move beyond the traditional representation of fascism, so prevalent in the early 1960s, which has had a continuing influence upon both theories and empirical studies of fascism that persists to the present day.

According to this traditional representation, fascism did not have its own historical individuality in the same way as liberalism, democracy, socialism or communism. Instead, it was a sort of anti-historical and anti-modern epiphenomenon without culture or ideology. Everywhere fascism was a movement of violent mercenaries, in the service of the most reactionary part of the bourgeoisie, led by cynical and opportunistic demagogues who merely subjugated and led astray the innocent and recalcitrant masses. Based on this interpretation, the tragic reality of fascism was thus a parenthesis in the ‘authentic’ course of contemporary history, as if historians were performing an act of consolation or exorcism that transformed the movement into a sort of malign excrescence foreign to the healthy body of modernity. In consequence, fascists represented something inhuman, an expression of diabolical madness, or, in the opposite sense, they were presented as a caricature or in a clownish guise. As a result, whether demonised or trivialised, fascism was reduced to a ‘historical negativity’. 
Such interpretations predominated for so long because they were considered the only ones that seemed consistent with a committed political stance of anti-fascism. Thus, this way of conceiving fascism became a kind of ‘sacred representation’ which could not be discussed in Italy without reopening the deeply contested political question of anti-fascism. Indeed, the interpretation of Italian Fascism as ‘historical negativity’ led to a serious impoverishment of the cultural anti-fascist tradition itself. In fact, as early as the 1920s, anti-fascist culture produced not only polemical and schematic interpretations, but also gave rise to a more complex and realistic analysis of fascism as a mass movement and a regime which emphasised the ideological, cultural, organisational and institutional character of fascism, as well as its links with modernity and with the transformation of politics under the impact of modernisation and mass society. The researchers who first used the concepts ‘totalitarianism’ and ‘political religion’ (although only the first a scholarly neologism) were opponents of fascism, who often became its victims. At the centre of their interpretation of fascism they placed the role of mythic thought, the mobilisation of the masses, the cult of the leader, the single party, the organisation of culture, and grandiose ideas about collective regeneration.

After the Second World War, this important anti-fascist legacy of historical and theoretical analysis was either ignored or almost totally forgotten, whereas the thesis of ‘historical negativity’ became prevalent. Even if this interpretation appeared convincing, it nevertheless failed to address a fundamental problem of fascism, namely, its novelty as a movement and a political regime, which exerted an attraction on the masses as well as on outstanding intellectuals. The tragic irony of the fascist experience may lie precisely in the ‘sincerity’ of its irrationalism and in the appeal of its ideology. Fascism was certainly demagogic, but it cannot be accused of disguising its intentions and goals. In a clear and brutal way, fascism proclaimed its disdain for liberty, for equality, for wealth and peace as life ideals; it exalted the power of a minority while imposing blind obedience on the part of the masses; it asserted a fundamental inequality between individuals, classes, nations and races. The militaristic ethics of fascism glorified sacrifice, austerity, a disdain for hedonism, total devotion to the State, discipline and unconditional fidelity, all in order to stand up to the challenge of new wars in the name of grandeur and the power of the nation. All this was not only proclaimed publicly at mass rallies, preached in schools, imprinted on the walls of buildings and along the
streets, but was put into practice as the policy of the regime. Despite this ‘sincerity’, millions of people, both cultured and otherwise, saw in fascism an inspirational movement that was able to provide an answer to questions pertaining to human existence. In addition, many of them considered the totalitarian system an effective solution to the conflicts of modern society, the dawn of a new era of national grandeur, or the birth of a ‘new civilisation’ destined to last forever.

When presented with evidence of fascism’s genuine popularity, the main historiographical schools of the post-war period, inspired by both Marxism and liberalism, either remained silent and indifferent, or limited themselves to presenting these aspects of fascism as marginal or unimportant ones. As Marco Gervasoni has recently observed, Marxist historiography ‘despite all of its nuances, remained dumbfounded in the face of the irrational, tending to approach it in a reductionist spirit as a mystification of economic interests’, while liberal historiography ‘has always felt uneasy when confronted by the accomplishments of mass politics, often ending up explaining totalitarian phenomena on the basis of the psychology of its leaders’. In this way, the problem of fascism’s attraction was simply ignored or concealed by interpretations that reduced everything to demagoguery, opportunism and terror. This may be the ‘disguising’ of the ‘appeal of fascism’ that Primo Levi, the Jewish intellectual and a victim of fascism, protested against in 1976:

Everybody knows or even remembers that Hitler and Mussolini, when making public speeches, were believed, applauded, admired, adored as if they were gods. They were ‘charismatic leaders’ who possessed the secret power to seduce which did not derive from any real credibility or from the justness of the things they said, but from the ‘fascinating’ way in which those things were said, from their eloquence, their histrionic art, maybe instinctive or maybe patiently exercised and learned. The ideas they proclaimed were not the same all of the time, and were in general aberrant, foolish, or cruel; but still they were cheered and followed by millions of believers until they died. We should remember that those believers, including the diligent executors of inhuman orders, were not born torturers, nor monsters (save few exceptions): they were ordinary people. Monsters do exist but they are not as many as to be really dangerous; the man in the street is much more dangerous, the servant ready to believe
and to obey without arguing, like Eichmann, like Höss, the commander of Auschwitz, like Stangl, the commander of Treblinka, like the French soldiers twenty years later, the slaughterers in Algeria, like the American soldiers thirty years later, the slaughterers in Vietnam.9

Understanding the grounds for the appeal that fascism exerted on millions of people between the two world wars was one of the reasons underpinning the first period of renewal in the field of research and interpretation. As we have seen, this period began in the early 1960s, when several historians started studying fascist ideology and culture, and recognised that the success of fascism depended not only on demagoguery, opportunism or terror, but also on its capacity to interpret collective aspirations, desires and ambitions; not concealing its brutal and belligerent conception of life and politics but, on the contrary, professing it openly in front of the applauding masses. It is remarkable that it was another Jewish intellectual, George L. Mosse, also a victim of Nazism (but luckier than Primo Levi because he did not go through the hell of the death camps), who became one of the first historians daring to call into question the validity of prevailing presentations of fascism as ‘historical negativity’. Mosse was a persecuted man who, being an historian, undertook the task of trying to understand the reasons the spell that his persecutors cast upon millions of people seemed to work, and he went about this by studying the ideology, culture and political style of National Socialism. He considered fascism a phenomenon not at all foreign to the course of contemporary history but, on the contrary, argued that its roots lay deep in the history and society of modern Europe, where it established itself by being able to interpret and represent the aspirations of millions of people, transporting them emotionally into the myths and the rites of a new lay religion.

Symbolically, Mosse can be considered the most representative historian of the first phase of renewal in the study of fascism.10 The Journal of Contemporary History, founded and edited by Mosse and Walter Laqueur in 1966, can be considered as symbolic of this period, and in particular its first special issue on international fascism. Starting from the initial phrase of Mosse’s opening article on the genesis of fascism, the distance between traditional interpretations and their presentation of fascism appeared very clear. Mosse wrote: ‘In our century two revolutionary movements have made their mark upon Europe: that originally springing from Marxism and fascism’.11
We can consider the definition of fascism advanced by Juan Linz in 1976 as similarly symbolising this first period. Linz specified that any definition of fascism could not be based only on its negations, but ‘should also consider its new appeal and its conception of man and society’. Linz added that, ‘no definition can ignore the importance of its distinctive style, its rhetoric and its symbolism, its chants, ceremonies and shirts that attracted so many young people in the years between the two wars’, and further concluded that neither ideology nor style would in any case have been the decisive factor ‘without the new forms of organisation and political action’. For all these reasons Linz proposed a multi-dimensional definition which marked a further clear-cut step to move beyond the traditional representation of ‘historical negativity’:

We define fascism as a hypernationalist, often pan-nationalist, anti-parliamentary, anti-liberal, anti-communist, populist and therefore anti-proletarian, partly anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois, anti-clerical, or at least, non-clerical movement, with the aim of national social integration through a single party and corporative representation not always equally emphasised; with a distinctive style and rhetoric, it relied on activist cadres ready for violent action combined with electoral participation to gain power with totalitarian goals by a combination of legal and violent tactics. The ideology and above all the rhetoric appeals for the incorporation of a national cultural tradition selectively in the new synthesis in response to new social classes, new social and economic problems, and with new organizational conceptions of mobilization and participation, differentiate them from conservative parties. The appeal based on emotion, myth, idealism, and action on the basis of a vitalistic philosophy is initially directed at those least integrated into the class structure – youth, students, demobilised officers – to constitute a self-appointed elite and later to all those disadvantageously affected by social change and political and economic crisis against the political system. In a plebiscitarian mobilization of the masses, the fascist appeal is based on an inflation of national solidarity and the rejection of the institutionalization of conflict and cleavages in modern societies and therefore a destruction and/or demobilization of the parties that organize those cleavages, particularly working-class but also clerical parties. Hypernationalism is
reflected in a deep-seated hostility to all organizations and movements that can be conceived as international in character – that is communism, even socialism, international finance capitalism, the Catholic Church or at least the Vatican, Freemasonry, the League of Nations, pacifism, and the Jews, even in those movements that are not initially anti-Semitic and even less racist.\(^\text{12}\)

By the end of the 1970s, the most original and innovative of these new assessments of fascism met with the critical approval of Stanley Payne in his 1980 book, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*. Payne drew conclusions from the empirical and theoretical disputes of recent years, reworking them into a general definition of fascism, a political phenomenon that he no longer presented exclusively in terms of its negations, but, rather, as combining new and modern features, with its own ideology, culture and revolutionary components blended with traditional and reactionary ones:

Fascism was after all the only major new ideology of the twentieth century, and it is not surprising that a variety of its key features reemerge in radical movements and national authoritarian regimes in later times and other regions, even though the profile of the new groups is on balance distinct from the generic European fascisms. A number of these features may be specified:

1. Permanent nationalistic one-party authoritarianism, neither temporary nor a prelude to internationalism
2. The charismatic leadership principle, incorporated by many communist and other regimes as well
3. The search for a synthetic, ethnicist ideology, distinct from liberalism and Marxism
4. An authoritarian state system and political economy of corporatism or syndicalism or partial socialism, more limited and pluralistic than the communist model
5. The philosophical principle of voluntarist activism, unbounded by any philosophical determinism.

In these respects the fascist experience was fundamental to revolution and authoritarian nationalism in the twentieth century.\(^\text{13}\)

During the second period of renewal in the study of fascism in the 1980s, theoretical elements of the debate weakened considerably, and became, in a way, marginal. In fact, what prevailed among scholars
was historical research of singular movements and regimes generally considered fascist, combined with a certain scepticism concerning the possibility of arriving at a theoretical definition of fascism that would meet with the general consent of most scholars. Some, like Karl Bracher and Renzo De Felice, went even further and focused on specific features of single movements and regimes in a way that called into question the very existence of a generic phenomenon that could be termed ‘fascism’. During that period, however, research in new fields opened up by the studies of the previous decade continued undeterred by the lack of a consensual definition and made particular headway in examining fascism’s political, organisational and institutional aspects, in addition to its ideological ones.

The dawn of the 1990s marked the beginning of a new period characterised by a renewed, major interest in the theoretical aspects of fascism, turning scholarly attention toward its cultural and aesthetic aspects, while also attributing a primary role to ideology and culture in an attempt to give the fascist phenomenon a more precise definition. Roger Griffin’s 1991 book, *The Nature of Fascism*, may be considered the most important product of this period. Griffin, a British-born scholar, presented a critical list of the main interpretations of fascism, rejecting those which no longer seemed able to meet the challenge posed by new knowledge and new interpretations that had emerged from the research and discussion of recent decades. By theoretically elaborating the most innovative results produced by the library of existing studies on fascism, Griffin set out a new ‘definition of fascism primarily in terms of its “positive” ideological axioms, from which its characteristic style, structures and negations follow’, which he condensed into a single phrase: ‘Fascism is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenic form of the populist ultra-nationalism’.

**The Two Concepts Return**

As this third, and current, period of fascist studies got underway, a renewed interest in the problem of totalitarianism and political religion emerged. In fact, we can speak about a ‘return’ of the historiographical debate characteristic of the 1920s and 1930s. As I have already mentioned, this had a fundamental function in the interpretation of fascism by anti-fascist scholars, but during the 1950s it was contested and marginalised within the study of contemporary history,
mainly because it was considered an instrument of anti-communist propaganda during the Cold War. By the 1990s, the re-awakening of interest in the subject of totalitarianism coincided with the collapse of the Soviet system that freed the concept of totalitarianism from the ostracism to which it had been condemned, mainly by the communist scholars or, in any case, by those who were not hostile to the Soviet communism.\(^\text{17}\) Almost concomitantly, this period also saw a renewal of interest in the question of political religion. One factor that possibly contributed to this, along with the renewed interest in totalitarianism, was the birth – or rather the re-birth – of manifestations of the ‘sacralisation of politics’ and the ‘politicisation of religion’ in the modern world. Even if these manifestations cannot be considered residues or variants of the totalitarianism of the twentieth century, they still reintroduce in a new way some of the fundamental features linking the religious dimension, the political dimension and modernity, which were typical of totalitarian phenomena.\(^\text{18}\)

Nevertheless, apart from the incidental reasons which provided an impulse to this process, the current debate on totalitarianism and on political religion cannot be understood without bearing in mind that it has been prepared – and made possible by – the renewal of previous interpretations of fascism. To some extent, my own studies and reflections on fascism, totalitarianism and political religion have contributed to this renewal. At the very least I can claim that, contrary to what some critics have asserted, my interpretation of fascism as a totalitarian movement and a political religion predated by several years the current renewal in interest of these themes. As I have already mentioned, my interpretation of fascism was first elaborated during the 1970s, and is rooted in my previous studies on the myth of national regeneration, and in research centred on the emergence of a new lay religion in Italian culture, particularly on the avant-garde movements of the first part of the twentieth century. As a logical consequence, I was led by those studies to re-examine fascism, which, in many aspects, was both a product and an heir of those movements and that culture.

**Totalitarianism and Political Religion in the Definition of Fascism**

The essential core of my interpretation of fascism as a form of totalitarianism was formulated in an article dating from 1974, in which I stated the following:
the essential element ... of fascist ideology was the affirmation of the primacy of political action, that is, totalitarianism in the sense of the total resolution of the private into the public, and as the subordination of the values which related to the private life (religion, culture, morals, affection, etc.) to the public sphere par excellence, namely politics now understood as a form of activism involving the application of naked force, and as the contest of conflicting powers in which the only judge is success. The permanent core of fascist ideology was – as a consequence of totalitarianism – the conception of the State as the implementation of the will to power of an activist minority bent on realising this myth and its idée-force. The ‘new man’ dreamt of by fascists was to have been the product of a class of modern Platos who wanted to build an organic and dynamic State, and considered politics an absolute value, an end in itself. In that respect, the ideology of Italian fascism was the most complete rationalisation of the totalitarian State (especially when approached in terms of Gentilean idealism), conceived as a society hierarchically organised and subordinated to a political aristocracy which derived the legitimacy of its power only from the conquest and the perpetuity of its action. Fascism was mainly the ideology of the State, whose reality it affirmed to be fundamental and totalitarian. And, as such, it represented the antithesis of communist ideology, which is the ideology of society, as it aspires to the realisation of a community of free and equal men, with no divisions of class or hierarchy through the organisation of State power.19

The same article outlined an interpretation of fascism as a political religion, viewed as a logical consequence of its totalitarian world view:

The fascist conception of life gave rise to fascist behaviour in the way of doing politics, organising social existence, conceiving the overall objectives, not on the basis of logic and persuasion, but by appealing to the instinct, to faith, feeling, and imagination, to the magnetic attraction of the leader. The fascist group was conceived as a group bound by the ties of the faith. A fascist did not choose or discuss doctrine because he was primarily a believer and a fighter. Fascism appeared an escape from all that gave substance and measure to social existence, and hence deprived it of its Romantic, mystic, heroic, and adventurous dimension. Adventure, heroism, the spirit of sacrifice, mass
rituals, the cult of martyrs, the ideals of war and sports, fanatical devotion to the leader – these were the characteristics of fascist collective behaviour.20

From this emotional and extremist conception of politics I inferred what I defined as fascism’s ‘essentially subjective behaviour toward politics ... an aesthetic conception of political life’, that manifested itself in ‘transformation of politics into spectacle’:

Rejecting the materialism that, according to fascists, was the defining feature of both capitalism and communism, fascism extolled the values of the spirit. The materialism of both ideologies impoverished the individual, reducing him to a servant subordinate to bureaucratic routine, a worker in the service of production and machine, a citizen educated according to the middle-class morality based on money-making, wealth, and indifference to political and social life, trapped in his egoism, demoralized by the degrading collectivistic system of labour and suffocated by the anonymity of urbanisation. On the contrary, fascism presented itself as the political movement that brought back the colour and the joy to social life. In the totalitarian State, civil life was a continuous spectacle, where the fascist new man was swept away in the flow of orderly collective existence, in the re-enactment of rites, in displaying and worshiping symbols, in the constant appeal to collective solidarity to the point of mystic fusion, at least in peak moments, of psychological and emotional ecstasy, of one’s own individuality with the unity of the nation and the race through the magical meditation of the Leader. Even if some of these aspects can still be found in other totalitarian regimes, in fascism, they were celebrated as the ideals of civil life and represented a considerable factor in its success. Organising the consensus of the masses, in fact, was based on these rituals ...

In the end these considerations resulted in an overall evaluation of the significance of fascism in contemporary history; and in particular, as a modern experience of mass politics:

A political system based on irrationalism almost inevitably reduces political participation, both individual and collective, to a mass spectacle. When man is disdained for his rational idealism, for his capacity to logically comprehend reality, for his need for persuasion and understanding, he is reduced to a cellular
element of the crowd, and as the crowd, becomes easy to influence not through appeal to rational, but solely by means of the instruments of psychological manipulation and moral violence imposed through the manipulation of conscience, so that life becomes reduced to pure superficiality. But by exalting fantasy and imagination, by fomenting group prejudices, anxieties, frustrations, complexes of grandeur or misery – by all these means the capacity of the individual to choose and to be critical is destroyed. Symbols, rites, mass ceremonies and the mythic consecration of ordinary acts of social life (‘The Battle of the Grain’) become the only possible political participation of the masses, as spectators of the drama that is being performed with them and on them.21

This interpretation of fascism, initially based only on the ideological and cultural dimensions of its experience, was developed further by taking into consideration its organisational and institutional aspects, through a close study of the history of fascist parties and regimes. This was done in order to verify in which way, by which means, and to what ends the fascists acted out their totalitarian conception of politics.

In 1982, in a paper given to a conference at the University of Sydney, I summarised my interpretation of fascism as a totalitarianism and a political religion by insisting on the links between the fascist party and the totalitarian experiment under the fascist regime:

The goal of fascism was a revolution that, while leaving the fundamental pillars of the bourgeois edifice intact, would transform the architecture of the liberal State along the lines suggested by the myth of the ‘new State’. Fascism defined this myth in terms of a new plan: absolute political supremacy, foreshadowed by the practical experience of the local power groups formed by the fascist squads (squadrismo). The organisation of the armed party (partito milizia) was the fundamental structure for the new fascist State.

For many fascists, the squad was an embryonic experience of totalitarian community, based on the spontaneous support of its members, who felt that they were united by bonds of elective affinity and solidarity; they were also united morally by complicity in terrorist ventures, by patriotic fervour, and by the exaltation of war heroes and their dead comrades. The squad formed a military organisation in order to destroy all adversaries,
whether by physical elimination or by passive obedience imposed through humiliation. The squad also considered itself the armed militia of an integralist and intolerant national religion that fascism sought to impose on all Italians. In this sense, the totalitarian nature of fascism was already present in the squads ... The mixture of politics and religion, the concept of politics as a lay religious experience, was not a fascist invention, but belongs to the history of nationalism after the French Revolution. The lay religion was, nevertheless, an integral factor in fascism mass politics ... It might be said that the totalitarian State, by its very nature, had to assume the character of a lay religious institution, with rituals and symbols, totally enclosing man in his material and moral reality.22

Two years later, on the occasion of a conference on Fascism and National Socialism, I tried to synthesise the results of my research in a definition of fascist regime that made use of the expression totalitarian Caesarism:

a charismatic dictatorship of the Caesarist type integrated into an organisational structure built on conformity with the totalitarian myth, consciously adopted and concretely operating as a behavioural code and a point of reference for the action and the organisation of the State and the masses.23

Totalitarian Caesarism was the institutional aspect of fascism as a modern and revolutionary phenomenon.24 But its totalitarian nature, in my opinion, preceded the establishment of the regime because it originated before the seizure of power, in the matrix established by the Fascist National Party (PNF) that gave fascism its original characteristics of a ‘militia party’, something I highlighted in 1989, in the introduction to the first volume of the history of the Fascist National Party:

Fascism’s totalitarian orientation emerged with the militia party during the first years of its formation, and consolidated the action of the movement and the regime. During its life as a regime the experiment was carried out on the uneven terrain of the historical and social situation that had been produced in Italy by the first phases of industrialisation and modernisation; it met with obstacles and resistance in the process of its realisation and ended in the catastrophe of the war. Nevertheless, recognising the failure of the totalitarian ambitions of fascism is no reason to
minimise or trivialise the seriousness and historical significance of this unique experiment in political dominion, as scholars have tended to do hitherto: for two decades Italy was transformed by the PNF into a huge laboratory that involved millions of men and women, whether they liked it or not, in an attempt to implement a myth of a totalitarian State in order to form a new race of Italians schooled in fascist extremism, in the idolatry of the primacy of politics and in the cult of the will to power as the supreme ideal principle.25

The concept of ‘totalitarianism’ seemed to me an analytical instrument useful not only for understanding the historical events of Italian Fascism, but also for the possibility of theoretically linking, in a way firmly based on historical reality, essential components in order to formulate a definition of fascism that would comprise its organisational, cultural and institutional dimensions:

1. A mass movement with a multi-class membership, but where the middle class is prevalent among rank and file and within the leadership, most of whose members are new to political activity; it is organised as a party-militia whose identity is not based on social hierarchy and class origins but rather on the feeling of comradeship, the sense of a shared mission of national regeneration; it considers itself in a state of war against political adversaries, and aims to achieve a monopoly of political power through terror, parliamentary tactics and compromise with ruling elites, so as to destroy parliamentary democracy and create a new regime.

2. An ideology having an ‘anti-ideological’ and pragmatic character that proclaims itself anti-materialistic, anti-individualistic, anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-Marxist, populist and anti-capitalist in tendency; expresses itself aesthetically, more than theoretically, through a new political style and through the myths, rituals and symbols of a lay religion created for the cultural socialisation and integration of the masses, toward faith in the creation of a ‘new man’.

3. A culture based on mythical thought and a tragic and activist vision of life conceived as the embodiment of the will to power, on the myth of youth as the creative force of history, and on the militarisation of politics as a life-model and a collective organisation.

4. A totalitarian concept of the supremacy of politics as an integral experience in bringing about the totalitarian State, the fusion of
the individual and the masses into the organic and mystical unity of the nation as an ethnic and moral community by instituting discriminatory and persecutory measures against those viewed as being outside that community, either because they are enemies of the regime or because they are viewed as belonging to races that are considered as inferior, or in any case dangerous to the nation’s integrity.

5. A public ethic based on total dedication to the national community, on discipline, virility, comradeship and the warrior spirit.

6. A single party whose mission it is to ensure the armed defence of the regime; to select the leadership cadre and organise the masses within the totalitarian State by involving them in a permanent mobilisation based on faith and emotions.

7. A police apparatus that prevents, checks and represses dissent and opposition, even through the use of organised terror.

8. A political system that organised according to hierarchies of functions appointed from the top down, and crowned by the figure of the ‘Leader’, who is endowed with a charismatic and sacred nature who leads, orders and directs the activities of the party, the regime and the State.

9. A corporative organisation of the economy that eliminates the freedom of labour unions, broadens the sphere of State intervention seeking to create, according to technocratic- and solidarity-based principles, the collaboration among the ‘productive classes’ under the regime’s control, to reach its power-driven objectives while maintaining private property and divisions among social classes.

10. A foreign policy inspired by the myth of power, national grandeur and the ‘new civilization’ having imperialistic expansion as its objective.

Despite being subdivided into ten parts, this definition intends to highlight the logical – not merely chronological – connection between the organisational, cultural and institutional dimensions of fascism, viewed as ‘one of the first experiments of totalitarian dominion undertaken in the modern age’, and as ‘a political religion aiming at realising in its institutions a new ‘sense of community’ on the basis of myth and faith, banishing the liberty of the individual and the masses’.26

The idea of the genetic connection between totalitarianism and the ‘sacralisation of politics’ was consolidated by a deeper understanding,
not just of its ideology, but also of the concrete political events of its history. The shift of attention from the ideological dimension to the ritual and symbolic dimension of fascism was stimulated and conditioned by the study of the mass politics enacted by both party and regime, where rites and symbols appeared fundamental elements of a culture based on mythic thought, and central to its policies in the realm of collective organisation and mobilisation. The comparison of the phenomenon of Fascism’s ‘new politics’ with the ritual dimension of National Socialism analysed by Mosse in The Nationalisation of the Masses, was, for me, a stimulus to study in depth the peculiarity of the Italian case and its points of contrast with the German one. It is worth stressing that, even if my reflections on fascism as a political religion were influenced by the work of Mosse, who was the first in the new historiography to affirm that ‘fascism was a new religion’, it is not from his book on the nationalisation of the masses that my interest in the aesthetic, ritual and symbolic aspects of fascism derives. Moreover, it was while reading Mosse’s book that I became convinced of the differences between the Italian case and the German one, and, therefore, of the inapplicability of his interpretation of the nationalisation of the masses to the experience of Italian Fascism:

Even if some of the external and particular aspects of fascism – I observed while reviewing Mosse’s book in 1975 – correspond to the idea of the ‘new politics’, in reality, the essential conditions for the elaboration of a national liturgy were missing. The only national political theology was the one elaborated by the tradition associated with Mazzini-Gioberti-Gentile, and this remained purely intellectual. Besides, Italy’s historical and social process did not bring about the elaboration of a widespread and shared national liturgy. The only one, which was hardly replaceable, was the Catholic liturgy. In the end, the lay religion of the nation was only the faith of few small groups.

The difference between the various national traditions of Fascism and Nazism was the starting-point for my investigation of the political religion contained in Fascism, which naturally did not have the same background as Mosse had discovered in the case of Nazism. As I pointed out, in 1982, while studying the subject of Fascist religion, Fascism had to produce its own political cult mainly using its own resources:
Fascism invented its political cult by drawing on the traditions of Mazzinianism and socialism, the patriotic ceremonies of the Great War, the rites and the symbols of ‘combattentism’, of Futurism, of ‘arditism’ and of ‘Fiumanism’. We are speaking about invention (but not about improvisation, considering the abundance of existing material which fascism could make use of) because the current state of our knowledge suggests that Fascism was unable to draw on a widespread lay tradition and national liturgy shared by millions of people, similar to the one to which George L. Mosse could trace the origins of the Nazi political cult. This explains the fragility of the Fascist political cult; the sense of the grotesque imposition of empty formulas that it stirred up in so many Italians; the widespread use of the rites and symbols of the Roman world; the predominance assumed, within the limits of new political cult, by a special cult of the Duce which ended up absorbing all the other components of the cult and of the Fascist political faith, including the nation and the State. The Fascist political cult, contrary to the Nazi political cult, was not the expression of an advanced process of the nationalisation of the masses, but an instrument to initiate this process. However, from such observations it would be wrong to arrive at the conclusion that the fascist political cult was a ridiculous expedient adopted artificially for propagandistic use and irrelevant to understanding the nature of fascism. As a matter of fact, the political cult, adopted or invented by fascism, was consistent with its totalitarian logic and with its image of man and the masses.

I developed my analysis of the Fascist political cult in the course of the 1980s, along with my research into the history of the Fascist Party and regime, resulting in a later volume on the sacralisation of politics in Fascist Italy published in 1993, the core argument of which was summarised in the article ‘Fascism as Political Religion’ in the Journal of Contemporary History in 1990. The introductory remarks of my interpretation of fascism as a political religion were the reconsideration of the relation between secularisation and sacralisation in modern society. This postulated, instead of a progressive disappearance of the sacred, a constant process of the sacralisation of politics, in the sense that, as I wrote, ‘politics has assumed its own religious dimension … which reached its highest point in the totalitarian movements of the
ten twentieth century’. It is in the context of this process, and as one of its main manifestations in the twentieth century, that the problem of fascism as a political religion acquires its significance. In that sense it is beyond doubt that the ‘sacralisation of politics’ was a fundamental aspect of fascism from the very beginning, and became increasingly predominant in the course of its development as a political religion that ‘placed itself alongside traditional religion syncretically within its own sphere of values as an ally in the subjection of the mass to the State, although it did stress the primacy of politics’, because, ‘due to its totalitarian nature’ and ‘to its conception that politics constituted an all-consuming reality, fascism aimed at abolishing the boundaries between the religious and political spheres’.

Criticism as Denigration and the Snare of Presumption

My interpretation of fascism as a totalitarianism and a political religion have been subject to various criticisms. I will limit myself to discussing here the negative criticism related not only to my interpretation, which in itself would be of a little importance, but also to the type which manifests a deep aversion to the very concepts of totalitarianism and political religion, as well as their application to the study of contemporary history.

Criticism is fundamental for the progress of understanding. Renewing the historiography and interpretation of fascism would not have been possible without a solid criticism of the historiography and the more traditional interpretations. But not all criticism carries out a function that promotes progress in understanding. In fact, there is a form of criticism that might appropriately be called denigration because it aims simply at rejecting an interpretation without a cohesive line of argument or any supporting evidence. This is the only sense in which the repudiation of this ‘denigrating’ criticism is treated here, namely as a contribution to the reflections and the debate on fascism, as well as on totalitarianism and on political religion. I believe it is worth examining the validity of this sort of negative criticism in order to clarify the terms and problems under discussion, even when they are born simply of a hostile prejudice against any approach to fascism that takes issue with its representation as an ‘historical negativity’, an argument that can even be taken to the point of claiming that the interpretation of fascism as a totalitarianism and a political religion is part of a devious manoeuvre to rehabilitate fascism.
In fact, it was ‘denigrating’ criticism that my interpretation initially attracted. The first critique of this kind was published 30 years ago, although since then the scholar in question has made amends in a spirit of good faith, claiming to have misunderstood the sense of my historiographical work, and recognising the contribution that my interpretation of Italian Fascism as totalitarianism has made to scholarly research. Twenty years later, the accusation was repeated by those who wanted solely to denigrate my interpretation, defining it as ‘anti-anti-Fascist’. This accuser seems to assume he is the sole guardian and authorised interpreter of an authentically anti-Fascist interpretation of Fascism. In reality, the accusation of ‘anti-anti-Fascism’ levelled at my interpretation reveals a quadruple ignorance: of anti-Fascism, of Fascism, of the current Italian anti-Fascist historiography, and, finally, of my interpretation of Fascism itself. In fact, this interpretation, as anyone who has actually read my writings and has a real, not rhetorical, knowledge of the anti-Fascist tradition, was elaborated in the wake of the interpretations of such anti-Fascists as Luigi Salvatorelli, Giovanni Amendola, Luigi Sturzo and Lelio Basso. Each of these were the first to sense and analyse the newness of the fascist phenomenon as an original experiment in political dominion, acted out by a party organised along military lines, which had conquered a monopoly of political power and was aiming to impose its ideology as a lay religion. It was these anti-Fascist scholars who first invented and spread the concept of totalitarianism, to which other anti-Fascist scholars added the concept of political religion, considering them to be two sides of the same coin. Also, in the current historiography my interpretation of Fascism has obtained the critical approval of many scholars belonging to the Marxist or Marxist-oriented tendency. One of the most weighty exponents of this trend, Giampiero Carocci, in a 1993 review of my book Il culto del lictorio, declared that he agreed with my thesis that an ‘essential aspect of the totalitarian State is its tendency to sacralise politics, to make of it one of the numerous lay religions which, as it is the case of nationalism, characterise modern society’. Thus, Carocci recognised the importance of the central issues, going on to stress that the book filled an important gap in existing scholarship: ‘The sources we consulted largely confirm the existence of a Fascist religion, of a “cult of the Lictor”, as the fundamental instrument to achieve the goal of making the masses participate in what was or seemed to be the life of the nation’.
To define my interpretation of Fascism as ‘anti-anti-Fascist’ appears yet more paradoxical, even ridiculous, if we consider that it has been mostly opposed by right-wing thinkers who affirm that Fascism was just an authoritarian regime that never became totalitarian. The denial of the totalitarian character of Fascism, a view expounded mostly by right-wing thinkers, whether neo-Fascist or post-Fascist, is the most explicit expression of a more general tendency that I have called ‘the de-fascistisation of Fascism’. This recently resulted in their affirmation that the Fascist regime was a benevolent dictatorship which degenerated only when the alliance with National Socialism infected Italian Fascism with the virus of antisemitism and racism. In the various attacks on my interpretation of Fascism, those who assert that Fascism was not totalitarian, nor even a political religion, without proper supporting evidence, have regularly made use of De Felice’s work to do so, frequently citing him out of context in the process. One of these critics wrote that the ‘first and the most authoritative of the critics of Gentile’s interpretation could be considered his master Renzo De Felice’. In making observations of this kind, the critic’s ignorance shows that they have fallen into what might be called the ‘snare of presumption’, making a partial and distorted use of sources with whom they were not remotely familiar.

My interpretation of fascism as a political religion has also been subject to denigrating criticism of this nature both by some of those who do not deny the importance of studying the ritual and symbolic aspects of fascism in principle, and those who consider these aspects simply irrelevant, and even believe that it is ‘ridiculous’ to study fascism as a totalitarian movement let alone a political religion. To those just mentioned, we may add critics who categorically reject the possibility of applying the concept of religion to fascism. They either affirm that my interpretation of fascism as a political religion is a product of my ignorance of what religion is, or accuse me of mistaking a metaphor (‘fascism is a religion’) for reality. It is easy to show, though, that these critics are victims of their own sense of self-importance, because it is evident from their arguments that they have made no attempt to investigate the themes and problems that they claim to address. For instance, when I am accused of not knowing what religion is, such critics ignore the fact that among the first and most important observers of fascism as a political religion were a number of Catholic and Protestant theologians, both lay and religious, with at least one pontiff among them. The fact that members of the clergy and experts
in religion like Luigi Sturzo, Paul Tillich, Jacques Maritain, Arthur Keller and Pius XI all shared my ignorance in what religion is – moreover, transmitted their ignorance to me, for it was also their reflections on fascism as a secular religion that helped convince me to study this problem – is not only a personal consolation, but it raises a historical problem of great seriousness, of which religious scholars themselves are certainly aware. It is not by chance that my studies of fascism as a political religion, and of the ‘religion of politics’ in general, aroused particular interest and frequent approval among Catholic scholars.47

We may well banish the definition of fascism as a political religion: but the problem of the sacralisation of politics would still remain; a problem which a serious historian cannot avoid taking seriously, which involves investigating the nature of a political phenomenon which, by its use of religious ‘metaphors’, inspired genuine faith and enthusiasm, while at the same time sowing the seeds of anxiety and terror. To study this problem it is necessary in the first instance to study those who produced it; that is, those who were the creators of political religions, by what means they elaborated their ideas and how they institutionalised these religions and put them into practice, investing an enormous amount of energy, money, and constant effort, to turn them into the generators of adoration and instruments of death.

As I wrote in the closing part of my research on fascism as political religion, I think this problem should be treated as the one to be studied as the premise to understanding the process of the sacralisation of politics typical of fascism, and prior to examining other aspects of the same phenomenon, such as its penetration of and effects on the populace:

Once in power, fascism instituted a lay religion by sacralising the State and spreading a political cult of the masses that aimed at creating a virile and virtuous citizenry, dedicated body and soul to the nation. In the enterprise of spreading its doctrine and arousing the masses to faith in its dogmas, obedience to its commandments, and the assimilation of its ethics and its life-style, fascism spent a considerable capital of energy, diverting those energies from other fields that might perhaps have been more important for the interests both of the regime and of the people. A commitment to the organisation of mass rituals that persisted with obsessive determination for two decades, even when the foundations of the regime were crumbling as a result of defeat in war, is already and of itself a subject worthy of reflection.48
This does not mean that we can avoid studying the effect produced by the fascist political religion — and more generally, by the totalitarian experiment — on the life and conscience of the people who were involved, but that we are dealing with a problem which poses considerable methodological difficulties, as I noted in 1988, when dealing with problem of support for the fascist regime:

We are facing one of the most complex and controversial problems of Fascism: it is difficult to evaluate, because of the lack of specific analysis and of the fluidity of the phenomenon itself, what amounts to ‘consensus’ in a totalitarian regime, that goes beyond carrying the party card. Any generalisation would be misleading. To exclude the presence of ‘consensus’ would be as unrealistic and illusory as to presume a lasting and uniform general support. The analysis of ‘consensus’ should necessarily be divided into different segments, sorted by social condition, place, time, sex, age, and then go on to look at the individual motivations and main sources of this ‘consensus’ (the myth of Mussolini, the image of fascism, the actions of the party, etc.). In the case of the party we have pointed out some of the aspects of ‘consensus’ that, with different levels of intensity, were obtained through the monopoly of political activity and the institutionalisation of political professionalism, charity work, entertainment for the masses, and the organisation and mobilisation of youth. However, speaking generally about the relationship between the party and the populace, we must point out that at the end of the 1930s there were many symptoms of growing negative reactions, provoked by party policies, and the more intrusive and oppressive its obsession with organising and mobilising became.49

The problem posed by a totalitarian experiment on the general population is of such dimension and complexity that it cannot be solved by mere representations of public opinion, which are often nothing but generalisations taken from limited and questionable sources, carried out with questionable methods, and in many cases inspired by a sort of ‘historiographical populism’ representing the personal opinion of the author, yet reflected in the opinion of an imaginary people, as a genuine expression of public opinion.

I do not believe that criticism of the nature cited above can detract from the relevance of totalitarianism and political religion to the understanding of fascism. Nor can it in any way contribute to a
clarification of the basic issues involved, for it is a form of criticism which, as I have shown with numerous examples, is not able to employ any arguments other than caricature or misrepresentation, and does not provide any rational critique. The intellectual vulgarity and crudeness of the insinuations that often accompany such criticism are aimed at the personality of the scholar, rather than at his or her work, and perhaps do not even deserve to be commented on, corrected or refuted. Time is a resource consumed rapidly and notoriously difficult to manage. It is thus extremely precious, and must be preserved for more serious tasks. Having said this, it was necessary to cite specific examples of this retrograde type of criticism in order to highlight both its dubious scientific reliability and questionable intellectual integrity. Once its lack of substance is recognised it is easier to ignore when encountered again, thus sparing time for reflecting upon more serious questions.

Final Clarifications and Explanations on the Subject of Totalitarianism

Adopting the concept of totalitarianism in defining fascism was a theoretical choice fully consistent with the results of my research into the history of Fascist culture, party and regime, as well as with the history of this concept, its origin and development. As I have already noted, my interpretation of totalitarianism owes much to those scholars who directly experienced life under totalitarian regimes and political religions, and became victims of them. They were the first to start elaborating this concept, almost always linking it to the concept of political religion.50

In my interpretation of the totalitarian phenomenon, I clarified some fundamental points which I believe necessary to stress here, for they could help to set the limits in which I consider the concept of totalitarianism a valid analytical instrument, both for the study of international fascism and the study of other contemporary political phenomena, though without making it the exclusive key to interpretation:

1. The use of the concept of totalitarianism in the comparative analysis of single-party political systems created by revolutionary movements does not imply the shared identity of these systems as if they were the branches of the same tree.
2. Totalitarianism, as an experiment in political dominion, does not result from the contingent degeneration or radicalisation of dictatorial power, or from the will of a single individual. Instead, it originates from a revolutionary party with an extremist and palingenetic ideology, craving a monopoly of power in order to conquer society and transform it according to its conception of man and politics.

3. Defining fascism as totalitarianism is not the same as stating that it actually accomplished what it meant by ‘totalitarian’, nor of stating that Fascism was totalitarian in the same way as Bolshevism and National Socialism.

4. The concept of totalitarianism understood as an experiment of political dominion does not refer to any ‘perfect’ and ‘completed’ totalitarianism in any of its forms. It refers, instead, to a process which by its nature can never be considered ‘perfect’ or ‘completed’.

In reference to the last point, which in my opinion is the most important for clarifying the concept of totalitarianism and its application in the study of contemporary history, I cannot but reassert what I wrote in a 1986 article:

In an historical sense, it can be observed that totalitarianism is always a process and not a complete and definitive form, assuming that connections between institutions and ideology are taken into consideration. The totalitarian integration of society into the State or the party could never be definitive, but would have to be renewed year after year. A complete totalitarian integration would be, paradoxically, the complete realisation of Rousseau’s democratic ideal. All totalitarian regimes are therefore ‘imperfect’ with respect to their ideal of integration; during their existence they all come up against various limits and ‘islands of separation’. Historically, one can observe that, even during the lives of those totalitarian regimes which have asserted the supremacy of the party, a ‘personalisation’ of power has occurred, leading to the political liquidation of the party as a centre in the formulation of choices and decisions, as these become the privilege of the leader. It is, however, precisely the existence of the single party and mass mobilisation which does not allow this ‘personalisation’ of the fascist regime to be bracketed with traditional personal dictatorships. To reduce Fascism
to ‘Mussolinism’ is to trivialise the problem of the ‘Leader’ in the totalitarian system. It not only overlooks the existence and behaviour of the organisation, but also does not take into consideration the fact that without the Fascist organisation, the myth of the Duce and the figure himself would have been incomprehensible. Finally, without going into the merits of the debate on the theoretical placing of Italian Fascism within the models of totalitarianism elaborated by the social sciences, one can note that there has been a Fascist conception of totalitarianism, and this cannot be overlooked. Once one attributes a ‘totalitarian tendency’ to Fascism, which distinguishes it from traditional authoritarian regimes, one then has to study how this tendency originated, how it was formed in reality, and how it operated to modify reality, conditioning the lives of millions of men and women in the process. The failure of fascist totalitarianism is not a proof of its non-existence. The gap between myth and achievement is not an argument against the importance of myths in the politics of Fascism, nor against its conception and mode of organisation of the masses.51

Fascism was the ‘Italian way to totalitarianism’. Fascist totalitarianism represented a reality in a continuous process of construction which unfolded progressively, taking shape in political culture, education and in the lifestyle of the Fascist regime by means of a complex relationship between the ideology, party and regime which, despite contrasts and contradictions, shows the constant presence of a totalitarian logic peculiar to Fascism, present in both the ideology and the political actions of the Fascist movement/regime. Obviously, the Fascist totalitarian experiment in the course of its implementation encountered numerous obstacles in society: for example, in the apparatus of the old State, and in the Church. Nevertheless, more recent research on these aspects – which I am going to treat widely in a forthcoming article – has confirmed the validity of the interpretation of Fascism as the ‘Italian way to totalitarianism’, demonstrating how, in the course of its totalitarian experiment, Fascism actually attained numerous results, so that on the eve of the Second World War, the regime was certainly much more totalitarian than at the end of the 1920s: no opposition within the country seriously threatened the stability and the functioning of the totalitarian laboratory. We should also remember that the end of the Fascist regime was determined by
military defeat, not by the monarchy, the Church or popular oppo-

tion.

We could certainly agree with those who assert that in Italy fascism
did not achieve the condition of a ‘perfect’ and ‘completed’ totalitari-
anism. But I doubt if there exists any possibility of solving the problem
posed by Renato Moro; that is, of identifying ‘what this missing total-
itarian component of the regime actually was’, because such a prob-
lem, from an historical point of view, does not even arise. If it did, it
should be raised in connection with all totalitarianisms, because in the
reality of human history, where nothing is perfect, totalitarian regimes
are also doomed by their own dynamic and experimental nature to fail
to attain complete perfection. Even regimes considered entirely total-
itarian, upon closer examination turned out to be imperfect, not only
in relation to various theoretical models elaborated by scholars, but
also in relation to their totalitarian projects, to the different phases of
development of their experiment, as well as to the different historical
and social situations in which these regimes were set. However, as
Luciano Zani has argued, even

if, for the sake of argument, it was possible to affirm the accom-
plishment of a complete and integral totalitarianism on the part
of Italian Fascism, there would be substantial elements of
contrast not only between Italian Fascism and Stalinism, but also
between the various forms of fascism as well, whose common
totalitarian conception was not a guarantee of a lasting reciprocal
accord and coexistence.

The usefulness of interpreting Fascism as the ‘Italian way to
totalitarianism’ – which, it should be said again, refers not only to
the ideology, but also to the policy of the party and the regime – has
been continuously confirmed by the research of scholars who explicitly apply it, or reflect it indirectly in their arguments. It is impor-
tant to mention that Juan Linz, a major authority on these matters
in political science, although preferring the term ‘failed totalitari-
anism’ instead of ‘interrupted totalitarianism’ in the context of the
Fascist regime, has recently declared: ‘It was Gentile who managed
to convince me to accept his point of view, according to which
Fascism not only had a totalitarian potential, but was evolving
towards a totalitarian regime, especially in the Thirties’; while Stan-
ley Payne, who also has been sceptical about the totalitarian charac-
ter of the Fascist regime, writes that the author of La via italiana al
totalitarismo 'presents an impressive amount of evidence to bolster his conclusion that during the second half of the 1930s the Italian regime was undergoing a process of totalitarianisation, even though that process was not institutionally complete by the time of Mussolini's downfall in 1943'.

In addition, I believe that the formula I propose, which presents the concept of totalitarianism as an experiment and not only as a regime, is also effective in interpreting the 'fascist phenomenon'. That is, it permits us to analyse ideas and behavioural types, the dialectics between myth and the organisation of other nationalistic and revolutionary movements, which in the period between the two world wars had characteristics similar to Fascism, because they used the latter as a model in organisation and style, claiming not only to save the nation from Bolshevism or to protect the interests of the bourgeoisie, but to conquer power in order to regenerate the nation and to lead it to a new age of grandeur and power. Those movements shared or imitated the concepts, institutions, motives and behaviour typical of the Fascist synthesis: they opposed rationalism, egalitarianism and the progressive conception of democratic and socialistic ideologies; they disdained the individualism of liberal, middle-class society and parliamentary democracy; they exalted the cult of the 'Leader' and the role of those active minorities who were able to mobilise and mould the masses; they proposed a 'Third Way' between capitalism and communism that was nationalist, totalitarian and corporative, with the objective of creating a new order and a new civilisation. This would be based upon the militarisation and sacralisation of politics, on organisation and mobilisation of the integrated masses, by means of the organisation of the State, into an organic community of a regenerated nation, which would be ideologically and ethnically homogeneous. Apart from the differences, quite profound sometimes, in ideological content and the aims they pursued, what those movements had in common with Fascism was political mysticism, revolutionary dynamism, and an ideological extremism founded on the myth of the nation sacralised as a supreme collective entity, destined to be united and homogeneous, and organised into a state of permanent mobilisation in order to affirm its grandeur, its might and its prestige in the world. All those movements hated and fought against parliamentary democracy in the name of the democracy of the national community, and dreamt of achieving a 'collective harmony', as Mussolini called it, through the organisation of a new State conceived as the expression of
a people’s community and the concept of the ‘new man’. Therefore, all those movements can be defined as totalitarian, in the sense that all of them were, as Griffin puts it, ‘political or social movements driven by a palingenetic vision of the new man which, if implemented, would have created a totalitarian regime’.\(^5\) From this point of view – as Alessandro Campi argues when referring to my interpretation – among the elements which identify the fascist phenomenon, ‘there is totalitarianism which cannot be understood only as a regime or a political system (which probably, in the course of history, has never appeared in the complete and perfect form), but also as a general political goal, as a cultural pattern, as a *forma mentis*, as a complete political idea’.

… and on the Subject of Political Religion

Palingenetic myth, the factor that Roger Griffin makes central to his ideal type of fascism, is a crucial element corroborating the totalitarian nature of fascism. It is significant in order to understand the connection between totalitarianism and political religion, because it is a key ideological factor behind the drive to secure a total monopoly of power. Only a monopoly of power, through the subordination of society to the State and the organisation and control of the masses, allows the regime to act out an *anthropological revolution* in order to create a new man and a new civilisation. Palingenetic myth, which already contains a religious matrix and is deeply imbued with religious meaning, contributes by conferring upon fascism the characteristics typical of a political religion with a strong and markedly modern messianic (but not necessarily millenarian) component, because it derives, not from the revival of pre-modern traditions, but from an apocalyptic interpretation of modernity assigning the mission of regeneration to politics.\(^7\)

As to the use of the concept of political religion in the analysis of fascism and totalitarianism, it is necessary to address the more important problems – above all theoretical and methodological ones – raised by some critics of my definition of fascism as a form of sacralisation of politics, especially with respect to the role and concept of political religion for a general interpretation of fascism. Some of this criticism, primarily of my book on the sacralisation of politics in Italy, seems to derive from a misunderstanding of my interpretation which is based solely on a reading of this book, as if I had not written on other aspects
of the Fascist experience, such as the political, organisational and institutional – without taking into consideration my basic definition of fascism, expressed in the terms of dimensions complementary to fascist organisations, culture and institutions which I formulated as long ago as 1990. For instance, this is the case of Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, who, while accepting the validity of my approach to fascism as a political religion, affirms that ‘the analytical category of “politics as religion” does not exhaustively convey the nature of Italian Fascism, its peculiar cultural content’, because ‘references to “lay religion” alone cannot explicate Fascism’s unique turn, its original totalitarian culture’.58 As a matter of fact, I have never written (nor thought) that the category of ‘political religion’ is the only key to the interpretation of fascism. Above all, I hardly think it reasonable to accuse me, as Falasca-Zamponi does, of not having taken into consideration in my studies the ‘original totalitarian culture’, which, on the contrary, since the very beginning has played a central role in all my research on fascism, as, in fact, Robert Gordon recognised in his observation: ‘Gentile’s approach amounts to nothing less than a redefinition of the totalitarian project’.59

Similarly, I believe that it is a remarkable misunderstanding to consider my approach to fascism as a political religion as an exclusively ‘culturalistic’ approach, similar to one which studies fascism as the ‘aestheticisation of politics’. Claudio Fogu, in a review of my book on the religion of Fascism, remarked: ‘Gentile shies away from engaging in any dialogue with either Walter Benjamin’s famous thesis or with the more recent literature on fascist modernism’.60 Indeed, in my book neither Benjamin’s thesis nor the literature on fascist modernism is mentioned. This absence, though, was based on a choice, so as to avoid any possible confusion between the problem of the ‘sacralisation of politics’ and the ‘aestheticisation of politics’. In my opinion, these are two substantially different problems, even if they overlap in the study of rites and symbols. By a curious coincidence, Fogu’s review of my book was published in the issue of a magazine that also included an article of mine where I explicitly criticised the ‘culturalistic’ approach, and the use of Benjamin’s thesis in the literature on fascist modernism:

Fascist modernism has been especially studied by literary critics and historians of art, sometimes with notable results, often drawing upon Fascism as ‘the aestheticisation of politics’ which
Benjamin proposed. Yet however suggestive this interpretation, it can also be misleading if it obscures fascism’s other important feature, its ‘politicisation of aesthetics’, which not only inspired fascism’s attitude toward avant-garde culture, but lay at the very origin of the encounter between futurism and fascism and of the participation of many Modernist intellectuals in fascism. Such caution might seem excessive, but it is also necessary if we are to avoid letting emphasis on ‘the aestheticisation of politics’ lead to a kind of ‘aestheticisation’ of fascism itself, privileging its literary, aesthetic, and symbolic aspects while losing sight of motivations and matrices that are essentially political in nature. To do so risks trivialising the fundamentally political nature of fascism, its culture, its ideology, and its symbolic universe. Even when studying strictly aesthetic manifestations of fascism, such as its political style, its liturgy for the masses, or its copious symbolic production, all of them characteristic and essential elements in the fascist mode of doing politics, it is important not to lose sight of the political dimension of fascist culture.61

In my interpretation, the phenomenon of the sacralisation of politics is not to be equated with the ‘aesthetisation of politics’, nor with the ‘new politics’ theorised by George Mosse in his study of political symbolism in the nationalisation of the German masses. A gross error is made by those critics who consider my interpretation of fascist religion to be a mechanical derivation, or an application of Mosse’s approach to the theme of the ‘new politics’, which is different from my approach in both the method and the treated themes, as I have explained above. In fact, it is not by chance that Mosse’s analysis is based on the concept of the ‘aesthetics of politics’, while mine avails itself of the concept of the ‘sacralisation of politics’.62 Nor is this difference merely terminological. As Renato Moro observed in a 1995 critique of my book on the sacralisation of politics in Italy, my inquiry went ‘in some respects further than the idea of the German-American historian’ because of the central position given to the categories of ‘myth, theology and political religion’. Moro added that the centrality of the sacralisation of politics to my analysis of fascism leads to ‘a pronounced emphasis on the “theological aspects” of fascist culture and its “religious anthropology”’, which goes considerably beyond what Mosse asserted concerning its ‘liturgical’ and ‘aesthetic’ ones … And it is perhaps no coincidence that,
with the exception of the deep difference between the two subjects of study under examination, Mosse’s work focuses primarily on aesthetic theories and tastes, theatrical experiments, popular festivals and celebrations, gymnastic and choral associations (even widely read novels), while Gentile’s rotates constantly around, and ever more closely to, political culture and its theoreticians.63

More recently, Roger Griffin has noticed the difference between Mosse’s and my approach: ‘Gentile seems to have also arrived at his view of fascism as an attempt to sacralise the state largely independently of Mosse’.64

I think that these comments fully clarify the substantial difference between my approach and the ‘culturalistic’ one, which are often confused with one another, as if my interpretation of fascism was confined exclusively to the book on the sacralisation of politics, or was restricted merely to the ideological and cultural dimensions and to the use of the category of ‘political religion’.65 In my first study on fascist ideology in 1974, I expressed my basic convictions on this subject and, in the course of time, have never altered:

In our narrative we, naturally, have never thought of explaining fascism by making use of its own ideology, even if we consider it one of the elements, and by no means the least important, in the consensus that it won in Italy and abroad. However, history never gives a single answer to questions posed by those who want to understand the past. Therefore, within the limits of our research, we have only tried to reconstruct one of many ‘threads’ that constituted the fascist phenomenon.66

In the same way, a quarter of a century later, I clarified and specified the limits within which I believe the concept of political religion can be legitimately employed, avoiding a general and indiscriminate use of it. In particular, I have stated clearly and unambiguously that the category of political religion does not resolve the problem of fascism, nor the totalitarian phenomenon of which it is a component.

It should be pointed out, even if it seems obvious, that viewing a political movement as a secular religion does not necessarily suggest that this constitutes the only explanation of its nature and historical significance. Political religion is one element of totalitarianism, not the principal element and not even the most
important in defining its essence. It might be remembered that within the term ‘political religion’ it is the word ‘political’ that has dominated history, and should, therefore, prevail in historiographical and theoretical analysis. Drawing attention to the characteristics of totalitarianism as political religion does not signify that one will find the key to understanding the nature of totalitarianism in the sacralisation of politics. This remains a wholly open question.67

The superficiality of the ‘reductionist’ criticism of my interpretation of fascism as a political religion is thrown into relief by those who, although expressing some reservations on the very concept of religion applied to fascism, as Robert Gordon does, nevertheless recognise that my work ‘combines a close and shrewd attention to contemporary archive sources with a keen originality of analysis alert to cultural history and histories of attitude and mentality as much as to political and institutional history’.68 Equally clear is the explanation given by Sergio Luzzatto, who distinguished my approach from the regrettable preoccupation with the ‘aestheticisation of fascism’ which prevails among the scholars of the ‘culturalistic’ trend, noticing that ‘the dedication and high quality of Gentile’s previous research (particularly into the ideological origins of fascism and the internal history of the PNF), prevented the author from falling into a trap of “culturalism” as an end in itself, the tendency to see fascism as a creation of rhetoric and fancy’.69

My criticism of the ‘culturalistic’ approach does not entail criticism of the cultural history of fascism, which, when pursued seriously, has showed itself to be highly productive, delivering insights which extend beyond the cultural dimension because they are also relevant to an understanding of fascism’s organisational and institutional dimensions. Instead, it is more accurate to speak of the ‘anthropological-cultural’ approach, as far as my analysis of fascism as a political religion is concerned, as Giampiero Carocci has recognised in his review on my study of the ‘cult of the Lictor’:

Gentile in this book does not write as a scholar of political history, nor of the history of ideas, but as a scholar of anthropological history. The task he sets himself is not to establish if certain acts are or are not congruous to rationality, but to establish to what extent they are congruous to the satisfaction of some human needs, such as security and certainty, needs whose roots go deep into the world of emotions, without touching the sphere of reason.70
Another important series of explanations and clarifications concerns the use of the term ‘religion’ in the definition of fascism. The return of the concept of political religion in the interpretation of fascism, when I re-proposed it at the beginning of the 1990s, initially met with a certain scepticism, not because of any preconceived hostility toward this type of analysis, but due to a certain confusion about the best way to understand the concept of political religion. Griffin, for instance, at first criticised my approach to the study of fascism as a secular religion, putting it alongside the work of other scholars like Eric Voegelin – who applied to the study of National Socialism such concepts as ‘millenarianism’, ‘chiliasm’ and ‘eschatology’ – considering it an ‘abuse of religious concepts’. The title of the paragraph where this criticism was expounded left little doubts about Griffin’s views: ‘Fascism as a Political Ideology, not a Political Religion’. Now, I do not think that the concepts of political ideology and political religion are either antagonistic or exclusive of one other. For example, one need not be a Marxist to solve the presumed antagonism between the two concepts, recognising that religion is, or can become, a political ideology. The history of the two last centuries witnessed frequent manifestations of the political ideologisation of religion in all the reactionary, conservative or democratic movements of Christian or Catholic inspiration in Western Europe, as well as in revolutionary nationalistic movements of the fascist kind, such as the Falange or the Iron Guard. Such movements, in my opinion, may already be placed within the dimension of sacralised politics, notwithstanding their exaltation of Catholic or Orthodox Christianity, because their ideology makes the sacralisation of the nation and the State evident, even if through a strongly politicised version of a traditional religion. In turn, movements like the Iron Guard assume, in reality, the character of a political religion in that they become the main factor of legitimation for the sacralisation of the nation, and for the nationalisation of Orthodox Christianity itself, with the exaltation of the ‘Romanian God’ or by claiming that ‘God is a fascist!’, a slogan shouted by the Legionary journalist I.P. Prundeni, which, as Radu Ioanid writes, ‘succinctly captures the place of mysticism as a distinctive quality of Romanian fascism’. Here, as Lucretiu Patrascanu observes, ‘The incorporation and subordination of Orthodoxy to political ends pursued by the Legionary movement are more specific to the Iron Guard than the recognition of a Christian spirituality as a behavioural norm or a source of ethical and social directives’. The Romanian case
is a clear example of my theory about the syncretic symbiosis between political religion and traditional religion. The same problem occurs in the case of National Socialism’s relationship with Christianity, where the main factor is the sacralisation of politics. It can also be seen in the various attempts at conciliation between National Socialism and Christianity, represented by the ‘Aryanisation’ of Christ and by his consequent ‘Germanisation’ and ‘Nazification’, as many Christian theologians, such as Nathaniel Micklem, warned:

National Socialism is a movement militant for a new Weltanschauung or philosophy not derived from Christianity; it is prepared to tolerate only such Christianity as will march in step with the philosophy of Blood and Race and Soil. What Christianity is of this kind, and is it aptly described as ‘positive’? ... Any type of religion that is prepared to affirm without qualification the ideals and principles of National Socialism is positive ... It may be politic in public to represent National Socialism as Christianity in action and to declare that the State has no intention of setting up a new Church to replace the old, but the real implication of National Socialism for religion become plain in these official and explicit directions. National Socialism is a new and intolerant religion.74

In the case of Italian Fascism, there were Fascist Catholics and Catholic Fascists who, in good faith, did not see any antagonism between Fascism and Catholicism, although it is not a sufficient proof to argue that Fascism was essentially Catholic and that its Catholicism was an impediment to its totalitarianism.75 To refute this argument, first of all, there was an awareness among the highest ecclesiastical and theological authorities of the Catholic Church, starting with Pope Pius XI, of an incompatibility between Catholic doctrine and Fascist statolatry, which was openly condemned by the Pontiff. We must add to this theoretical condemnation the growing preoccupation with the concrete measures taken by the fascist totalitarian system, which constantly tried to ‘privatise’ the Catholic faith, using it publicly only to boost its process of absorption into the fascist regime so as to become a ‘fascistised’ Catholicism, exalted essentially and exclusively as an heir to the Roman universal tradition and a manifestation of the genius of the Italian race. Under these aspects, the problem of the ‘syncretic’ relationship between political religion and traditional religion, in the terms in which I expressed it in my definition of political religion, is a subject requiring deeper research and reflection.8
Nor do I believe it a convincing argument to justify renouncing the concept of political religion to observe that all the ideologies propose an interpretation of the meaning and the final goal of human existence, and all of them have a mythic core and use symbols and rites. Indeed, it is true that all political ideologies contain mythical, ritual and symbolic aspects. It is also true that not all of them avoid institutionalising themselves as a religion and acting accordingly. Benedetto Croce asserted that liberalism was a modern religion, even while denying that fascism was the same. Still, his conception of politics did not embrace the deployment of rites and myths that belonged, in his opinion, to the traditional, not to modern forms of religion. Nevertheless, the fact that some political ideologies, such as fascism itself, visibly emphasise mythic thought, symbolic expression and ritual devotion, is to be seen as a reality specific to its political ideology, which distinguishes it clearly from other movements, such as, for instance, parties inspired by Christianity, which did not have an exclusively rationalistic ideology and belonged to the traditions dominated by the faith, the rite and the symbol. After all, the difference between Mussolini and Luigi Sturzo, between the Fascist Party and the Popular Party, is represented also by a profound and essential diversity in the political style, in their use of rites and symbols, in the attitude toward the Church and Catholicism, and in the behaviour toward adversaries, a fact we have to take into consideration when we place them in a common category of political ideology.

Political religion is certainly an ideology, but, we could say, an ideology with an extra ingredient, which makes it qualitatively different from other political ideologies. It was this ‘extra ingredient’, present in Fascism or Bolshevism, that induced some observers of these movements to compare them with phenomena of a religious kind, and to adopt the concept of political religion, since they did not believe the traditional concept of ideology was appropriate. And their use of the concept of religion, in this case, as I have already specified, was not at all metaphoric, nor was it such for religious people and clergymen, who were experts in religion, and who employed it to raise awareness about the threat Fascism posed to Christianity. In the same way, there are contemporary scholars, especially experts in the history of political and religious movements, who consider my interpretation of fascism as a political religion legitimate, and believe that this aspect is an ‘essential element of a regime and an ideology, above all a revolutionary one. It acted not only to sacralise politics and to institute a
lay religion, but also to precipitate the eclipse of Catholicism, as historian Jean-Dominique Durand put it in his review of my book on the sacralisation of politics in Fascist Italy.

It is evident that, faced with a problem concerning not fascism as political religion but the very legitimacy of the concept of political religion, the definition of what a religion means becomes crucial. Commenting on my article published in the first issue of this journal, Stephen Di Rienzo observed that ‘Emilio Gentile … has not provided a definition for his understanding of what a religion is and the possible antithesis to religious organisation’. Indeed, my article lacked an explicit and formal definition of what I meant by a ‘religion’. However, ‘my understanding of what a religion is’ was expressed in the passage of the article in which I defined the process of the sacralisation of politics:

This process takes place when, more or less elaborately and dogmatically, a political movement confers a sacred status on an earthly entity (the nation, the country, the State, humanity, society, race, proletariat, history, liberty, or revolution) and renders it an absolute principle of collective existence, considers it the main source of values for individual and mass behaviour, and exalts it as the supreme ethical precept of public life.

According to my point of view, fascism was a political religion, where by religion I understand a system of beliefs, myths and symbols which interpret and define the meaning and the goal of human existence, making the destiny of an individual and of the community dependent on their subordination to a supreme entity. This definition is related to an interpretation of religion as a phenomenon that expresses the dimension of the sacred as a human experience and, consequently, does not necessarily coincide with the dimension of the divine. Therefore, it is quite plausible, in my opinion, to use the term political religion to define the political movements which, predominantly in their culture, organisation and style, appear as manifestations of a sacralisation of politics, that is, in one of the possible manifestations of the sacred in modernity. As the historian of religion, Giovanni Filoramo, observed in connection to my analysis of Fascist political religion,

the sacralisation of politics and of the State performed by fascism through the cult of the Lictor, far from being a return to the past, constitutes a typical example – which can be used to better
understand the continuous interweaving of politics and religion which characterises the present era – of the diaspora of the sacred which characterises the relationship between modernity and religion.80

A final point about fascism as a political religion that requires clarification concerns the theme of irrationalism, which is frequently referred to both in general when fascist culture is discussed, and, in a more specific way, when fascist culture is recognised as deliberately and explicitly affirming the primacy of mythic thought, to which its definition as a political religion is also linked. Now I would like to state clearly that recognising the irrational and mythic nature of fascist culture does not mean denying that fascism had its own rationality, both in structural terms, and in the concrete manifestation of fascism as an organisation and an institution. ‘In this connection’, I wrote in 1974, ‘we have to observe that the irrationalism of fascist ideology, far from being a manifestation of blind instincts, was the consequence of a rational devaluation of reason as a protagonist of history and politics’, in the same way that its mass politics, with their emphasis on rites and the symbols, were not only an expression of mythic thought, but a consequence of ‘a rational use of the irrational’, too.81 We also have to bear in mind that as far as the irrationality of fascist culture is concerned, its myths were politically efficient because they were combined with the rationality of the organisation and the institution. The organisation and the institution define norms of rational behaviour, formalised and directed in order to achieve a goal. Without the rationality of the organisation and the institution, without being a party and a regime, without becoming the ideology of a modern State, fascism would have probably remained on the fringes of Italy’s political culture, confined to the realm of intellectual elitism or marginalised sectarianism. The link between myth and organisation, between irrationality and rationality, is an inseparable element of fascism, both as a form of totalitarianism and as a political religion, in the same way that occurs with other organised religions. This is the link I have always insisted on in my research, thereby avoiding the trap of transforming the ‘rational’ irrationalism of fascism into a historiographical code for the essential irrationality of fascism, and thus relapsing into the theory of its ‘historical negativity’.

Obviously, if we consider that the concept of religion has to be reserved solely for phenomena which belong to the dimension of the
divine, the problem of political religion is automatically declared irrelevant, simply because it is a problem which does not exist. But even if it were possible, by the general convention and unanimous consensus of all scholars, to ban the use of the concept of political religion in the analysis of political movements, there would still be a need to face the phenomenon of the sacralisation of politics. This dimension still has to be defined whenever it manifests itself in the ideology, organisation and active politics of a movement or a regime. Obviously, we could also negate the existence of this phenomenon as a particular manifestation of the human experience of the sacred, but in my opinion, this could not happen without performing a serious mutilation on our understanding of contemporary history, without surgically removing an important part of its recent past, as much as its present and, probably, its near future as well.

NOTES

I would like to thank Roger Griffin and Robert Mallett for ensuring that as little as possible has been lost in the translation of my article into English.

5. The substantial progress achieved in this first period can be seen by comparing the contents, the methods, and the results of two collections of studies on the phenomenon of fascism that appeared in this period: S.J. Woolf (ed.), European Fascism (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968); and W. Laqueur, Fascism: A Reader’s Guide (London: Wildwood House, 1976).


20. Ibid., p.123.

21. Ibid. pp.123–4. I would like to point out that when I wrote this article I was not aware of Walter Benjamin’s thesis on the ‘aestheticisation of politics’, nor Mosse’s unpublished book on the nationalisation of the masses, where he adopted the concept of the ‘aesthetics of politics’; the latter came out a year later. By this clarification I intend to underline the fact that my interest for the aesthetic, ritual and symbolic aspects of fascist politics as well as for fascist political religion derived directly and, I would say, spontaneously from the study of the fascist phenomenon itself rather than from Benjamin’s or Mosse’s influence.


26. Ibid., p.x.
29. On the influence Mosse’s book had on my elaboration of the interpretation of fascism as political religion, see below pp. 68–69.
30. As far as the expression ‘the invention of the political cult’ is concerned, it is necessary to specify that it precedes the publication of Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and, therefore, does not derive from it.
31. Ibid., p.251.
32. Gentile, Il culto del littorio (note 3).
34. Ibid., pp.230–1.
35. G. Santomassimo, ‘Le matricole del libro e moschetto’, Il manifesto, 15 June 2003: ‘The whole course of Emilio Gentile’s research – initially misunderstood by many who willingly make amends – has tended to outline in the first place the culture, the symbology, the rituality of Italian fascism as a totalitarian phenomenon, and then, in the closing stages, to provide a more concrete examination of the construction and the consolidation of an authoritarian regime which wanted to be totalitarian’.
36. Foremost among them is Richard Bosworth. He asserts that my interpretation of Fascism could be characterised by ‘its almost anti-anti-Fascism’, Bosworth, The Italian Dictatorship (London: Arnold, 1998), p.22. This author claims to be a critic of my ideas on fascism, but what he presents as my interpretation is nothing but distortion, even misrepresentation of my thought, in order to make me seem ‘the leading figure among the new generation of neo-Rankean anti-anti-Fascists’, ibid., p.21. To confirm this allegation, Bosworth discusses what he claims to be my thesis, through omissions and arbitrary extrapolations of quotations, attributing to me assertions which are his pure invention. For instance, Bosworth writes that ‘In 1995 Gentile felt confident enough to come up with his own definition of Fascism’, ibid., pp.21–2; and presents as a ‘definition of Fascism’ my definition of totalitarian Caesarism, which instead refers solely to the fascist political system, and in doing so makes a mistake in the date of its formulation, namely 1986. Similarly, Bosworth comes up with a distorted version of my ideas when, about my book La grande Italia (note 2), he writes: Gentile ‘argued the provocative and curiously nostalgic case that popular identification with the Italian nation reached its apogee in 1911’, ibid., p.24; while in the same book I clearly state that this ‘popular identification’ in 1911 was only an apparent one, something I extensively demonstrate in the chapter deliberately entitled ‘Le Italie dell’Italia monarchica’. Neither is it true that my interpretation of Fascism as a ‘political religion’ squared the circle against traditional Marxist claims that Fascism expressed a class reality and a class purpose’, ibid., p.24. Actually, in my studies on the origins of the fascist ideology and in my history of the Fascist Party, its class nature is widely discussed. In a similar way the class dimension of Fascism is also present in my definition of fascism, given in the Enciclopedia italiana (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1992), yet Bosworth does not quote it. Another distortion is to allege that, from my history of the Fascist Party, ‘the PNF’s real character, it emerged, was cultural’, ibid., p.128, which is simply not true. One more distortion is the manipulation of a quotation of mine, for which my affirmation ‘Fascism always felt itself to be a movement and a militia’, becomes in Bosworth’s text: ‘this was an organisation which was ‘always a movement and a militia’, ibid. Once again Bosworth distorts my interpretation when he writes that ‘we have Gentile’s assertions that the Italian “people” had, to a considerable degree, became Fascist true believers’, ibid., p.131, because such an assertion cannot be found in any of my writings, while there are many which express a judgement entirely different from the
one Bosworth attributes to me. Again, it is simply untrue that I support the thesis of the 'genuineness of Fascism’s claims to have forged a totalitarian Italian society', ibid., p.235, because in all the writings where I discuss the Fascist totalitarian experiment I clearly state that it ended up in failure. Apart from these distortions, and by way of a confirmation of the poor scholarship that characterises Bosworth’s book on the interpretations of Italian fascism, it should be sufficient to quote some additional simple examples. For instance, Bosworth affirms that I had secured a ‘place in the editorial boards of Storia Contemporanea and the Journal of Contemporary History’, ibid., p.21, ignoring the fact that the magazine Storia Contemporanea has never had an ‘editorial board’ and that for this magazine I had been merely a contributor, and not even a regular one. Equally misleading is his statement that ‘Gentile has duly received the applause of his academic faction. Non-De Feliceans, however, retain many doubts’, ibid., p.129. Indeed, this affirmation is rendered absurd by the mainly positive judgements that most ‘non-De Feliceans’ expressed on my work, in particular, regarding my interpretation of totalitarianism and the sacralisation of politics in Fascism, as is known by anyone who has at least a superficial knowledge of the Italian historiography on fascism of the last few decades. With the same factual ignorance, Bosworth affirms that ‘leading figures … in the Catholic Church’ participated in Mussolini’s first government, ibid., p.41; locates Rieti, a town in the Lazio region of central Italy, in the south of Italy, ibid., p.134; and defines as ‘an anonymous preface’, ibid., p.200, n.143, the preface to the volume by R. De Felice, Mussolini l’alleato 1940–1945: La Guerra civile 1943–1945 (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1997), signed by the historian’s wife, Livia De Felice. Finally, as conclusive proof of the superficiality and unreliability of Bosworth’s book as a general critical survey of the interpretations of Fascism, it is sufficient to observe the conspicuous absence of references and comments on the interpretations of Fascism proposed by more serious and authoritative exponents of Italian Marxist or left-wing historiography, like Giorgio Candeloro, Enzo Collotti, Ernesto Ragnieri, Enzo Santarelli and Piergiorgio Zunno, to name but a few. These historians, indeed, have provided interpretations of Fascism entirely different from Bosworth’s, which replicates the thesis of ‘historical negativity’, and this may be the reason why the works of these historians do not even appear in the bibliography of his book.


39. The thesis of an authoritarian and not totalitarian Fascism which became a dictatorship not by vocation, but merely as an unwanted circumstantial consequence, was the interpretation of the Fascist experiment put forward by neo-Fascists like the Movimento sociale italiano (MSI): ‘Fascism’, we read in an article published on 14 December 1986 in Secolo d’Italia, the official organ of the MSI, ‘became a dictatorship by force of circumstances, rather that through inclination. This dictatorship was theorised a posteriori, but was not programmed by the fascism–movement. Even when the need to theorise the dictatorship came, fascism conceived it as a transitory phase, determined by historical contingencies, neither ineluctable nor inalienable. It had nothing in common with the Leninist dogma of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. Besides, as far as the dictatorship is concerned, the fascist regime was authoritarian, not totalitarian. After conquering the monopoly of political power – which became transformed into a real participatory and active consent, therefore, into legitimation – the regime did not attempt to do the same in the fields of economics and culture. This has nothing whatsoever to do, again from this point of view, with the real modern totalitarianism which is communism, that systematically and programmatically subjugates politics, culture, economics over which it gains exclusive and coercive control’. This thesis finds its
support in interpretations of Fascism as an ‘authoritarian regime of mobilisation’, and therefore not a totalitarian one. This interpretation is provided by an expert in political sciences, Domenico Fisichella, a prominent member of the Alleanza Nazionale, which grew out of the Movimento sociale italiano. Fisichella categorically and repeatedly rejects my interpretation of Fascist totalitarianism, without ever citing either my definition of totalitarianism or my definition of fascism, and without discussing the facts and arguments supporting it. Following closely the historiographical knowledge of Fascism of 30 years ago and refusing to take into consideration a considerable amount of new knowledge on the reality of the fascist regime, provided by the new historiography, Fisichella resorts to an evident deformation of my research and my interpretation when he asserts that the ‘thesis of an “Italian way to totalitarianism” and of “totalitarisation” of the regime lies essentially on the basis of analysis of proclamations and doctrinal and propagandistic proclamations and sometimes even on normative precepts’, which are not complemented by concrete facts. D. Fisichella, Totalitarismo: Un regime del nostro tempo (Rome: 2002), p.10. As a matter of fact, my works on the history of the Fascist Party, on the Fascist regime and on the institutions of the monarchical State, such as the Senate, deal with concrete actions and structures and not only with ideology and proclamations. For a synthesis of the result of this studies, see E. Gentile, ‘Fascism in Power: The Totalitarian Experiment’, in A. Lyttelton (ed.), Liberal and Fascist Italy 1900–1945 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.139–74.

42. Marco Tarchi, an expert in political science and a Right-Wing intellectual, quoted De Felice in order to refute my interpretation of fascism as a totalitarianism and a political religion. In the first case, Tarchi writes peremptorily that, ‘The conviction that what developed during those twenty years was an authoritarian regime of the classical type “albeit black-shirted”, strongly conditioned by its supporters, built on a compromise with traditional institutions, whose “most typically modern demagogic-social dimensions” are not sufficient to consider it, despite the declared aspirations, a real totalitarianism, which was expressed by De Felice in the entry, written in the mid-1970s for the Enciclopedia del Novecento, still remains relevant’, Tarchi (note 41), p.132. However, Tarchi omits to let the reader know that De Felice’s phrase concerning the Fascist regime is preceded by a conditional statement. In the following paragraph, referring to the definition of the Fascist regime, quoted by Tarchi, De Felice specifies that ‘such a superficial and factual vision would be, however, partial’, R. De Felice, ‘Fascismo’, in Enciclopedia del Novecento (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia italiana, 1977), p.915. On the subject of Fascism as a political religion, Tarchi asserts that De Felice, in Intervista sul fascismo (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1973), ‘declared himself to be contrary to the hypothesis that during the Ventennio in Italy there ever existed any form of political religion’, Tarchi (note 41), p.130. But in this case, De Felice himself refutes Tarchi, who quotes De Felice badly: indeed, in the above quoted encyclopaedia entry, De Felice affirmed that Fascism, in the same way as National Socialism, set a completely new goal ‘to transform the masses by organising them in a political movement with the characteristics of a lay religion’, De Felice, ‘Fascismo’, p.920. Finally, as for De Felice’s judgement on my interpretation of fascist totalitarianism, Tarchi blunders again when he neglects to refer to what Mussolini’s biographer wrote in 1982 specifically about my definition of fascist totalitarianism: ‘Emilio Gentile has penned the definitive statement on this matter, which also helps explain the essence of Fascist totalitarianism and its deep difference from the Nazi and Stalinist ones’, R. De Felice, ‘Introduction’, in R. De Felice and L. Goglia (eds.), Storia fotografica del fascismo (Rome and Bar: Laterza, 1982), p.xix. Faced with such ‘glitches’, I do not intend to set myself the problem of whether this is a case of accidental ignorance or accidental bad faith. It is interesting, though, to note that Tarchi’s book quoted above appeared with the same publishing house and in the
same series as my critical essay on De Felice: E. Gentile, *Renzo De Felice: Lo storico e il personaggio* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2003). This essay illustrates with extensive quotations the evolution of his interpretation of the Fascist regime, which culminated in the conviction that Fascism was a totalitarian regime.

43. For instance, this is the case of Mabel Barezin in her review of the Italian edition of Gentile, *Il culto del littorio* (note 3), attributing to me affirmations and ideas which are simply false. It is not true that, as Barezin asserts, Gentile ‘assumes that representation of power equals realities of power’ and ‘never directly confronts how symbols and rituals contribute to political practice’ and ‘fails to make an analytical distinction between the producer of the ritual and the Italian populace as audience of symbolic practices. In short, Gentile fails to differentiate between movement and regime, party and people’, Mabel Barezin, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 1/3 (1996), pp.470–2. As I clearly set out in the introduction to my book, the subject matter and the aim of my work was mainly that of ‘singling out and analysing the origin, the motivations, the forms and the goals of the “cult of the Lictor”’; consequently I turned ‘chiefly toward the promoters and the propagator of the “cult of the Lictor”’, Gentile, *Il culto del littorio* (note 3), p.viii. However, within the framework of the book I also expounded my considerations on the political function of the ‘cult the Lictor’, as well as on the reaction of the populace, when it was possible to record them, ibid., pp.189–95; 292–7. And in the closing part I clearly expressed my overall evaluation of the effects of the ‘cult of the Lictor’: ‘The totalitarian experiment of the Fascist political religion failed amid the ruins of a disastrous military defeat in a war both Fascism and anti-Fascism lived and combated as a “war of religion”. Probably, the reasons for the failure lie in the very nature of the experiment, conducted in the euphoria of a voluntarism which believed enduring what was ephemeral, mistook emotions for conviction, the enthusiasm of success for confession of faith, the physical mass, as being similar to ocean waves, for the conscious body of the nation. But the same happened to the other experiments in secular religion’, ibid., p.313.

44. This is the case of Tobias Abse, who, in an article dedicated to the English translation of *Il culto del littorio*, tried to denigrate my interpretation of fascism as a totalitarianism, presenting it in a caricature that generated the same effect as distorting mirrors in a funfair. Indeed, without ever citing anything of what I had been writing for years on the theories of totalitarianism, on the diversity and on the necessity of the differentiation between Fascism, Communism and National Socialism, as well as on the limits, the failures and the defeat of the Fascist totalitarian experiment, Abse peremptorily asserts that my ‘theoretical framework is totally dependent on reviving the completely bankrupt notion of Italian Fascism constituting a totalitarian regime to be ranked alongside Nazism and what Gentile quaintly calls “Bolshevism”’. It is revealing that Gentile writes as if the concept of totalitarianism was unproblematic in the Russian and German instances, but this apparent ignorance of well-known debates about Nazism and Stalinism in not crucial to an argument about Fascist Italy’, T. Abse, ‘Italian Fascism: Political Religion, Political Ritual or Political Spectacle. Emilio Gentile and his Critics’, *South European Society and Politics* 3/2 (1998), pp.142–50. Also in this case misrepresentation prevails over critical argumentation, as when Abse affirms that ‘Gentile seems to have regressed to the antiquated political science clichés of a Germino’, making reference to the book by Dante L. Germino, *The Italian Fascist Party in Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), as if I myself did not express towards Germino’s book a critical judgement, similar to the one I expressed toward the other theories on totalitarianism elaborated by political science. For that purpose I refer back to what I wrote in Gentile, *Il mito dello Stato nuovo* (note 2), pp.255–6 (1999 edn., pp.xxvii–xviii); and Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo* (note 2), pp.65–9.

45. It is Abse again who distinguishes himself, repeating his criticism of my book on the fascist political religion, by referring to what he calls my ‘distance from the Catholic tradition’: ‘a distance that some might argue has had a negative effect on Gentile’s understanding of what constitutes a religion’, T. Abse, ‘The History of Italian Fascism’,
in K. Flett and D. Rendon (eds.), *The Twentieth Century. A Century of Wars and Revolutions?* (London: Rivers Oram, 2000), p.160. But this is again a glaring example of how Abse has fallen into the ‘snare of presumption’, an easy trap for those who speak of things they ignore. As a matter of fact, it was Catholic scholars who were the first and the most original interpreters of Fascism as a political religion and some of them, like Igino Giordani and Luigi Sturzo, are cited in the same book that Abse criticises.

46. This is what Barbara Spackman asserts in *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp.127–9. Spackman begins by giving me an ‘elementary lesson in metaphor’, ibid., p.128, using Benedetto Croce’s quotation, taken from the ‘Manifesto degli intellettuali antifascisti’ of 1925, where the philosopher defines as an ‘abuse’ the definition of Fascism as a religion, given by Giovanni Gentile. Also in this case, before giving elementary lessons, one should follow the elementary rules of scholarship. Indeed, it is not enough to quote an occasional phrase of Croce’s in order to disprove the interpretation of fascism as a political religion. The mere fact that Croce, the anti-Fascist, denied his former friend and Fascist Gentile (who was also a philosopher of religion) the right to define Fascism as a religion, should not cause surprise, considering that Croce asserted that it was not even an ideology. But anyone who has read some pages of Croce’s other writings on religion, for instance at least the two first chapters of his *Storia d’Europa nel secolo decimonono* on the ‘religion of freedom’ and on the ‘opposite religious faiths’, knows that his concept of religion, with reference to the political movements, legitimates, and not in the metaphorical sense, the definition of fascism as a political religion.


52. In this context I would like to point out that the criticism levelled at my interpretation of fascism as a form of totalitarianism by Robert O. Paxton is equally unjustified. He argues that ‘Even Emilio Gentile, most eager to demonstrate the power and success of the totalitarian impulse in Fascist Italy, concedes that the regime was a “composite” reality in which Mussolini’s “ambition of personal power” struggled in “constant tension” with both “traditional forces” and “Fascist Party intrusignets” themselves divided by “muffled conflict” [sorda lotta] among factions’, R.O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Knopf, 2004), p.120. He goes on to state that ‘Emilio Gentile ... admits that the totalitarian experiment was incomplete’, and at the same time, contradicting himself, reproaches me for being ‘less interested in the problem of how the Fascist project was altered and subverted in the process of its integration into Italian society’, ibid., pp.229–30. Clearly such judgements point to a superficial and biased reading of my book on Fascist totalitarianism, especially of the concluding chapters which focus on various aspects the effect that the totalitarian experiment had on Italian society, the various sources of resistance to it, the obstacles and barriers it came up against, and the disappointments and frustrations that its limited realisation caused to Fascists themselves. It is equally clear that Paxton misunderstands my interpretation when he states that I would be ‘most eager to demonstrate the power and success of the totalitarian impulse in Fascist Italy’, given that I actually have no intention at all of ‘demonstrating’ its power, but rather of ‘showing and understanding’ an empirical reality, namely the progressive expansion of Fascist power that is fully documented in my studies and in recent historiography. As for the internal conflicts and tensions within
Fascist totalitarianism, and its composite and incomplete character, Paxton mistakenly takes as a 'concession' or 'admission' what is actually a constitutive component of my interpretation of Fascism and the totalitarian experiment as a whole, which maintains that not just Fascism, but all totalitarian experiments are necessarily 'imperfect' and 'incomplete' when compared with a theoretical model of a 'perfect' totalitarian society. Besides, without explicitly acknowledging it, Paxton in fact echoes much of the interpretation that I presented in La via italiana al totalitarismo (note 2), especially when he states that 'One must concede that Mussolini’s regime, eager to “normalize” its rapport with a society in which the family, the Church, the monarchy, and the village notable still had entrenched power, fell far short of total control. Even so, Fascism regimented Italians more firmly than any regime before or since. But no regime, not even Hitler’s or Stalin’s, ever managed to pinch off every last parcel of privacy and personal or group autonomy’, Paxton, The Anatomy of Fascism, p.211.

53. Speaking about the diversity of totalitarianisms, Adrian Lyttelton, in a recent discussion of my interpretation, aimed to 'introduce a distinction between a “hot totalitarianism”, characterised by a great institutional instability, by the use of terror and high level of ideological mobilisation, and a “cold totalitarianism”, marked by a relatively stable institutional order, by substitution of terror with an all-prevailing apparatus of surveillance, by the climate of conformism', which would be the case of Italian Fascism, A. Lyttelton, ‘La religione della patria’, L’indice 7/8 (2003), p.22.


57. For the apocalyptic interpretation of modernity in the sense explained above, that is, as one of the characteristics typical of totalitarian movements after the First World War, see E. Gentile, ‘Un apocalisse nella modernità: La Grande Guerra e il Mito della Rigen-erazione della politica’, Storia contemporanea 26/5 (1995), pp.733–87.


62. We might point out that in Mosse’s work, as far as I understand it, the expression ‘sacralisation of politics’ appears only after publication of my book on the fascist religion: G.L. Mosse, The Fascist Revolution: Towards a General Theory of Fascism (New York: H. Fertig, 1999), p.xiii.

63. Moro (note 47), pp.310–12.

64. Griffin (note 10), p.130 n.42.

65. See, for example, D. Atkinson, ‘Enculturating Fascism? Towards Historical Geographies in Inter-War Italy’, Journal of Historical Geography 25/3 (1999), pp.393–400.


70. Carocci (note 38), p.40. However, Carocci believed it ‘reductive to study the myth if we confine ourselves to observing the awareness that its followers had of it’, but added: ‘Since Gentile is a scholar who is too shrewd not to know this fact, there is nothing else to do but to take cognisance of his refusal to emphasize what the scholars have noticed, mainly in Nazism, but in the second place also in Fascism, that is, the decadent, mortuary, nihilistic aspects of fascist activism in its behaviour deriving from DAnnunzianism and from Arditism’. As a matter of fact, the refusal Carocci referred to derives from the fact that my analysis was primarily aimed at studying the function of the myth in mass politics, which, in my opinion does not involve the aspects pointed out by Carocci, which were typical of certain fascist groups involved in DAnnunzianism or in Arditism.

71. Griffin (note 15), p.30. More than ten years later this criticism came up again, without new arguments, from Roger Eatwell’s side. Though recognising the utility of the approach proposed by me, he still reasserts that ‘fascism was a political ideology rather than a political religion’, R. Eatwell, ‘Reflections on Fascism and Religion’, Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions 4/3 (2003), p.163. The gulf dividing ideology and religion, presented as an argument to refute the concept of political or secular religion, was already put forward by Hannah Arendt in the debate with Jule Monnerot, who had defined communism as a secular religion in his book Sociologie du Communiste (Paris: Gallimard, 1949); see H. Arendt, ‘Religion and Politics’, Confluence: An International Forum 2/3 (1953); Monnerot’s objection, ibid. 2/4 (1953); and Arendt’s reply, ibid. 3/3 (1954).


73. Ibid.


75. For a more extensive treatment of this argument, I refer the reader to my article in the next issue of Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions 6/1 (Spring 2005).


