


BOOK REVIEW

## What is Christian Democracy? Politics, Religion and Ideology

Carlo Invernizzi Accetti. Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 385p. £90.00 (hardcover)

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I read this book while I was re-watching Paolo Sorrentino's tv-series *The Young Pope*. It was a fortunate coincidence, as the two works have a common *fil rouge*: Christianity as power in the contemporary world, or how to reconcile millenary dogmas with modernity. This is a key theme running through this excellent book, reconstructing how Christian Democracy is an ideology which, in the 20th century, shaped 'the *institutional framework* and background *political culture*' (p. 6, emphasis in the original) of many advanced Western democracies. Indeed, contemporary politics in those countries, the author contends, is so deeply influenced by Christian Democratic values that it is like a '*hermit crab*: the type of crab that is sometimes found inhabiting abandoned seashells on the beach' (p. 6). The seashell is shaped by Christian Democracy, even though its inhabitants vary.

In his second, ambitious monograph, Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, Associate Professor of Political Science at the City University of New York and Associate Researcher at the Center for European Studies of the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (Sciences Po), discusses the political ideology of Christian Democracy. This is the 'constellation' of 'political concepts' (p. 11) related to reconciling Christianity with modern democracy [a functional definition derived from Jan-Werner Muller 'Towards a New History of Christian Democracy' (2013) *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 18: 2 and Paolo Pombeni 'The Ideology of Christian Democracy' (2000) *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 5: 3]. Each chapter of the first part of the book traces the development of this ideology through its key concepts: anti-materialism, personalism, populism, subsidiarity, social capitalism and religious inspiration of politics. Even though, in isolation, none of these concepts are new, the map provided in the first part of the book would be insightful in and of itself; yet, Invernizzi Accetti goes beyond an articulation of the intellectual blueprint of Christian Democracy, taking on a description, in the remainder of the monograph, of the trajectory of parties operating under this banner in post-World War II in Europe (with an eye also to the US and the future). The author is rightly aware of the intellectual strength of this approach, which combines fruitfully political philosophy with the history of political thought (p. 14). Setting the bar so high, and branching out into various debates, means that perhaps some nuances are lost, but the book is an outstanding contribution to the (Anglophone) literature on Christian Democracy.

It is easy to share the initial assumption – at any rate, convincingly substantiated in the book – that Christian Democracy *did* matter and thus deserves a serious study of the kind offered by the author. To mention only one, but compelling and well-known example, at least some of those that Alan Milward [*The European Rescue of the Nation State* (Routledge 1999)] ironically called 'European Saints' (the founding fathers of the European Community, Schuman, De Gasperi, Adenauer) were Christian Democrats. Perhaps slightly overstated is the contemporary relevance of Christian Democratic values. Is the mention of human dignity, in a letter by Merkel to Trump,

‘an unmistakable reference to one of the core values of the Christian Democratic’ (p. 5)? How much do environmentalism and identity policy lend themselves to electoral returns for Christian democracies (Chapter 7)? Even if it were true that the contemporary role of Christian Democracy is in fact overstated, this by no means detracts from the merits of the book, which, if anything, can contribute to an informed discussion on the topic.

In 1864, Pope Pius IX considered an error ‘the idea that the people’s will, manifested by public opinion or in some other way, constitutes a supreme law’ (p. 32). In 1963, Schuman said ‘Modern democracy is therefore tied to Christianity doctrinally and chronologically’ (p. 39). What had changed? The first chapter reconstructs this change (and more), with regard to the intellectual evolution of influential Christian thinkers. A Christian philosophy of history is expounded with reference to the writings of Pope Pius IX, Maritain, Cardinal Ratzinger, Voegelin, and others. The chapter shows how the Roman Catholic Church undertook a ‘historicization’ of the Revelation and how it resurrected a theology of history from St Augustin, positing essentially that *ideal* forces drive the development of humanity. The result is a form of anti-materialism as the engine of history which allows to see Christian predicaments expressed through democracy: equality and human dignity are central tenets of (a certain understanding of) democracy and they also reflect Christian values. On the Christian roots of modern democracy, the author comments elegantly, but perhaps too dismissively, that ‘[t]he accuracy (and indeed the verifiability) of these statements from the point of view of the history of ideas is of course not what is at issue here’ (p. 41).

Throughout the volume, quotations from the main reference texts provide an overview of the topic, but not an in-depth reconstruction of the work or thought of any individual mentioned. While this is deliberate (‘differently from political theories or philosophies, political ideologies are not normally reducible to the thought of a single author’ p. 11), the book perhaps offers less insights that it might have done if it had commented more explicitly on the psychology of mechanisms through which individuals (or groups of individuals) coped with the *adequatio intellectus ad rem* of reconciling their religious and political beliefs with the reality of contemporary democracies.

When it comes to testing whether Christian Democracy has in fact shaped institutional and political culture, Chapter 8 is dedicated to the European Union. It purports to show how ‘an ideal–typical model of Christian Democracy can help to make sense of otherwise incomprehensible and apparently idiosyncratic elements of the EU’s institutional framework’ (p. 249). The characterisation is appealing, if not novel (see Joseph Weiler, *Un’Europa Cristiana*, 2003, also quoted by Invernizzi Accetti). The analysis of the Treaty on the European Union is less convincing. For example, it is true that Article 5, introducing the notion of subsidiarity, has some semantic ambiguity (in areas of shared competence between EU and Member States, the former can only act when the latter cannot achieve the objective sufficiently; but what does it mean to achieve an objective ‘sufficiently’?). However, this does not warrant the conclusion that the Treaty ‘inevitably points towards an extrajudicial criterion for establishing it. In this sense, the EU’s legal order is not truly sovereign, because it does not contain within itself the criterion for resolving its own internal disputes’ (p. 254–255). First, the Court of Justice of the European Union repeatedly stated that ‘the interpretation of a provision of EU law requires that account be taken not only of its wording and the objectives it pursues, but also of its context and the provisions of EU law as a whole’ (e.g. Case C–621/18 Wightman para 47). This means that it may be possible to resolve the ambiguity through legal criteria (even though, of course, what is a legal criterion is a matter of definition). Second, the example brought by the author is not an instance of ‘internal dispute’. Third, in any case the EU does, in fact, have several (political and judicial) mechanisms for dispute settlement. Yet, Invernizzi Accetti does make an evocative point in the Chapter: Christian values offer a lens through which to make sense in non-functional terms of the political entity that is the European Union. Students of European Union politics should consider the insight more closely.

The book is highly recommended to all those who take an interest in political ideology and political theory more broadly. Considering the wealth of examples on key themes of Christian Democratic ideology provided in the chapters in the first part of the book, the discussion contained in each of them is very helpful also as a stand-alone contribution. Overall, the entire monograph is a great intellectual achievement. It stimulates reflections on theology, philosophy of history, constitutionalism, human rights, taking the reader on a journey.