

**Politics as Religion.** By Emilio Gentile. Translated by George Staunton. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 194p. \$39.50. DOI: 10.1017/S1537592707070193

— Filippo Sabetti, *McGill University*

The projected secularization of the world—or the suggestion that religion should have as little as possible to do with economic, social, and political life in industrial societies—is not happening. First, the traditional faiths have shown a surprising vitality in reclaiming their respective space in the secular, public square. It is evident that faith movements cannot always be caged in pejorative stereotypes; secularization is not a linear process, and religious beliefs continue to shape ordinary people's lives and to have a say in public affairs. The increasing politicization of religion in many parts of the world has brought with it the challenge to engage Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as essential allies in the modern struggle for human rights, social justice, and enlightened thought. Second, the importance of religion in modern democracy and mass politics can be gleaned in an *ex adverso* kind of way: Even when rejecting the mission of religion to give meaning to human existence, many politicians have found it useful to appropriate for themselves the trappings of religious symbols and rituals. This sacralization of politics has sought to interpret and to define human existence by subordinating the destiny of individuals and the collectivity to a supreme entity, liberal democracy, or totalitarianism.

In the past 30 years, Emilio Gentile has emerged as a leading intellectual historian of the use of myths and symbols in politics. He is best known in the English-speaking world for his study of Italian fascist rituals and myths, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (1996). In his timely book *Politics as Religion*, a translation of the well-received Italian edition published in 2001, Gentile seeks to identify the different ways in which political regimes as diverse as fascism, communism, and liberal democracy have ultimately depended, like religion, on faith (which is another word for trust), rites, and symbols. His concern is not the political mobilization of traditional religion but the modern political ideologies and movements that adapted religious habits to secular, political ends. He argues that political religions are phenomena of the modern era, developing only after the construction of a political sphere independent of religion and after religion had been turned into a private, Protestant-like, matter. By adopting a historical and contemporary comparative perspective, he puts into sharp relief the nature of a phenomenon that has accompanied the growth of the modern state and that, often enough, has ended in tragedy.

To be sure, Gentile is not the first one to be concerned with politics as religion. He duly acknowledges his indebtedness to the rich literature on the phenomenon that, following the American and French revolution, attracted

the attention of Benjamin Franklin and Rousseau and that, since the nineteenth century, has stimulated much writing among political agitators, like Giuseppe Mazzini, and enemies of “state idolatry” among sociologists, historians, public intellectuals, and Protestant and Catholic scholars. A new scholarly journal, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, is entirely concerned with exploring the relationship between religion and politics. The journal has often carried critical assessments of Gentile's work, as well as his own contributions.

All this is to say that the author's analysis of democratic and totalitarian politics as religious is built on powerful historical and theoretical foundations. His work identifies the different ways that political regimes in America, Africa, Asia, and Europe have ultimately sought to shore up political rule and legitimacy. In so doing, the analysis presents a rich and illuminating comparative history of politics as religion, while giving interested readers the tools for understanding the sacralization of politics after 9/11. For Gentile, the sacralization of politics has basically taken two forms.

The first, civil religion, can be found in political systems that guarantee a plurality of ideas, free competition in the exercise of power, and the ability of the governed to dismiss their governments through peaceful and constitutional methods—in other words, liberal democracies. The American civil religion, for Gentile, is the first historical example of a “positive” religion of politics in the modern era. He begins his book by provocatively noting that “an American dollar bill, with its portrait of George Washington, is a religious symbol” (p. xi). He is careful to add that he is not using the dollar as a metaphor for treating money as a god. The religious symbolism of a dollar bill, including its Latin inscriptions, has to be seen as something literal because “it expresses a profession of faith and confers an aura of holiness on the people of the star-spangled republic, its origin, its history, its institutions, and its destiny in the world” (p. xii).

The second form of political religion is that rooted in authoritarian rule, ideological conformity, and the unconditional subordination of the individual to the totalitarian state. This sacralization of politics reached its highest point between the two world wars, in the new totalitarian regimes of communism, fascism, and Nazism. This way led to “Leviathan as a church” (chap. 3).

What makes Gentile's analysis persuasive is in part the way it proceeds. The first chapter deals with the general problem of a secular religion and looks at this in light of the principal interpretations of religious phenomena in order to determine whether it is legitimate to study some political phenomena as civil and political religions. The second chapter gives a historical background to the more important manifestations of politics as religion in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The third and fourth chapters examine the relationship between the

sacralization of politics and totalitarian states, drawing on a rich mix of eye-witness, historical, and philosophical accounts. The fifth chapter focuses more specifically on the second half of the twentieth century. In the final chapter, he tries to identify the theoretical nature of civil and political religion in relation to other ways in which the religious and the political dimensions come together.

Although Gentile differentiates analytically and historically the two categories of political religion, the actual cases he discusses in Europe and North America suggest similarities as well as differences. Clearly, once politics becomes a form of religion, a common universal pattern emerges. In fact, no political collectivity can, arguably, maintain its unity and identity over time without creating some form of lay religion. It is hard to envisage a democracy without some form of civil religion that educates its citizens to pledge loyalty to its institutions and devotion to the common good. Yet, as the author notes, civil religion, however noble its aims and ideals, can potentially constitute a danger to democracy itself because it contains the inherent risks of tempting conformism, intolerance, and discrimination. The vulnerability of democracies to forms of democratic despotism is real. Curiously, he does not seem to have found the time or interest in explaining how and why the religion of totalitarianism failed so catastrophically. Gentile is perhaps too brief in his discussion of the various attempts to sacralize political power in the new national states that emerged from the collapse of the European and Ottoman empires. His analysis helps us to understand why, following the fascist experience, various forms of patriotic rituals remained suspect in Italy after the Second World War. Still, a reader is challenged to wonder what models of politics as religion applied to the sacralization of politics that took place both in the Italian Communist Party and the Christian Democratic Party, and what kind of civil religion applies to multinational political systems like Canada and Spain.

The book challenges social scientists to take seriously all the manifestations of sacralization of politics, which have for so long been ignored or treated with scathing contempt out of a misplaced desire to demystify. Gentile's illuminating and lucid exposition—facilitated by the excellent translation—reproposes in a novel way the question with which, many years ago, José Casanova began his book *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994): “Who still believes in the *myth* of secularization?”

**The Trouble with Passion: Political Theory Beyond the Reign of Reason.** By Cheryl Hall. New York: Routledge,

2005. 192p. \$75.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

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This book argues for passion in politics: not just calm passions, that is, sentiments or interests, but “enthusiasm”

and “explicit appreciation of and commitment to something valued” (pp. 12, 7). Liberal theory, Hall argues, is wrong to regard political passions as inherently suspect, intolerant, and “opposed to both reason and justice” (p. 3). Passion in politics is inescapable, for passion and reason are not opposed but interpenetrating aspects of human thought and motivation. Beyond this, however, some passions are politically salutary: They inspire worthy political actions, especially movements for social change.

Hall begins with the display of flags after September 11. She calls on political theory to understand and value the collective allegiances then displayed—“passion for the polity” (p. 2)—without denying the dangers of nationalism or jingoism. In Chapter 2, Hall marshals a rich literature on action and motivation against the idea that passions are irrational and uncontrollable; she stresses the ways in which even the strongest passions are still cognitive and educable. Chapter 3 attacks liberalism: Liberals, according to Hall, typically denigrate, privatize, or altogether ignore passion, rarely noting its political benefits. They blame passion as such when they should be blaming the particular objects of passion: “passions that have contributed to cooperation and liberation get far less attention” than those that further war and oppression (pp. 28–29). The result is to stifle political innovation—and to promote gender inequality, because mainstream theory both denigrates passion and implicitly assigns it to women. (Chapter 6 pursues this further.)

Chapters 4 and 5 treat Plato and Rousseau as paradigm cases of theorists who respect political passion. Hall deftly traces the career of *eros* (a near synonym for her “passion”) from the *Republic* to the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. She notes that Plato's denigration of desire in the first focuses on *epithumia*, unreasoning or animal desire. *Eros*, in contrast, can be rationally cultivated and can be directed toward noble objects such as beauty and the good—and, crucially, to the wisdom “concerned with the ordering of states and families, and which is called temperance and justice” (p. 65, citing *Symposium* 209a–b). Chapter 5 adduces Rousseau's *Government of Poland* and other works to make the claim—perhaps, in truth, a bit obvious—that Rousseau thought the passions for justice and patriotism essential to good citizenship, even while fearing the dangerous sexual passions that he associated with women. Chapter 7 closes by linking passion to political education. Hall calls for education in “working with our passions” (bringing to mind, though she does not cite, Martha Nussbaum's *Therapy of Desire* [1994]) and “developing a passion for democracy itself” (p. 127). The latter means an attachment not to particular countries or constitutional orders but to democracy as “process”: “practices . . . through which citizens work to take account of each others' perspectives . . .” (p. 130).

This book has many virtues. It is generous toward a variety of views, unafraid to quote radical feminists and