Frustrated of Islington

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David Roberts has published widely on Italian fascism and more recently a significant comparative study of totalitarianism in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union.[1] The short essay published here is a useful compression of the arguments presented in the longer work. Unfortunately, this piece represents all that is problematic and frustrating in totalitarian/political religion studies. Roberts gives us a useful review of the growth and evolution of totalitarianism and political religion from the inter-war period through the Cold War until we reach the sunny postmodern uplands of the cultural turn. A review of the arguments of Gentile, Griffin, Morgan, Kershaw, Eatwell, Payne, Burrin and Voegelin is helpful to the reader who is unfamiliar with a series of complex arguments, which straddle decades.

But it is obvious to the most casual or *sceptical* observer (such as Ian Kershaw, with whom I have great deal of sympathy) that Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin mimicked formal revealed religion by creating semi-sacred cultic spectacles, which emphasised the drive for the absolute, by creating priesthoods (Stalin and Hitler were more effective in forming effective, lethal varieties than Mussolini), by possessing semi-divine attributes or at least appearing as men of sacred destiny on which the entire system seemed to rest (although the Soviet Union outlasted Stalin). In the Marxist-Leninist case, there was holiness, sainthood, priesthood, salvation, asceticism, purification, catechism, and a messiah. Hitler, as Roberts reminds us, citing Saul Friedländer, believed that the extermination of the Jews was a redemptive mission to cleanse the earth of physical and metaphysical pollution, and in doing so Hitler employed a toxic mixture of 'religious sentiment' and 'scientific' racial biology.

Roberts also engages with the literature which objects to the use of the term 'political religion' because it is literarily misleading. Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini were not divine and human political succession became a major issue in all three regimes. Emilio Gentile gets around this, as Roberts explains, by suggesting that political religion meant followers entering a relationship with the sacred not the divine. But surely this is a form of pettifogging scholasticism. Gentile himself concluded that

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[1] David D. Roberts, *The Totalitarian Experiment in Twentieth-Century Europe. Understanding the Poverty of Great Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

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Fascist political religion merely resulted in a superficial form of participation and spectatorship. Naturally, one is then driven to the conclusion that perhaps Mussolini was competing with a much more successful form of religion, Catholicism, and was forced to mimic, or unconsciously mimicked, in his own bizarre fashion, patterns of cultural behaviour which came as second nature to his followers, especially when fascism mushroomed into a mass party and a regime during the 1920s and 1930s.

But Roberts largely overlooks model-shopping. Once in power the new regimes looked for forms of mobilisation that could be useful for institutional reach and longevity. Stalin described the NKVD as his SS and once Hitler came to power, Mussolini and his cohort pondered and argued about the lack of an Italian variety of SS. Giovanni Gentile, one of the Mussolini regime's master thinkers, looked enviously to Japanese Shinto militarist mysticism, precisely where comparative experts have discounted the notion of Japanese fascism, because the emperor was seen to be a god and not a secular leader.[2] But Paul Brooker has argued that the Japanese effectively mobilised their villages through a form of fraternalism which outstripped the effectiveness of the cultural and social organisations of Nazi German and fascist Italy. (Indeed, I wonder if Brooker's term, 'fraternalism', is what Roberts is after?)[3]

Roberts suggests that the concept 'political religion' diverts our attention from what is truly unique about the totalitarian project in the first place. He is closer to Roger Griffin and Philip Morgan's concept of an alternative modernity, although Griffin has now endorsed the term 'political religion', which he had formerly robustly criticised, as well.[4] Perhaps there might be a set of different alternative modernisms or modernities: a fascist, a Nazi and a Stalinist. Roberts also suggests that the ideological origins of Italian Fascism, Nazism and Stalinist Marxism are so diverse that the heuristic purchase we get from using the concept 'totalitarianism' must be questioned. Roberts attempts to transcend both political religion and totalitarianism and reach a new, more satisfactory Hegelian synthesis. Thus he finally discounts the usefulness of 'political religion', since this approach 'does not challenge us as deeply as the novel unanticipated phenomenon of totalitarianism warrants'. 'Political religion' does not enlighten our understanding of totalitarianism because it does not attend fully to the novelty and historical specificity of the dangers and possibilities of modern politics, because totalitarianism is different 'from anything we have meant by religion'. In this sense he seems close to Stanley Payne on Nazism: it was not a substitute or ersatz religion, it was a political religion in which 'political religion' is in essence a neologism, just like scientists, who were called 'natural philosophers' in the seventeenth century for want of a better conceptual term for individuals working in a new paradigm, with its unique codes, protocols and methods.

[2] Emilio Gentile, 'La nazione del fascismo. Alle origini della crisi dello Stato nazionale in Italia', *Storia Contemporanea*, 24, 6 (1993), 857–8.

[3] Paul Brooker, *The Faces of Fraternalism: Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 289–315 (esp. 314). I discuss Gentile and Brooker in Carl Levy, 'Fascism, National Socialism and Conservatives in Europe, 1914–1945: Issues for Comparativists', *Contemporary European History*, 8, 1 (1999), 104–6.

[4] Roger Griffin, ed., *Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5–6.

Invoking the work of Benjamin Yack, Roberts argues that 'political religion' is misleading because the cause of this new form of politics is a yearning not to return to the old religions but somehow to transcend the dehumanisation of secularisation to go beyond the 'abiding religious imperative'. Totalitarianism, he concludes, 'has its own historically specific sources, so we better understand the originating aspirations and resulting frame of mind through a recast notion of totalitarianism itself'.

Roberts suggests that the way forward is foregrounding the categories of myth and *Rausch*, but he has embedded them in a new framework, not 'political religion'. Thus for Roberts Italian fascism and Soviet communism share the concept of myth because both can trace their origins to the revision of Marxism at the turn of the nineteenth century, which stimulated Lenin and Mussolini (via Sorel), whereas the more pessimistic and nihilistic *Rausch*, the grandiose redemptive mission, suits Nazism. Thus Soviet Marxist-Leninism and Italian fascism are motivated by struggle not by a quest for heaven on earth (and therefore Griffin's definition of fascism as palingenetic rebirth is dismissed), in which human will and resolute fighters can change the course of history. On the other hand, Nazism is a relentless *uncertain* struggle: Hitler and his followers suffer from a variation on the Weberian Calvinist salvation anxiety – are the German people worthy of being a master race? By 1945 Hitler had his dismal answer.

I think Roberts exaggerates the importance of Mussolini's Sorelianism and ignores the extent to which Mussolini was really a personal follower of Max Stirner; ideology and policy could be shaped to the requirements of the moment and the needs of the man and his ego.[5] Furthermore, in its regime phase traditionalist nationalism is more significant for Italian fascism precisely because nationalism had ideologists and lawyers who knew how to create a sturdy dictatorship for the *Duce*. And although Lenin may have emphasised voluntarism in his tactics, his Marxist theory was as turgid, determinist and scientistic as anything that antebellum German social democracy ever served up. Just examine Lenin's attacks on the various unorthodox Bolsheviks 'god-builders' and the followers of Mach.[6] Stalin deepened this tendency in Lenin by petrifying this determination in a menacing, life-threatening orthodoxy for those foolish enough to seek a career in Bolshevik political ideology in the 1930s and 1940s.

Roberts criticises the concept of political religion because it deflects us from 'the requisite attention to historical specificity and novelty'. He is also refreshingly candid at times: thus he states that '[c]haracterization as "political religion" deflects us from the ad hoc, improvised quality of each of these regimes, the sense in which, *even though* there was indeed a core of idealism and shared belief, the agents were making it up as they went along'. This robust, pragmatic approach, a form of conditional anti-intentionalism that recognises that Adolf Eichmann was a career bureaucrat but also a Nazi race warrior, could have helped him to avoid his at times po-faced

[5] I discuss Mussolini's ideological formation in Carl Levy, '"*Sovversivismo":* The Radical Political Culture of Otherness in Liberal Italy', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 12, 2 (2007), 147–61.

[6] Robert Williams, *The Other Bolsheviks: Lenin and His Critics, 1904–1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

acceptance of the ideological consistency of the syndicalist ideologists who became Italian fascists or that man-on the-make, Mussolini.[7]

Roberts insists on drawing a boundary between the drivers behind totalitarianism and political religion and analogous phenomena in conservative or liberal secular societies. But Hannah Arendt understood that the imagery and passion of Fascism derived from the models of imperialism created by nineteenth-century liberal Europe. The concentration camp was pioneered by the Spanish in Cuba and carried forward by the British in South Africa.[8] Indeed, fascism and Nazism came into their own in Africa, Yugoslavia and eastern Europe, in the lawless empires where fascists and Nazis could translate literary or cinematic fantasies into realities. The use of myth and charisma in totalitarian societies is rather similar to what Weber detected, or hoped for, in the democratic Caesars, such as Gladstone or Wilson. While Emilio Gentile is very clear that there is a difference between the political religion of totalitarian societies and the civic religions of liberal societies, are the barriers so strong? Do civic religions start adopting the trappings of the other sort under pressure? When did Wilson's battle for democracy become a witch-hunt against dissenters? Only the blunders of Iraq and the scandal of hurricane Katrina undermined similar tendencies, which grew in a fearful United States after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack. But the process can also go the other way: there were former Nazis who for opportunistic or heart-felt reasons discovered and fashioned a civic political religion in the German economic miracle of late 1950s: this process may be less successful in Putin's Russia.

Although Roberts hints at its virtues, empirical methodology is not employed and demonstrated to the reader to any extent in this essay. Thus Roberts argues that if political religion is dismissed, it is still helpful in enabling us to take the liturgy of totalitarian regime seriously. But repeated statements like this have left this reader very frustrated, since the promised solution remains at such a high degree of abstraction that it is difficult to see in what ways the historian can use this new synthesis, this *Aufhebung*. In the end Roberts discredits the concepts of political religion and totalitarianism, but in his suggested solution we are left with illusive snakes chasing disappearing tails.

[7] I criticise the overemphasis on the coherence of Italian syndicalism, in Carl Levy, 'Currents of Italian Syndicalism before 1926', 45 2 (2000), 209–50.

[8] For a new overall view of the connection between colonial war and the modern instruments of genocide see Annette Becker and Georges Bensoussan, eds., 'Violences de guerre, violences coloniales, violences extrêmes avant la Shoah', *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah*, 189, July–December 2008.