Catholics and Europe during the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

The idea of Europe accompanied explicitly or implicitly the development of the myth of medieval Christianity along with its political use by Catholic culture and the magisterium during the nineteenth century. The emphasis on the Catholic Church's role in the formation of European civilization, which was a common leitmotif, nonetheless served as a foundation for conflicting demands: the need for harmony between religion and liberty, and a revival of papal management of social organization.

Article

The Italian Jesuit review *La Civiltà cattolica*, which was founded in 1850 and then became the semi-official periodical of the Holy See, did not publish an article explicitly focusing on Europe until the early twentieth century. Similarly, there are no traces of the Catholic conception of Europe in the texts of the Church's magisterium, its authority in matters of faith and morals. One must nevertheless be wary of this apparent Roman silence, for it was due to the absence of an immediate reason for political confrontation, such as the process of European integration that took place during the ensuing century. However, if one takes into consideration the history of mentalities, Europe has always been involved, albeit implicitly, in the construction of the myth of medieval Christianity present within post-Revolutionary Catholic culture.

The romantics rediscovered the Middle Ages, and emphasized the role of the ecclesiastical institution in the construction of European civilization, thereby affirming the bond between Christianity and Europe. European identity consequently took on a clearly historicized character for the first time. This commonplace was shared by the most diverse political movements, whether of Catholic inspiration or not. Each of them endowed it with a meaning different from that proposed by its enemies, while willingly taking inspiration from it: this enabled the circulation of themes and ideas by way of opposing sensibilities. The French Revolution fuelled reflection on the original characteristics of a political and cultural space previously thought of as unitary, and now shaken by the formation of nation states.

1799 was a turning point. Novalis, a young preacher of the preromantic generation who was educated in pietist and Saxon Protestant circles, wrote a pamphlet entitled *Christentum oder Europa* (1826,

published posthumously), an enigmatic work prophesying that a universal council would reconstruct an idealized medieval Christianity under the management of the Church of Rome. It was destined to become a source of inspiration for the central figures of the Catholic revival. In parallel, Chateaubriand finished his *The Genius of Christianity* during his English exile, a work which enjoyed immediate success when published in 1802. The French writer's masterpiece initiated a tradition that saw the medieval Church as an actor fusing the pagan and barbarous element said to be at the foundation of European culture. This cultural notion of Europe as the product of Christianization was accompanied by a political sense of protest against the all-powerful state: the Church had acted as a restraint on the power and violence of public authorities by affirming the individual's liberty in matters of conscience, preaching truce and God's peace, and forbidding slavery. Chateaubriand summarized it thus: "The Christian religion is the most poetic and human, the most favourable to liberty, arts, and letters. The modern world owes it everything." The crusade was the apex of this Europe, which was united by the Church's faith and helped it spread across the Mediterranean. It was consequently at the origin of both Europe and modernity. This reading of Christianity was first taken up by liberal historians, who like the Protestant Guizot (*Histoire générale de la civilisation en Europe*, 1828) considered the Reformation as a positive event, a stage in Europe's advancement along the path to secularization and public liberty. This notion of Europe as a space of liberty forged by Christianity was later recovered in an entirely different sense by the pioneers of the vast Catholic-Liberal network, notably those revolving around de Lamennais and professing ultramontanism, who exalted the civilizing function of the papacy. For Gerbet (article "L'Europe," *L'Avenir*, May 16, 1831), Europe was born in the "prophetic cradle" of modern civilization that was the Middle Ages, and had matured despite an adolescence equally brilliant and troubled (allusion to the Reformation that risked destroying religion). It prepared the way for civilization and the religious unification of the world under the motto "Gospel and liberty." That was the vision that Frédéric Ozanam translated into historical interpretation in his *Études germaniques* (1847-1849) and lessons on *La civilisation au ve siècle* (1855): to defend the alliance between the Church and modern liberty by taking inspiration from Chateaubriand and Gioberti.

Intransigent ultramontanists, who were attached to Roman doctrine and the person of the pope—and shared an appreciation for the limits imposed by the Church on civil power—refused to see modern liberties as the product of Christianity, instead denouncing their origin, namely the dissolution of European civilization begun by the Reformation (J. Görres, *Europa und die Revolution*, 1821). What was therefore needed was to rebuild Europe by reestablishing medieval Christianity, through the subjection of states to the hierocratic management of the pope (Maistre, *Du pape*, 1819). This line of thinking became so dominant during the 1850s that it was gradually included in the Church's official magisterium upon restoration of the pontiff's temporal sovereignty in 1849 and the recovery of his states after the revolutionary insurrection. It restated the problem of relations between Christianity

and the national state, in which the intransigents began to recognize the fundamental factor of historical evolution. Despite the many crises between the Church and the regime, the experience derived from the development of the Catholic press and education in Bonapartist France proved decisive: the reconstruction of Christian Europe could be facilitated by negotiating areas of reciprocal support with the authoritarian state, even to the point of sanctifying the cause of its armies. The mobilization of the Western powers against Orthodox Russia during the Crimean War thus appeared as a providential crusade for the return of a Europe of Catholic unity, and for the establishment of a political order that one anonymous voice called the "social monarchy of Jesus Christ" (*Le catholicisme ou la barbarie*, 1854).

This evolution, which was blocked by Italian unification, matured under the pontificate of Pope Leo XIII, when Catholic associations and parties were tasked with conquering the state to bring about the "Christian organization of civil society," which had enabled "Christian Europe" to maintain "the supremacy of civilization" and serve as "guide and master" of humanity (*Immortale Dei*, 1885). These words echoed until the Great War, when Rome saw "the return to Christian civilization" as the only possibility of saving "this old Europe, apostate to its God, who made it great and civil" (E. Rosa, "Le parole del papa e la stampa," *La Civiltà cattolica*, 66, 3, 1915).

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