CONCLUSION

RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

If a man knows not to which port he sails, no wind is favorable.
—Seneca the Younger

Over at least the past four decades, religion has regained a place in the public scene. All evidence would indicate that this trend will continue in international relations, as in other areas. In the months that this book was being written, religion was used as a pretext to explain, justify, or glorify political and military confrontations in Mali, Nigeria, the Central African Republic, Kenya, Iraq, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India, and even Ukraine. It has been a central feature of the "Arab Spring," and it continues to play a dramatic role in those countries where revolutions have been abortive: Syria, Egypt, Yemen, and Bahrain. Libya, for its part, remains a hotbed of potential trouble for the entire region, where mujahidin—who are as zealous as they are heavily and richly armed—are ready to place their capital of "holy wars" at the service of one interest or another, either local or international.

It has taken some time for the return of religions as political actors to be considered as not just a curiosity of history but a general trend. Nonetheless, even today, in some countries where the secularization process has gone on for centuries, the dominant opinion is that the "Return of God"

is of no direct concern; that it essentially affects only emerging countries lacking in solid political traditions. Some even see it as a matter of interest only for Muslim-majority countries.

The failure to understand the universal character of this desecularizing movement is particularly acute in France, where the belief prevails that the 1905 law on the separation of church and state settled the matter once and for all. The impacts of this misunderstanding—based on a quasi-Pavlovian legalistic tropism—can be almost laughable. During their respective electoral campaigns of 2007 and 2012, Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande both addressed the 1905 law of separation of state and church: the former, to suggest an easing of its terms, with the idea of appealing to Catholic authorities and believers; the latter, to propose that it be engraved in bronze in the constitution, with the idea of winning over the supposedly Jacobinist and anticlerical masses. It appears that neither candidate had read a document from the Conference of French Bishops of 2005, in which they expressed the wish that the 1905 law not be modified: "It would appear wise to us to not touch this equilibrium through which our country has been able to achieve a certain calming and healing." Neither Sarkozy nor Hollande carried out his plans; had they done so, they would have obtained a result precisely the opposite of what they intended.

In politics, as in many other domains, such flawed assessments often lead to misfortune, with more or less serious results. In Hollande's case, pursuing a frontal confrontation with the church over same-sex marriages produced three undesirable forms of collateral damage: it allowed the church to test its own ability to mobilize, proving again that it was among the strongest forces—if not *the* strongest—in France; it gave the church the opportunity to consolidate the Conference of Religious Leaders in France—founded on November 23, 2010, it includes Orthodox, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist dignitaries—around a common objective; and, it made France—according to a Gallup survey in the spring of 2013—the only Western country where homosexual relations were considered much less acceptable in 2013 when compared to 2007. Moreover, Hollande's central objective with this operation—to burnish his image as a statesman—also failed, as his public approval ratings continued their inexorable descent until setting a negative record among all the presidents of France's Fifth Republic.

In the United States, it is now nearly impossible to run for almost any elective office without putting one's solid religious credentials on display. John McCain, the failed Republican presidential candidate in 2008, learned this lesson the hard way: suspected of being lukewarm on the matter, he felt obliged to try to offset this major weakness by choosing as his running mate a fundamentalist evangelical heavyweight, Sarah Palin. In the same election campaign, Barack Obama broke two records that proved decisive in his ultimate victory: he spent more money than any candidate in United States history, and he mentioned God more frequently than any major party candidate before him. Indeed, it was Obama who, in reversing the principle enunciated by John F. Kennedy—"I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute"—asserted in 2006 that "secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square."

The interest for politicians in this new religious "Great Awakening" goes beyond the possibility of exploiting it for immediate political benefits, whether electoral or military. One critical front that has opened up with the acceleration and intensification of international competition has been that of social services: with the exception of a few emerging countries, nearly every country in the world has been forced to trim its financing and administration of public services in areas ranging from health and education to disaster management, culture, or even sports. In nearly every part of the world, religious groups and institutions have been called on to fill the breach with their networks of social assistance and protection. According to research conducted at Georgetown University, in 2000, the latest figures available, the Catholic Church alone operated some 80,000 hospitals and clinics, 14,000 retirement homes, nearly 9,000 orphanages, just over 1,000 universities, and some 125,000 elementary, middle, and high schools. If one considers that even in highly secularized France the number of Catholic institutions of learning has grown from 8,847 in 2010 to 9,005 in 2012, one can easily imagine how rapidly Catholic social services are developing in other parts of the world.

The proposal for a "Big Society," the flagship policy of David Cameron's election campaign in 2010, was intended precisely to transform this weakening of the state's social competence into a motif of free-market and populist propaganda. In the slogan "take power away from politicians and give it to the people," the "people" were the local authorities and charitable organizations—often branches of religious groups or institutions—involved in administering social assistance in those areas where the British state lacked the means, or the will, to do so. It is significant that, two years after his election, Cameron advocated a "Christian fightback," asserting that "the values of the Bible, the values of Christianity, are the values that we need."

For his part, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), Pope Benedict XVI stated no less than thirteen times his explicit offer to shoulder a share of the social responsibilities, calling for action aimed at "gradually *increasing openness, in a world context, to forms of economic activity marked by quotas of gratuitousness and communion*"—that is, openness to charitable and other voluntary activities within organizations administered directly or indirectly by the church. Such actions, Pope Francis later made clear in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), should not be limited to "activities or programs of promotion and assistance" but should above all be characterized by "an attentiveness which considers the other 'in a certain sense as one with ourselves.' " This is a plus, when compared to almost any state social structure, which can only reinforce the sense of the historic superiority of religions and churches over public institutions.

Another reason politicians seek to profit from the reemergence of the religious phenomenon is, finally, the international context. Religions often constitute an element of stability, providing an anchor to tradition that can be particularly useful in an era of instability and change. Clearly, the more solid and influential religion is, the more capable it is of fulfilling this auxiliary political role. Thus the governments of Muslim countries often present themselves as the heralds of the religious cause, aiming to exploit the religious faith of their subjects in the sense of justice that Islam represents to them; but the more Islam bows to private interests, the less effective it becomes.

Orthodox-majority countries claim the unconditional support of their respective churches, helping consolidate their identity and contributing to the maintenance of social and political order. This support is, however, ineffective on the international level, since the range of helpful action for these churches almost never extends beyond their national borders. Countries with Lutheran majorities, as well as Anglican Britain, are barely supported by their churches, which suffer from the same limits as their Orthodox counterparts on the international level, without, however, offering the same advantages on the national level, despite the fact of often being state religions.

The Catholic Church, on the other hand, can exert its influence equally on the national and international levels; it is thus extremely rare for any country to close its doors to the church. Since 1993 Israel has had diplomatic relations with the Holy See; and even Saudi Arabia saw fit to invite Benedict XVI for a visit, while rejecting his request to allow places of Catholic worship to open in the country. As for the relationship with China, the current impasse does not appear to depend on the will, or lack thereof, of Beijing.

The United States is among the countries that have been shaken most by the current shifting of the world's geopolitical axis; that might explain the disproportionate weight held by leaders who come from America's Catholic community—which represents between 25 and 30 percent of the general population—in key political, military, and judicial institutions. At the start of the second Obama administration, the vice president, the entire Joint Chiefs of Staff, one-third of Congress, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, as well as the House majority leader, the national security advisor, the CIA director, and the FBI director were all Catholic. Further, as of January 2015, 38 percent of American governors and six of the nine Supreme Court justices were Catholic. Never before in the short history of the United States have Catholics enjoyed such political visibility and importance.

As the United States tries to leverage, and gain advantage from, the position of the Catholic Church—which seems even more likely in the future—the church also reciprocates. For at least the past half century, Rome has adopted the entrepreneurial mentality of the American model: the "free

market of faith," which is often considered the most important factor behind Americans' greater than average religiosity. The church also draws another advantage in principle from this model: in any system based on free competition, the best-equipped competitor nearly always prevails. Moreover, any relationship with the world's leading power will have an effect on the influence of the church—even, and perhaps above all, when the latter takes its distance from the United States. Finally, the generosity of American Catholics provides a very large part of the funding on which the global church relies.

During the last conclave, American prelates played a particularly visible role, contributing in a not insignificant way to the election of a pope whom Andrea Riccardi has described as being "quasi-pan-American." The nineteen American cardinals constitute not only the second largest national contingent in the Sacred College but also the largest contingent of cardinals from the United States in the entire history of the church—yet another sign of an ever closer relationship.

Whatever weight the American component carries, we should not forget that the church does not rely on the United States to affirm its power on the international level, any more than it does on any other political or economic power. It does not reject a priori any support—material or political—but only so long as it is able to preserve its freedom of movement in every situation.

This book has emphasized the potential role that the Catholic Church could play in national and international life of the twenty-first century. In these pages, the term "strategy" has been used to refer to the possible long-term objectives of Rome in a historical era in which the mission of carrying the word of Jesus to the "far ends of the Earth" coexists with the impossibility of doing so through the old method of conquest and conversion. However, this strategy has not been thought out, discussed, and codified by a general staff in the way that, for example, the military doctrines of great powers are—such as the Schlieffen Plan in the Second Reich—or even, *si parva licet*, the "electoral strategies" of the parliamentary parties. Rather, it is referring to the practical form that, in each historical era, the church's accumulated experience takes; experience that is unique in the

world, allowing it to inscribe its action and its views into a framework of time and space that has nothing in common with those of any other human organization or institution.

The strategy of the church flows "naturally" from this accumulated experience. In fact, the church knows perfectly well where it wants to go—to the "far ends of the Earth"—and it also knows, from its very long historical and political practice, how to go about this: by thoroughly defending its autonomy and independence; remaining conscious of objective constraints; and, avoiding, as much as possible, any frontal collision with them. The church knows how to combine rigidity in strategic principles with extreme flexibility in daily practice; it is a *complexio oppositorum*. John Paul II and Benedict XVI established that certain values are "nonnegotiable," even while knowing perfectly well that in everyday life, most of their followers, and some Catholic leaders, not only negotiate those values but transgress them with ease. If the church really required of its followers a rigid respect for its moral prescriptions, it would no longer be a great global political force—perhaps the greatest and most important global political force—but merely a sect of limited standing, completely without political influence, like any other sect. The current Jesuit pope from Argentina clearly understands this difference.

Since the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, numerous observers claim to have detected a revolution: an end to the rigidities, Roman centralism, and the prohibitions of years long past. At the time of writing, it is still too soon to have a well-defined idea of what, plausibly, the church will be under and after the reign of Pope Francis. With the exception of Joseph Ratzinger, who, when he was elected pope, was already fairly well-known, one must always wait a few years to understand the political imprint of a new pope. This is truer still when we are dealing with a Jesuit: many people seem to forget that Bergoglio is a Jesuit, which is to say a member of the most *political* order in the history of the church.

Yet the Argentinian pope's public speeches have already allowed us to distinguish two particular traits: the frequent use of the title "bishop of Rome" rather than "pope" and the charismatic accent, the promotion of

the image of a church that is both "joyous" and "outgoing," that is, in a state of permanent mission.

The first trait is generally interpreted as a subtle wink to other Christian denominations, a formal and highly symbolic step backward on the question of the primacy of Peter, historically claimed by the Church of Rome. The second trait is a product of the competition with the Pentecostalist and charismatic evangelical movements, which, especially in Latin America, have eaten away at the Catholic influence owing, exactly, to their state of permanent mission, to their close-level contacts with the populace, and to the people's aspiration to move out of poverty and accede to the relative benefits of the middle class.

And yet Francis does not turn his back on the political advantage embodied in the Ratzingerian line about an "ethic of duty." In only the second paragraph of the *Evangelii Gaudium*, he reminds readers that "the great danger in today's world . . . is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience." While Francis does not reject this notion, he attempts to give it, in his own words, "a fitting sense of proportion." Thus when a parish priest "speaks about temperance ten times but only mentions charity or justice two or three times, an imbalance results," and the most important of virtues can be overlooked. The priest should thus not be "obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed."

The "new proportion" of Francis's church seems to have as its pivot the charismatic concepts of "joy," "mercy," and "missionary enthusiasm." If observers often speak of his charisma, it is not by chance. Jorge Mario Bergoglio knows perfectly well that a smiling face and a modest lifestyle are important aspects of an image that can only shore up, but not replace, the political power of the church: a power made of organization, centralism, networks, and solid principles around which the "holy alliance" can be built. A Jesuit will always be the best-placed person to know this.

In conclusion, I should again point out that in politics, as in other domains, there is no such thing as an unequivocal and absolute trend; and that one face of uneven development is uneven religious development. The trend

toward desecularization provides the indispensable historical context for any possibility of creating a "holy alliance" among the great religions of the world. However, this trend to desecularization coexists with certain trends toward secularization, both in different countries and, at times, within the same country.

Many countries are in the process of modernizing, that is, of following "roughly the same fairly simple 'model,'" as Fernand Braudel has put it, of every process of industrialization. The effects of this process are also more or less uniform. So if the economic and social development of Turkey, Brazil, India, or China gives the impression of "sustained and perpetual growth" capable of supporting "the expectation of incessant improvement," as Ernest Gellner has articulated, it is highly likely that many of those who have reached the psychological status of the "middle class" are beginning to adopt more and more secularized models and styles of living. It is even possible that these trends ultimately lead to a new religious form, more individualistic and more secularized, while remaining rigorously fundamentalist. The struggle of certain ultra-Orthodox Jewish women to win the right to pray at the Wailing Wall could be a symbol of this new religious form.

The global shift of power under way today will certainly result in the populations of the developed countries living in ever more uncertain conditions; but it is also possible that the populations of the so-called emerging countries, in the future, will be able to live in conditions that seem to them to be less and less uncertain. Such an eventuality could yield a paradoxical result: a more religious Europe and United States at odds with an increasingly materialistic Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

Just the sort of thing that could feed new "clashes of *civilizations*."