

**The idea of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics
in the political ideology of Christian Democracy**

[DRAFT – PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT AUTHOR’S PERMISSION]

This chapter is devoted to an exposition of the way in which the Christian Democratic ideology has historically conceived – and proposed to structure – the relationship between politics and religion. The analysis will proceed through a reconstruction of the meaning assigned to the concept of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics in this intellectual and political tradition.

The concept occupies a prominent place in almost all the programmatic statements and documents of European Christian Democratic parties over the course of the past century and a half. The Italian DC, for instance, formally described itself as a ‘*Partito di ispirazione cristiana*’. The ‘Christmas Program’ adopted by the Belgian CVP in 1945 employs a very similar formulation (“*Christelijke inspiratie partij*”) and even goes as far as to add that “Catholics who join the party will have the sentiment of serving their religious faith on the political plane”. Similarly, the Dutch CVA’s 1976 manifesto states that the party “will pursue policies based on the inspiration of Scripture ... striving for a society in which Biblical precepts carry more weight than at present”. Finally, the political program adopted by the EPP at its first congress in Brussels in 1978 states that:

Our policies are based on a conception of man which is inspired by the fundamental Christian values, and which finds expression in the dignity and inalienable freedom of the human person and its responsibility.

These reiterated references to the idea of a religiously ‘inspired’ politics are far from coincidental, but rather refer to a sophisticated theoretical elaboration which took place in the writings of some of the most important thinkers of Christian Democracy – from Luigi Sturzo, to Jacques Maritain and Etienne Borne – over the course of the past century. This chapter’s wager is that by reconstructing the meaning assigned to this concept in the context of these documents it will be possible to uncover a specific and distinctive conception of the relationship between politics and religion, which is not reducible either to the standard ‘liberal’ conception of secularism, or to the counter-valent concept of religious ‘establishment’ of politics.

As we will see, in fact, the idea of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics is predicated on a distinctive mode of articulation between the spheres of politics and religion, which was explicitly designed to trace a middle – or perhaps more precisely: alternative – course between these two poles. This chapter therefore constitutes an essential component of the overall reconstruction of the political ideology of Christian

Democracy carried out in this part of the book, but will also lay the grounds for an assessment of its persistent heuristic and normative value, in the next part.

THE PUZZLE

A useful starting point to begin a reconstruction of the significance attached by the Christian Democratic ideology to the concept of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics is a description of the specific historical and conceptual problem this concept was meant to solve. As I already pointed out in the introduction, the internal unity and coherence of the Christian Democratic ideology as a whole is best understood in ‘functional’ terms, as the set of ideas and principles that were developed over the course of the past century and a half for the purpose of both justifying and orienting the political project of reconciling Christianity (and in particular Catholicism) with modern ‘secular’ (and in particular democratic) politics. In order to get at how this broad ideological current conceived and proposed to structure the relation between politics and religion, it is therefore necessary to begin from a description of the way in which this overall historical and conceptual problem was posed from this specific point of view.

At core, the issue is that of reconciling two seemingly contradictory premises. On one hand, the assumption that the universal and therefore trans-historical function of the Christian faith – and therefore by implication the Catholic Church – is to guide humanity through its penitentiary pilgrimage across this world, towards its ultimate goal of “other-worldly redemption” (which by definition implies that Catholics and the Catholic Church *must* take an interest in the ‘temporal’ sphere of politics, as an integral component of their ‘spiritual’ mission), and on the other hand the recognition that the modern age is characterized by an irrevocable ‘separation’ between the spheres of politics and religion, which in turn implies that the Church cannot continue to exercise its ‘spiritual’ mission by means of a privileged access to the coercive apparatus of the state.

In Jacques Maritain’s discussion of the relationship between Church and State, for instance, we find a distinction (analogous to that between the historical ‘thesis’ and ‘hypothesis’ we already encountered in Chapter 1) between the “general and immutable principles” regulating the relations between the temporal and spiritual domains, and the “specific application” of these principles to the present historical epoch (Maritain 1998, 147-148). The most important “general and immutable principle” in this regard is assumed to be “the superiority of the Church – that is to say the spiritual domain – over the political body of the State” (152). This principle, however, is assumed to have to find its “specific application” in the context of the present historical epoch, the distinctiveness of which is made to emerge from a tripartite periodization of the history of Church-State relations over the course of the past few centuries:

- The pre-modern or medieval age is described as a “sacral” epoch in which the domain of politics was still inextricably intertwined with that of religion, since human society was assumed to be integrated on the basis of religious belonging (as a *respublica christiana*). This, for Maritain,

implied that the Catholic Church was “required” to exercise a temporal power over the state, according to the principle of “justice in the service of force” (157).

- The early modern or baroque age is described as a “transitional” phase in which the sphere of the political gradually acquired a measure of autonomy from religion, through the elaboration of a “temporal” conception of the common good. During this phase, however, the Church is said to have maintained most of its “inherited privileges” in the temporal domain and, as a consequence, Maritain writes that its relation with the state was “hardened” by the fact that it became “more juridical than vital” (158).
- Finally, the modern age is described as a “secular” or “profane” epoch, in which the domain of the political has acquired complete autonomy from the sphere of the religious, and the Church has consequently lost the privilege of exercising any kind of temporal power over the political sphere. The organizing principle of public life has accordingly ceased to be that of “force in the service of justice” and become that of “freedom” understood as the “right” (but also the “responsibility” of finding one’s own way in the pursuit of the ideal of “full realization of the principle of human dignity” (159).

In this respect, it is important to note that for Maritain (as for most of the other Christian Democratic thinkers working from these premises) this overarching process of “secularization” of the political sphere did not necessarily constitute a negative development. On the contrary, he contends that it should be perceived as something “normal”, inasmuch as it is “implied by the evangelical distinction between the things that belong to God and those that belong to Caesar” (Maritain 1998: 159). Etienne Borne goes even further, stating that: “By dismissing the gods and refusing to deify itself, the modern state puts into practice the evangelical distinction between the domain of God and the domain of Cesar ... This is the significance of the modern concept of ‘secularism’ (*laïcité*), which shouldn’t however be interpreted to mean religious neutrality, because it refuses and excludes a certain form of religion – closed, mythical and pagan – which is reborn every time nationalisms and totalitarianisms attempt to make an absolute of the political community itself” (Borne 1961, 33).

What *is* perceived as pathological – and indeed potentially catastrophic – is the “hypostatization” of this measure of autonomy of the political, which, to use Luigi Sturzo’s words, inevitably leads to a form of “statolatry” that deprives the domain of the political of any “external control” and therefore ultimately lays the conditions for the emergence of “totalitarianism” (Sturzo 1959: 215-221). Etienne Borne puts this point as follows in stating that: “the errors we denounce are basically two: the idea that politics should be indifferent to religion and the complete politicization of human existence pursued by fascism and communism” (Borne 1961, 34).

The key historical and conceptual problem that emerges from these premises is that of finding a way of enabling both Catholics individually and the Catholic Church as an organization to continue pursuing their

universal historical (and intrinsically political) mission, in the context of an age characterized by a complete “secularization” of the sphere of the political, without seeking to deny or overturn the latter development, but rather guiding it in a direction that is consistent with Christian principles and values.

THE METHOD OF FREEDOM

The way in which the notion of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics functioned as a solution to the historical and conceptual puzzle outlined above has several components and will therefore have to be introduced in stages. The first component is the idea of using the specific political means of modernity – that is the set of liberal-democratic freedoms granted by modern states – for the purpose of guiding and orienting modern politics *from within*. ‘Inspiration’ in this sense literally means the attempt to imbue a substantively Christian ‘content’ (or ‘soul’) into the liberal-democratic institutional ‘form’ (or ‘body politic’) through a form of indirect action, working at the level of individual consciences and collective ideational projects, rather than seeking to control policy outcomes through coercively enforced agreements with the state.

This idea has its origin in the thought of some early Catholic liberals from the middle part of the 19th century. Already in the 1830s, for instance, authors such as Felicité de Lammenais, Jean-Baptiste Henri de Lacordaire and Charles de Montalambert had suggested that Catholics ought to “baptize the revolution” and invited readers of their magazine *L’Avenir* not to “tremble before liberalism”, but rather to “Catholicize it”. The basic logic at work here was made even clearer a few decades later by the prominent Belgian Catholic thinker Camille de Hemptine in answer to his own question: “What should subjects do if the law is indifferent and places error and truth on the same level?”. “Since the law allows them to” he wrote “they should *use freedom to do good*: to redress ideas, expose the true principles and spread the understanding of how much God abhors these general freedoms” (quoted by Kalyvas 2003: 299, emphasis added).

The key difference between these early forms of Catholic liberalism and the Christian Democratic idea of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics is that the latter is not predicated on the assumption that God “abhors” the modern liberal-democratic freedoms, but on the contrary – as we have seen – on the conviction that these are in fact expressive of fundamental Christian principle distinguishing the things that belong to Caesar from the things that belong to God. The key point is therefore that a form of indirect action working through people’s consciences and collective projects is in fact *more* adequate from a Christian perspective than directly coercive action in the temporal sphere.

This is a point we find made for instance in Luigi Sturzo’s reflections on the historical experience of the first world war, during which the Church is said to have adopted a policy of rigorous “neutrality”, while at the same time doing its best to further the interests of peace, from a purely “moral” standpoint: “The terrible test of the Great War – he wrote – has shown it is possible to conceive and respect a religious authority that is so far elevated, even within the context of warring states, that it need not fear being tainted by their shocks and hardships”. As a result, Sturzo added, “the whole problem of the relationship between

Church and State” has been “spiritualized”, and thereby made “more consonant” both with the “intrinsic nature of Catholicism as a religious faith” and with the “principle of freedom now being invoked by peoples everywhere” (Sturzo 1918, 50-51).

The same point was also made several decades later by Jacques Maritain, with explicit reference to the concept of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics:

In a new Christianly inspired civilization, as far as we are able to see it, the supreme principles that hold sway over the relationship between Church and State ... would in general be applied less in terms of social power than in terms of the *vivifying inspiration* of the Church. The very modality of her action upon the body politic would thereby be spiritualized, the emphasis having shifted from power and legal constraints to moral influence and authority; in other words, to a fashion or ‘style’, in the external relations of the Church, more appropriate to the Church herself, and more detached from the modalities that had inevitably been introduced by the Christian Empire of Constantine (Maritain 1998, 162, emphasis added).

On this basis, the idea that a form of direct interference of the Catholic Church in the temporal sphere of politics would be harmful for *both* Christianity and the state became a standard trope of Christian Democratic rhetoric. Already in 1907, for instance, while asking the Florentine Catholics to elect him to parliament, the lay activist Agostino Cameroni explained that Catholics ought not form “a Catholic parliamentary party with official Vatican character” because that would, amongst others “be a gravely dangerous misunderstanding, a reciprocal diminution of the freedom of the Church and of Catholic parliamentarians” (quoted by Formigoni 1988, 106). Similarly, in the last speech he gave as secretary of the Italian DC at the party’s Naples congress of 1954, Alcide de Gasperi asserted that any form of direct interference of religious authorities in the day-to-day running of the country is “contrary not only to the principles of Christian Democracy, but also to the Catholic faith itself”. “Our party” he added “may draw inspiration from the religious conscience and authority, but political action – that is to say the exercise of our constitutional rights and duties within the sphere of government legislation – must take place through the democratic method; that is to say by means of voting or through the elective or administrative apparatus of the state” (De Gasperi 2009, 2057-2069).

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ACTING ‘AS A CHRISTIAN’ AND ‘IN THE NAME OF CHRISTIANITY’

Despite its centrality for the Christian Democratic ideology, the idea of adopting the ‘method of freedom’ as a way of influencing the political outcomes of modernity is not sufficient to fully explain the meaning attached to the concept of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics by this ideological current. The reason is that it does not yet explain how it became possible to both conceive and justify a form of concrete partisan involvement of Catholics in the struggle for power and the day-to-day running of liberal-democratic states.

As we have seen, in fact, the acceptance the ‘method of freedom’ was posited primarily as a vision of the way in which *the Church* ought to fulfill its historical mission of guiding and directing the temporal affairs of humanity in the context of modernity. The idea of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics carries this principle a step further, by carving out the conceptual space for a form of direct involvement of *Catholics* within the sphere of modern liberal-democratic politics. This required supplementing the adoption of the ‘method of freedom’ with a further set of theoretical constructs, which bring us to the core of the Christian Democratic conception of the relationship between politics and religion.

Once again, the clearest theoretical articulation of this set of shared premises can be found in the work of Jacques Maritain. On the basis of a recovery of a broadly ‘neo-thomist’ metaphysics (which we already in part discussed in chapter 2 above), in his writings, we find a conception of the political as a specific sphere of human endeavor, defined by its orientation towards the “temporal common good”. The latter is described as an “infra-valent” end, which assigns politics a specific “dignity” and therefore a “relative degree of autonomy”. This specific sphere, however, is itself assumed to be inscribed within the framework of a broader “natural order”, whose overall finality is assumed to be the fulfillment of God’s “supernatural” plan for the “other-worldly salvation” of humanity (Cf. Maritain 1998, 148-150).

By drawing on this set of assumptions, Maritain is able to draw a categorical distinction between two different forms of Christian action: acting ‘as a christian’ (*en chrétien*) is said to be a form of action oriented towards the ultimate goal of other-worldly “salvation”, and therefore to be directly subject to the religious authority of the Catholic Church. Acting ‘in the name of Christianity’ (*en tant que chrétien*), on the other hand, is assumed to be a form of action oriented towards the “infra-valent” goal of the temporal common good, which is not of immediate religious significance, and therefore doesn’t require a literal application of the religious precepts dictated by the Catholic Church, but may nonetheless still “draw inspiration” from Christian values and beliefs, in order to contribute more fully towards the fulfillment of its ends, both at the natural and supernatural levels (on this point, see also: Maritain 1936, 273-286).

The key point of this distinction is therefore to carve out the conceptual space for a form of action that is not *immediately* subject to the religious authority of the Catholic Church, but nonetheless manifests its spiritual influence on the political sphere by “drawing inspiration” from Christian values and beliefs, while acting in pursuit of the temporal common good. In virtue of the neo-thomist metaphysics that posits the fulfillment of this goal as an “infra-valent” end, such a form of action is construed as consistent with – and even perhaps required by – the Christian faith, even if it escapes the domain over which the Catholic Church is assumed to have direct authority.

It is accordingly on this basis that practicing Catholics could take themselves to be legitimated to participate within a sphere of politics conceived of as essentially ‘secular’, without violating the core principles of their religious faith. This point is made very clear by numerous statements of some of Christian Democracy’s historic leaders. In his theoretical articulation of the doctrinal principles informing the political

platform of the French MRP, for instance, Etienne Borne wrote that: “While not devoid of any relationship to Christianity, our creed does not have a properly religious significance ... the whole point of our political struggle would be voided if we searched for its meaning in the spiritual domain, confusing it with a drive to salvation in the religious sense of the term (Borne 1961, 33). Similarly, in his speech before the DC’s 7th congress in Naples I already quoted from above, Alcide De Gasperi also asserted that: “[Within the framework of our party] the believer acts as a citizen, in the spirit and in the letter of the constitution; he therefore only engages himself, his category, his class or his party, but not the Catholic Church” (De Gasperi 2009, 2066).

THE ACONFESSIONALITY OF CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTIES

The most important implication that follows from the analysis conducted above is that Christian Democratic parties – and therefore by implication the Christian Democratic ideology they stand for – should not be understood as ‘confessional’ organizations, in the sense of temporal extensions of the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church. They are rather parties that draw their ‘inspiration’ from Christianity, in the sense that they extrapolate from the Christian faith a set of general principles and values, which they then seek to apply to the specific sphere of politics in pursuit of an end – the “temporal common good” – which is not assumed to be of direct religious significance.

This too is a point Christian Democrats have been keen to insist on, precisely in order to carve out a space of (relative) autonomy from the Catholic Church, while at the same time claiming to protect the latter from being forced to meddle with temporal affairs. In his inaugural speech at the first congress of the Italian PPI in 1919, for instance, Luigi Sturzo made the following statement, which remains amongst the most paradigmatic expositions of the significance of the concept of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics for the Christian Democratic conception of the relationship between politics and religion:

From the beginning, we have excluded that our label should be religion and have consciously chosen to situate ourselves on the specific terrain of politics, which has as its specific object the interest of the nation ... However, it would be illogical to deduce from this that we have fallen into the error of liberalism, which treats religion simply as a matter of individual conscience. On the contrary, this is precisely what we stand against when we posit religion as the *vivifying spirit* for the entirety of individual and collective life ... While keeping that firmly in mind, we cannot allow ourselves to be transformed into an organism of the Catholic Church, nor would we even have the right to speak in the name of that authority, either in parliament or outside it. It is only in our name, albeit as Christians, that we can fight on the same terrain as other parties (Sturzo 1919, 82).

The same point was also reiterated almost exactly five decades later by Flaminio Piccoli at the 9th national congress of the Italian DC in Rome in 1969, where he asserted that “the DC is not the party *of Catholics*, but rather a lay and aconfessional organization *of Christian inspiration*”. “Our religious faith” he added “precedes our political choices: it can be their basis and it is also, in my opinion, their decisive

condition ... but politics – that is, the art of governing the things of this world – is its own specific domain”. (quoted in Durand 1995, 104).

Carrying this logic a step further, Etienne Borne even went as far as to suggest that, in principle, it is not even necessary to be a practicing – or even believing – Christian in order to adhere to the Christian Democratic ideology. “Christian Democracy” he wrote “is a political ideal, and while it is natural that Christians may feel more comfortable as members of a Christian Democratic party, the latter should not for that reason be taken to be a confessional party ... an unbeliever or an agnostic can also be a Christian Democrat in a full sense, because it is certainly possible to recognize the cultural importance of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and the civilizing function of the Catholic Church, without thereby experiencing the revelation or vowing allegiance to the ecclesiastical institution” (Borne 1986, 138-139).

The flip side of this is the equally – and perhaps even more – important point that Christian Democracy should not necessarily be understood as the *only* possible political expression of Christianity, even in the context of modernity. In this respect, for instance, Etienne Borne writes that “certain Christians will legitimately believe that the democratic ideal is not necessarily tied to Christianity, but to a certain temporal or philosophical interpretation of it, which other Christians may legitimately reject”. “The Christian Democratic ideal” he added “has always been contested on its ‘right’ by the Catholics of the Syllabus, who suspect it of a form of anthropocentric humanism which places the rights of man before the rights of God; and on its ‘left’ by Christian revolutionaries which condemn its democratic proceduralism as a concession to the status quo that is incompatible with their evangelical impatience” (Borne 1986, 139).¹

TOWARDS A ‘PUBLIC’ RELIGION?

From what has been just stated, it might be tempting to infer that the overall outcome of the principle of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics is to convert Christianity into a sort of ‘public religion’ in the sense theorized by José Casanova in his famous book on this topic (Cf. Casanova 1994). For, the way in which all of the above makes Christianity bear onto politics may seem – at least at first sight – to match the two key characteristics of a ‘public religion’ in Casanova’s sense: on one hand, the acceptance of a form of secularization understood in terms of a functional differentiation of the sphere of politics from that of religion (which doesn’t necessarily imply a decline in the overall social salience of religion), and on the other hand the attempt to exercise a renewed form of political influence within the framework of this ‘secularized’ social structure, not by means of a direct intervention at the level of formal political institutions, but rather by

¹ It should be noted, however, that the question of the legitimacy of such alternative interpretations of the political implications of Catholicism in the context of modernity has always remained contested within the framework of Catholicism itself, in the name of a competing ideal of “political unity of Catholics”. In this respect, for instance, Guido Formigoni has written that: “The idea that all the aspects of a believer’s life ought to refer to a self-sufficient and internally complete Catholic ‘synthesis’ remained decisive ... The very unity of the Christian Democratic party was indicative of this: it was in fact always referred to as *the* party of Christian inspiration; that is, the only possible one, the specific expression, in that particular historical moment, of a Christian substance construed as essentially a-historical and immutable” (Formigoni 2008, 44).

means of an indirect action at the level of what Habermas calls the ‘intermediary’ dimension of the “public sphere” (Cf. Habermas 1967).

As Casanova himself points out, if this were indeed the case, from a normative point of view, it would mean that the ideology of Christian Democracy succeeds in devising a form of political mobilization of Christianity that is perfectly compatible with the theoretical premises and institutional frameworks of modern ‘secular’ and liberal-democratic states. For, as Casanova puts it emphatically in his book: “it has been maintained throughout this study that ... public religions *are* consistent with modern universalistic principles and with modern differentiated structures” (Casanova 1994, 219). From this perspective, there would therefore seem to be no difference between a Christian Democratic party and any other kind of ‘secular’ political organization, advancing its specific conception of the common good in the democratic public sphere.

In fact, this is an argument that was made in one version or another by at least two amongst the most prominent recent scholars of Christian Democracy. In his seminal book on *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe*, for instance, Stathis Kalyvas argues that through the elaboration of notions such as religious ‘inspiration’ of politics, ‘Christian values’ and ‘Christian civilization’, Christian Democrats effectively “reinterpreted Catholicism as an increasingly general and abstract moral concept, controlled and mediated by them, rather than the Church” (Kalyvas 1996, 244). In this way, “political Catholicism was gradually yet decisively detached from both the Catholic Church and religion” and thereby “drained of its religious content, even while being legitimated as an ideology” (245). Thus, “to many Catholics, Catholicism became as much a religion represented by the Church as a *secular ideology* represented by a political party” (247, emphasis added). This is the basis for Kalyvas’ famous claim that “in a paradoxical way, the politicization of religion contributed to the secularization of politics” (245).

A similar point is also made by Bryan McGraw in his book entitled *Faith in Politics: Religion and Liberal Democracy*. Drawing on the historical experience of Northern European Christian Democratic parties in the second half of the 19th century, McGraw argues that the Christian Democratic ideology exercised a decisive political function not just in integrating Christian citizens within the framework of modern liberal-democratic states, but also in stabilizing and legitimating these institutional frameworks themselves. Taking issue with contemporary normative theories of “deliberative restraint” (which seek to exclude, or at least limit, the public expression of religious belief in the democratic public sphere), he therefore contends that Christian Democratic parties offer a historically salient example of the way in which religiously ‘inspired’ politics can offer a *positive* contribution to modern ‘secular’ and liberal-democratic states (Cf. McGraw 2010, 33-64).

Despite some important differences, both Kalyvas and McGraw ultimately offer versions of a familiar liberal-democratic story – which Jan-Werner Muller refers to as the centerpiece of the “political science account of Christian Democracy” (Muller 2013, 246-247) – and whose main claim is that the

requirements of “inclusion” within the sphere of modern liberal-democratic politics are bound to have a “moderating” effect on political (and religious) standpoints that may initially have been hostile to liberal-democracy itself. The expectation is therefore that such presumptive ‘enemies’ of democracy can be converted into loyal participants in the liberal-democratic political game by the incentive of participation itself (for another statement of this view, see also: Rosenblum 2008).

The argument I would like to advance in the remaining parts of this chapter is that, in light of the more detailed analysis of the concept of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics I have sought to offer here, this view may prove at least somewhat overly optimistic. For, what it misses is that the conception of the relationship between politics and religion that is implicit in the Christian Democrats sought to reconcile Christian values with modern democratic politics *cuts both ways*: on one hand accepting and even appropriating a version of the secular principle of ‘separation’ between Church and State, but on the other hand reformulating it in a way that preserves a fundamental role for religion (and in particular Christianity) in politics.

In other words, the claim I want to make is that, while ostensibly operating a *reconciliation* between the basic religious assumption that Christianity must be allowed to exercise a guiding influence on the temporal domain of human politics and the modern liberal-democratic conception of ‘secularism’, the Christian Democratic notion of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics also subtly but decisively *modifies* the latter’s meaning in a way that isn’t necessarily compatible with what it was assumed to imply in the first place. Thus, its net effect may be as much to ‘christianize democracy’ as to ‘democratize christianity’.

In order to substantiate this argument, in the remaining parts of this chapter, I will look at several other features of the conception of the relationship between politics and religion implied by the notion of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics, which tend to be overlooked by commentators such as Kalyvas and McGraw, perhaps precisely because they appear incompatible with the way in which the liberal-democratic conception of ‘secularism’ is normally understood.

THE RELATIVE AUTONOMY OF THE POLITICAL

The first thing to note in this respect is that the measure of autonomy that is afforded to the sphere of the political by the set of concepts reconstructed above remains significantly *relative*. The reason is that, as we have seen, the specific end that is assumed to establish both the dignity and the autonomy of the sphere of the political – that is, the “temporal common good” – is itself assumed to be ordained towards the fulfillment of a higher religious end: the fulfillment of god’s supernatural plan for the “other-worldly salvation” of humanity. This is precisely what the thomistic notion of “infra-valency” is meant to imply: that the sphere of the political has a special “dignity” because the fulfillment of its specific end is *instrumental* to the fulfillment of the higher end of the natural order itself. The autonomy of the political therefore only extends as far as is allowed – and indeed required – by the broader (religious) system of ends in which it is inscribed.

This has at least three important implications, which clash with the way in which the notion of ‘separation’ between politics and religion is normally understood from a ‘liberal-democratic’ perspective. The first concerns the order of priority between the two spheres. From a liberal-democratic perspective, politics is normally understood as a domain of ‘universality’, in which decisions taken should be – at least in principle – justifiable to everyone, independently of their religious beliefs, whereas religion is seen as consisting in a ‘particular’ set of practices and beliefs, which may or may not be shared by all citizens in a given polity (on this point, see for instance: Rawls 1996 and Habermas 2008). Conversely, from the point of view of the Christian democratic ideological constructs I have been describing, religion is seen as the ‘universal’ sphere of ultimate ends that concern the entirety of the natural order, whereas politics is seen as a ‘particular’ sphere of human endeavor within that overarching order. Thus, religious concerns are seen as ‘lexically prior’ to political ones in Rawls’ sense. As Maritain puts this point:

There can be no distinction without an order of values. If the things that are God’s are the things that are Caesar’s, that means they are better ... By nature, the body politic, which belongs strictly to the natural order, is only concerned with the temporal life of men and their temporal common good. In that temporal realm the body politic, as Pope Leo XIII has insisted, is fully autonomous. But the order of eternal life is superior in itself to the order of temporal life (Maritain 1998, 152-153).

The second important implication that follows from the above conceptual framework is that the specific “dignity” – and therefore autonomy – of the political is defined by a religious criterion, since the notion of the purely “temporal” common good is defined by its orientation towards the overarching religious goal of “other-worldly salvation”. Given that the only competent authority to ascertain such a question is assumed to be the Vatican, from this it follows that it is ultimately up to the Vatican to establish the boundaries of the sphere of the political itself; a point that was already insightfully noted by Arturo Carlo Jemolo in his classic study of Church-State relations in Italy, where he remarked that: “the power to fix the limits between that which was purely political and that which concerned morality and religion, in such a way as to justify the intervention of ecclesiastic authorities, always remained with the last named (Jemolo 1960, 174).

Finally, the third important implication that follows from the conceptual framework I reconstructed above is that, despite the measure of ‘autonomy’ that is granted to the sphere of the political, legitimate political action can never contradict religious purposes or ends. The reason is that, as we have seen, this measure of autonomy is granted on the grounds that the fulfillment of the specifically political end of the “temporal common good” is taken to be instrumental towards the fulfillment of the higher religious end of “otherworldly salvation”. This implies that whatever runs counter to the latter cannot possibly be considered a legitimate course of action from a religious point of view. Moreover, the only competent authority to establish whether this consistency obtains is once again assumed to be religious (i.e. the Vatican).

Thus, in the final analysis, the widely-noted fact that Christian Democratic parties always depended for their viability on an explicit endorsement by the Vatican (see for instance Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen 2010) proves to be not just a matter of ‘external’ legitimation, but also an *internal* requirement of the concept of religious ‘inspiration’ itself, since this concept implies that a religious authority must remain responsible for fixing the limits of the sphere of the political, and also constantly watch over it in order to ensure that what takes place within it is indeed ‘inspired’ by Christianity.

The overall picture that emerges from this is that of a conception of the autonomy of the political that remains significantly impaired with respect to the ‘liberal-democratic’ conception of secularism. One way of conveying this might be to say that whereas from a liberal-democratic perspective politics is ideally construed as a ‘level’ playing field, in which a variety of different ‘teams’ accept to compete with each other on the basis of a mutually agreed-upon set of rules, the concept of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics implies that Catholics are allowed to enter the playing field only on the condition that there is only one ‘goal’ (i.e. a conception of the “temporal common good” that is instrumental towards the fulfillment of the higher religious end of “other-worldly salvation”) and that the Church itself remains as the ultimate ‘arbiter’ of what counts as a goal in the first place and of what is a legitimate form of political action in pursuit of it. The way in which this particular set of conditions ends up transforming the political game will become clearer if we now move on to consider two further – more practical – implications that follow from it.

THE ‘POSITIVE’ CONCEPTION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

One of the most recurrent principles on which Christian Democratic parties and thinkers have always insisted throughout the history of this political ideology is that of religious freedom. Already in the program adopted by the Italian PPI at its founding congress in 1919, for instance, it was emphatically stated that two of the key demands the party was mobilizing for were: “the freedom and independence of the Church in the full exercise of its spiritual magisterium” and “freedom and respect for the Christian conscience, considered as the foundation and support of the life of the nation”. The same principles were also resoundingly endorsed by the political Manifesto adopted by the German CDU at its 21st party congress in Hanover in 2007, which states that: “the freedom of the Churches and religious organizations to bring their moral influence to bear on society should remain unimpeachable ... we therefore expect that all states and governments worldwide should respect and safeguard the principle of religious freedom”.

At first sight, this may appear perfectly compatible with a ‘liberal-democratic’ conception of secularism, given that almost most existing democratic constitutions grant a right to the “free exercise” of religion, and that the latter is generally considered to rank amongst the most fundamental “civil liberties” by most liberal political theorists (on this point, see for instance: Rawls 1996). It is sufficient to dig only a little deeper, however, to discover that the meaning assigned to the concept of religious freedom by the Christian

Democratic ideology is markedly different from the way this concept is normally interpreted from a liberal-democratic perspective.

In a speech pronounced only a year before the program of the Italian PPI was formally adopted, for instance, Luigi Sturzo (the party's founder and first secretary) had asserted that: "Many see the appearance of religious freedom as a concession on the part of the state to a portion of its citizens, who are thereby allowed cater to their spiritual needs according to the specific faith they profess ... But it is not a regime of tolerance, coupled with an official misrecognition of any religious principle, that we call for. It is rather a regime of freedom, in the full recognition of the essential moral and political function performed by religion" (Sturzo 1918, 47).

Along similar lines, in his 1944 reflections on the programmatic positions to be adopted by the Italian DC, Alcide De Gasperi write that: "Since a free regime can be stable only if it is founded on moral values, the democratic state will protect public morality and the integrity of the family, and will aid parents in their important mission of educating future generations according to Christian principles", specifically adding in this respect that "it is particularly important that the Christian leaven ferments all aspects of the social life of democracy, and therefore that the historical mission of the Church is allowed to explicate itself with full freedom, and that the voice of the Roman Pontiff, which has so often been raised in favor of human dignity, be allowed to resound freely in Italy and in the world" (De Gasperi 1944, 2).

Even more explicitly, the 2007 political Manifesto of the German CDU states that: "it is not only the duty of the Church, but also a major responsibility of the State ... to preserve in our consciousness [the basic principles that are rooted in Christian beliefs and enshrined in the Basic Law]". On this basis, it then goes on to suggest that: "religious education should form part of the school curriculum in all federal states" and that "Christian symbols must remain visible in public. They have to be protected in the same way as the Christian Sundays and holidays".

What seems to be delineated in these passages is a conception of religious freedom which cannot be reduced to an exclusively *negative* duty of non-interference with the "free exercise" of religion on the part of the state, but rather involves a more *positive* requirement of active involvement in fostering and protecting a specific form of religious consciousness within society, on the grounds that the latter represents the 'animating spirit', and therefore an essential stabilizing condition, of the liberal-democratic order itself. This point was in fact made explicitly by Jacques Maritain in his own discussion of the concept of religious freedom:

Insuring to the Church her full liberty and the free exercise of her spiritual mission is fundamentally required by the God-given rights of the Church as well as by the basic rights of the human person. But it is also required by the common good of the body politic. For it is the condition for that spreading of the leaven of the Gospel throughout the social body which the temporal common good needs in its own sphere ... [This implies] not only a 'negative' form of assistance, but also a 'positive' one ... Thus, the body politic, its free agencies and institutions need to ... positively facilitate the religious, social, and educational work by means of which she – as well as the other spiritual or cultural groups

whose helpfulness for the common good would be recognized by them – freely cooperates in the common welfare (Maritain 1998, 177-179).

As Luigi Sturzo had already recognized several decades earlier, such a positive conception of religious freedom is incompatible with the standard ‘liberal-democratic’ interpretation of this principle, inasmuch as the latter is founded on a purely negative conception of freedom as non-interference, which translates into a requirement of state *neutrality* with respect to the manifestations of religious belief present within the social sphere: “This principle” he wrote “clashes with a whole ‘liberal’ tradition, which has wanted to reduce religion to a simple individual fact of conscience, an internal relationship which can only manifest itself in the social field by remaining subject to the sovereign power of the state” (Sturzo 1918, 47-48). The same point, however, emerges even more pointedly if we consider some of the more specific policy applications that were inferred by Jacques Maritain himself from this ‘positive’ conception of religious freedom, and which still occupy a prominent place in most Christian Democratic party platforms and manifestoes:

- 1) *The public recognition of the existence of God.* In this respect Maritain writes that: “a political society really and vitally Christian would be conscious of the doctrine and morality which enlighten for it the tenets of the democratic charter. It would be conscious of the faith that inspired it and it would express this faith publicly” (Maritain 1998, 172). In practice, this boils down to the public endorsement of “religious symbols” and “moments of prayer” that form the centerpiece of the cultural policies still advocated for by contemporary Christian Democratic parties.
- 2) *State funding of religious education and places of worship.* In this respect, Maritain writes that “the State has no authority to impose any faith whatsoever upon the inner domain of conscience. But ... the State has to foster in its own way the general morality, through the exercise of justice and the enforcement of the law, and by supervising the development of sound conditions and means in the body politic for good human life” (Maritain 1998, 175). This has translated in the inclusion of specific clauses demanding state support for “religious schools” and “places of worship” in almost all Christian Democratic policy platforms and manifestoes we have a record of.
- 3) *Legal exemption of religious citizens from civil and political obligations that are inconsistent with their faith.* In this respect Maritain writes that: “the exemption from military obligations granted to the clergy in many countries is not a social privilege ... The rights enumerated in the Code of Canon Law in the chapter *de privilegiis clericorum*, should be recognized by a civil society of a pluralistic type as pertaining to the case of adjustments of law and custom to various functions and states of life (Maritain 1998, 172-173). Similar demands can also be found in the

programs of most European Christian Democratic organizations from the middle part of the past century.

From the perspective of a ‘liberal-democratic’ conception of secularism, the above reads more or less like a laundry list of practices or proposals that ought to be *forbidden*, precisely because they clash with the fundamental principle of state ‘neutrality’ with respect to religious manifestations present within civil society.

THE LIMITED TOLERATION OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Another key testing ground for evaluating the consistency of the Christian Democratic notion of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics with the ‘liberal-democratic’ conception of secularism lies in their respective ways of dealing with the issue of religious pluralism. Here too, what we can observe is a superficial degree of overlap between them, which actually masks a deeper conceptual opposition.

On one hand, since the idea of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics is predicated on the ‘method of freedom’ as the most appropriate way for Christianity to exercise an influence on politics in modernity, it must make some room for the acceptance of the possibility that individual citizens may hold different religious (or even non-religious) values and beliefs. In fact, most Christian Democratic political programs and manifestoes contain clauses recognizing that religious and cultural “diversity” are distinctive features of modern societies, and affirming that Christian Democrats do not seek to hinder or abolish that. The party manifesto adopted by the German CDU in 2007, for instance, states that: “Cultural diversity forms a part of our vibrant society ... Our vision is for a cosmopolitan Germany which, as a result of its traditions, is open to other cultures”. Similarly, the comprehensive party platform adopted by the European People’s Party in 2012 states that: “Fostering a strong sense of European identity, as an indispensable condition to a dynamic union, must be based on the social, cultural and spiritual diversity of our continent. This diversity also includes the contribution of other religions than Judaism and Christianity, such as Islam”.

At the same time, however, because the ‘method of freedom’ is accepted only on the grounds that it is the most appropriate way of promoting the Christian conception of the “temporal common good”, which is itself assumed to be ordained towards the higher religious end of “other-worldly salvation”, the acceptance of citizens entertaining different religious beliefs can only happen in the mode of a form of ‘toleration’ that only extends so far as it is compatible with the fulfillment of society’s overarching religious goal. As Maritain himself puts it:

It should be clear that the legislation of the Christian society in question could and never should *endorse* or *approve* any way of conduct contrary to Natural Law. But we also have to realize that this legislation could and should *permit* or *give allowance* to certain ways of conduct which depart in some measure from Natural Law, if the prohibition by civil law of these ways of conduct were to impair the common good ... Thus, in the sense which I just defined, a sound application of the pluralist principle ... would require from the State a juridical recognition of the moral codes peculiar to those minorities comprised in the body politic whose rules of morality, though defective in some

regard with respect to the perfect Christian morality, would prove to be a real asset in the heritage of the nation and its common trend toward good human life (Maritain 1998, 167-170).

As is made clear by this passage, the logic at work here is one of toleration of religious and cultural pluralism as a “lesser evil”, on the grounds that banning cultural or religious practices or beliefs that are inconsistent with the Christian faith may be more harmful for the fulfillment of the overarching goal of politics than tolerating them – either because, as Maritain puts it, “such prohibition would be at variance with the ethical code of communities whose loyalty to the nation ... matters to the common good” or because “it would result in a worse conduct, disturbing or disintegrating the social body” (Maritain 1998, 168). The underlying assumption, however, remains that non-Christian religious practices and beliefs are “deficient” with respect to a “perfect Christian morality” and can therefore only be ‘tolerated’ to the extent that they do not hinder the overarching societal goal of realizing the Christian conception of the temporal common good.

The specific mode of toleration for religious and cultural pluralism that follows from the Christian Democratic conception of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics therefore implicitly grants a privileged status to Christianity, as the specific set of values and beliefs that constitute the ‘animating spirit’ of modern liberal democratic polities. In the programmatic documents and party manifestoes I quoted from above, this is reflected in the fact that the acceptance of cultural and religious “diversity” is systematically tempered by a counter-valent requirement of respect for “our” cultural and religious identity. In such contexts, the latter cannot be interpreted as referring to the principles of toleration and pluralism themselves, but is rather intended to function as a reference to the Christian values and beliefs that are assumed to “inspire” liberal-democratic constitutions to begin with. The EPP’s 2012 party platform, for instance, insists that Europe’s “shared cultural heritage” is “rooted in Hebrew prophecy, Greek philosophy and Roman law, as they have been harmonized and enriched by the Christian message and Judeo-Christian values”, whereas the German CDU’s 2007 program makes clear that: “Germany is a European cultural nation, characterized *especially* by the Judaeo-Christian Tradition and the Enlightenment”.

The same point is brought home even more starkly by the way in which Maritain proposes to overcome – or at least temper – the evident incompatibility between the privileged status that is thereby granted to Christian values and beliefs within a presumptively secularized public sphere and the fundamental ‘liberal-democratic’ principle of “formal equality” amongst citizens, independently of their religious beliefs. His argument is that this tension can be “gradually overcome” by striving for a society in which Catholicism is the *only* significant religious orientation present in the public sphere. “For” he writes “given the factual circumstances created by modern societies ... the conditions of realization of an ideal situation suppose a people in whom division in religious matters has disappeared, and in whom the Catholic faith is accepted by all”. “Under such circumstances” he adds “the Catholic Church would obviously be alone in enjoying the rights and privileges granted *de jure* to the various religious bodies ... consequently, the ideal envisaged in the thesis would be fulfilled in a situation which was actually privileged, but which implied neither temporal

advantages granted to category of citizens as opposed to others nor any departure from the principle of equality of all before the law” (Maritain 1998, 173 fn27).

This passage demonstrates clearly that the overall conceptual horizon in which the Christian Democratic ideology remains situated is one in which religious and cultural pluralism ultimately have no place, but are rather accepted (or more precisely: ‘tolerated’) as a temporary concession to the empirical conditions of the time. The fundamental Catholic principle ‘*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*’ is therefore never really overturned or called into question, but rather only tempered and adapted to the present age. Moreover, far from being a merely contingent and therefore potentially revisable aspect of the Christian Democratic ideology, this ultimately proves to be of capital importance for the internal coherence of the conceptual edifice on which it rests. For, as the above passage also makes clear, it is only on the basis of the assumption that society itself is substantively Christian that the acceptance of the ‘method of freedom’ can be reconciled with the goal of fulfilling the Christian conception of the “temporal common Good” in the political domain. Christian Democracy, in this sense, *requires* a homogenously (or at least predominantly) Christian society.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on the analysis above, the most appropriate way of characterizing the specific conception of the relationship between politics and religion that is implicit in the Christian Democratic notion of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics may be as an attempt to reconcile – or at least hold together – two apparently contradictory desiderata: on one hand, to carve out a political role for Christianity within the framework of a conception of modernity understood as predicated on an overarching process of ‘secularization’ of politics, and on the other hand the preservation of a privileged political role for Christianity – and by implication the Catholic Church – within this framework.

The key to this attempted reconciliation lies in the recovery of a broadly neo-thomist metaphysics, which allows Christian Democrats to posit the fulfillment of the specifically political goal of the “temporal common good” as an “infra-valent” end; and thereby to assign the sphere of the political a relative degree of autonomy, while at the same time maintaining that it remains subordinate to the fulfillment of a higher religious goal, assumed to consist in the “other-worldly salvation” of humanity. The normative evaluation of this specific set of ideological constructs must accordingly depend on the point of observation.

From a strictly ‘liberal-democratic’ perspective, it should be clear that the principle of religious ‘inspiration’ of politics falls far short of a wholehearted endorsement of the modern principle of secularism (as I have sought to show, by bringing out the multiple points of tension and contradiction between them). However, from an internal Christian perspective, it should also be recognized that the set of ideas I have been discussing offered a powerful and systematic justification for allowing Christians (and in particular Catholics) to take part in the politics of modern liberal-democratic states *on their own terms*.

Compared to previous political instantiations of Christianity (and especially Catholicism) this certainly represented a major transformation, which allowed Catholics to exercise a much greater measure of political influence within the framework of modern secular states – and may therefore be said to have brought Catholicism more in line with its own aspiration of adapting itself to the specific historical contingencies of the time, in order to fulfill its universal historical mission of guiding humanity across its penitentiary pilgrimage in this world towards the ultimate end of “otherworldly salvation”.

Whether the net result came closer to a ‘democratization of Christianity’ or a ‘christianization of democracy’ is a question I will address in more detail in the second part of the book.