

PRESENTATION: TWENTIETH-CENTURY DICTATORSHIPS AND RELIGION

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Abstract: This dossier gathers papers covering as wide a geographical area as possible, offering different viewpoints on aspects concerning the relationship between dictatorial politics and religion. The final result are eight articles dealing with four continents, namely Asia, Africa, South America, and Europe. As for the diversity of approaches, the papers treat, each from a specific perspective, colonial and postcolonial “pragmatic” attitudes towards religion in Africa (Grandhomme and Kroubo Dagnini), African religious identity (Chande), the use of religion as a source of morals and ethics in Argentina (Cousins) and France (Stevens), the field of tension between political and traditional religion and myth in China (Lee) and in Italy (Nelis), and dictatorial attitudes towards religious identity in Spain (Beck).

Keywords: Religion, dictatorships, twentieth-century, contemporary history.

“Des chercheurs qui cherchent, on en trouve; des chercheurs qui trouvent, on en cherche.”

In November 2007 I launched, through a variety of channels, a call for contributions for a series of articles on the general theme of “twentieth-century dictatorships and religion.” It was my intention to gather papers covering as wide a geographical area as possible, offering different viewpoints on aspects concerning the relationship between dictatorial politics and religion. The final result are eight articles dealing with four continents, namely Asia, Africa, South America, and Europe. As for the diversity of approaches, the papers treat, each from a specific perspective, colonial and postcolonial “pragmatic” attitudes towards religion in Africa (Grandhomme and Kroubo Dagnini), African religious identity

(Chande), the use of religion as a source of morals and ethics in Argentina (Cousins) and France (Stevens), the field of tension between political and traditional religion and myth in China (Lee) and in Italy (Nelis), and dictatorial attitudes towards religious identity in Spain (Beck). Before leaving the stage to individual authors, in the following paragraphs I will briefly introduce each of their contributions.

The first article, by Cyrus Cousins, analyses the role of Catholic religion and nationalism during the Argentine “military revolution,” i.e. during the second half of the sixties and the early seventies, when after a coup d’état the military took over power in the South American country. Through a study of the aggressive, religiously inspired “morality” campaign, in other words by pointing at the “cultural” means by which this dictatorial regime pursued consensus and hegemony, and by linking this phenomenon to widespread fear of communism (and of leftist ideologies in general), this researcher offers an innovative approach to the subject of the *Revolución Argentina*. His insistence on the generals’ partly religiously inspired concern over public morality, as well as his understanding of its implications, constitute valuable contributions to the historiography of a very dark period in the country’s past.

Nathalie Stevens delivers an essay dealing with similar efforts made by France’s marshal Pétain during World War II. By relying heavily upon a religiously inspired discourse of culpability and the ensuing need for penitence, the latter sought to disguise his regime’s subordination to Nazi Germany, as a “puppet State,” as well as to invigorate the disillusioned population. It is against this historical background that Jean-Paul Sartre wrote his controversial piece *Les Mouches*, arguably an outspoken effort at

questioning both political and religious authority in Vichy France. A study of a specific manifestation of cultural *engagement* in the political field, Stevens' article further broadens the perspective, i.e. the interdisciplinary character, of this dossier.

Hélène Grandhomme's paper then is an archive-based study of French colonial politics in Senegal during the period 1936-1960. With the help of a variety of official reports concerning Islam and the way in which it was dealt with by the French –a policy which can be summarised in the notion of the “politique du sourire et de l'entente”-, Grandhomme produces an incisive, imaginative –not in the least thanks to the very effective use of citations- account of a particular side of French colonial politics. Historiography in the purest sense of the word, and as such a very valuable contribution to the knowledge of both Senegal's and France's contemporary religious and colonial history.

The “African chapter” proceeds with Abdin Chande's contribution on “Muslim-State relations in East Africa under conditions of military, civilian or one-party dictatorships.” Through the examples of how Islam positioned itself, and was being politically manipulated, in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, this scholar offers valuable insights into the intertwining of politics and religion in the region. Furthermore, by analysing different manifestations of the use of religion, as well as of ethnicity, or of rather vague notions of “identity” (for example the partially artificial “Nubi” factor in Uganda under Idi Amin), in politics, Chande can conclude by stressing the merits of a secular system of government, which clearly turns out to be the best option in order to generate peace, and to stimulate mutual respect. His account of the varying fate of Muslims, and of their religion, in East Africa, illustrates the relativity of political discourse, especially when inspired by religion, pseudo-religion, and “myth” (in the broad sense of ethnical, identitarian discourses).

The last contribution dealing with the African continent is Jérémie Kroubo Dagnini's study of France's “postcolonial colonialism.” In an overview of the various ways in which this nation remains omnipresent in many of its former African colonies (“Françafrique”), this author polemically argues that France has only had (and still has) one real interest in its policy regarding Africa, i.e. safeguarding its traditional influence in the region. To this general idea

Kroubo Dagnini adds some considerations on the way in which the United States seem to be expanding their presence in the region, namely through the work of protestant missionaries. The latter, so he argues, do not only enlarge the United States' sphere of influence, but could also engender dangerous sectarian phenomena, as the example of the “sorcerer children” shows. A two-sided research “en cours de route,” hopefully to be continued with the addition of a more extensive selection of primary and secondary source material.

The fate of Christianity in Maoist China is the subject of Joseph Lee's contribution. Through the example of the conflicting situation involving on the one side the regime and the so-called (State endorsed) “Three-Self Patriotic Movement,” and on the other side various Christian movements, this scholar offers an inspiring case study on Asian church and State interactions. A very valuable study not only in itself, i.e. as a paper studying specific religious movements in a specific context, but also on a more abstract level. Indeed, as Joseph Lee argues, the “various patterns of church and state interactions in Maoist China are insightful at both factual and conceptual levels. [...] The church, unwillingly, found itself in opposition to the state. Rather than maintaining a policy of accommodation, the state deliberately acted against the church in order to control the religious sphere. Therefore, the art of managing tensions between religion and politics was an integral part of the state-building process.” As emerges from Lee's paper, the way in which this was done in Maoist China shows the highly repressive side of governmental control over society, but it also appears that at the grassroots level, there existed room for negotiation and compromise.

My own contribution then deals with the way in which under Italian fascism, the myth of “Romanness” or *romanità* was observed by an influential Catholic periodical, the Jesuitical *La Civiltà Cattolica*. My analysis of the discourse on Roman antiquity developed by Italian Jesuits during the *ventennio fascista* aims at contributing to the ever growing corpus of scholarship on fascist *romanità*, as well as on the relationship between regime and Church in interwar Italy.

Lauren Beck's paper then is both the most and the least contemporary one. It offers a highly original approach to the relationship between

dictatorship –or in any case “dictatorial” tendencies in governmental policies- and religion in present day Spain. In comparing the situation in which Muslims found themselves in 16th Century Spain with their fate today, Beck not only touches upon the controversial problem of what is referred to as “international Islamic terrorism” and of (mainly African) immigration into Europe, but she also indicates how the seemingly “objective” gathering of information (i.e. census data) channels public discourse on Islam, namely through the way in which the media, as well as the Spanish authorities, use this information in order to shape certain “realities.”

Through a display of how the Spanish authorities influence statistical information on Islam by tendentiously directing it at the earliest possible stage, as well as by pointing at widely diffused prejudices rooted in contemporary racist attitudes and at the ways in which these continuously, and latently, infiltrate public discourse, Lauren Beck’s analytical case study offers a blueprint and a methodological framework for future research, not only into the present subject, but also, and above all, into the more general issue of popular opinion and the continuous threats to which it is exposed. As such her article is of particular interest to history writing in general, and that is why I want to conclude this part of my brief introduction with a citation from her article: “We have shown that the Muslim communities of the UK and Spain adapted to the preferences and agendas of the dominant democratic or Catholic culture, respectively, in order to avoid the penalties levied by laws, media coverage, public opinion and the ensuing feedback loop that they form.” Indeed, as “a form of control, generic language silences cultural differences and, in representation, prevents these differences from realising integration into the dominant culture.”

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