Between Political Religion and Politicized Religion: Interwar Fascism and Religion Revisited

Eliot Assoudeh*
University of Nevada Reno

Abstract
The following article surveys the relationships between fascist ideology and religion in interwar Europe. First, it provides a working definition for the term ‘clerical fascism’ through the exploration of 14 case studies presented at the 2006 international workshop on Clerical Fascism in interwar Europe. Next, it argues that fascism, understood as a syncretic coalition between political and politicized religion, improves the analytical understanding of how fascist movements and religious entities extended collaborations. This approach enables us to study not only how fascist and religious forces respond to political opportunities but also how these collectivities reshape political context in their favor and create new opportunities. In most cases, battles over two key factions, the ‘custody of youths’ and the ‘rebirth of nations’, provided both political and politicized camps with opportunities to cooperate or struggle.

The relationship between fascism – as a movement or a regime – and religion is complex one, shadowed with inconsistency and contradiction. The scholarship on fascism in interwar Europe identifies three types of religious entities with which fascist forces interacted: the Holy See, national protestant churches, and varied religious movements. While a majority of these studies explore the relationships between fascism, the Vatican, and domestic churches, in contrast, research on the interplay of fascist groups and religious movements is thin.

There has been renewed interest among scholars regarding the relationship between fascism and religion within the last decade. Among them, three articles provide a better roadmap on the connection between the two: Roger Eatwell’s ‘Reflections on Fascism and Religion’, Roger Griffin’s ‘The Holy Storm: “Clerical Fascism” through the Lens of Modernism’, and John Pollard’s ‘Clerical Fascism: Context, Overview and Conclusion’. In addition, the international workshop on Clerical Fascism in interwar Europe in 2006 (Feldman & Turda 2007) (hereafter the workshop) was the first scholarly attempt to debate the term ‘clerical fascism’. The present study, structured after Eatwell’s (and the agenda of the workshop), has two main goals. First is to identify some common patterns at work across the cases of clerical fascism presented at the workshop and to provide a working definition for clerical fascism. The second is to take a heuristic approach that studies fascism as a syncretic coalition between ‘political’ and ‘politically’ religions. The main thrust of my argument is that the concept of fascist ideology, if studied through the lens of political opportunity structures – alliance or conflict between temporal and clerical forces – provides us with a better methodological approach to study the interplay of politics and religion.

To test this argument, a comparative analysis of the relationships between fascism and three religious movements in interwar Europe is undertaken here: the German Christian Movement (Glaubensbewegung deutscher Christen), Catholic Action (Azione Cattolica), and French Action (Action Française). While there are other candidates, these cases are both wide ranging and representative, presenting degrees of similarities and differences that together offer enough variation for a typological model.
The three cases represent a variety of Christian confessions and a variety of relationships to the Vatican. The German Christians were Protestants, and Catholic Action was supported by the Pope, while the French Action was actively opposed by the Pope. All three cases were similar in that they endured beyond the watershed year of 1945 and were earlier catalysts of inspiration in their demographics and geographical areas across interwar Europe.

Recent scholarship on the religious-fascist relationships suffers from major methodological and conceptual shortcomings. From a methodological perspective, in the absence of large-N comparative analyses – generally a quantitative study of more than 20 comparable cases that focus, due to limitations of data, more on generalized results than on detailed complex testing – research on fascism and religion has taken two main courses: idiosyncratic and very small-N comparisons – generally a study of 2–20 comparable cases that focus on improving quality of the study and supporting the nuances of a quantitative analysis, if applicable.1 Overwhelmingly, the studies have adopted in-depth and case-oriented strategies to understand the development of a specific manifestation of clerical fascism.

Case studies alone are evidence, not proof – they are primarily valuable in supplying material for further research. The confusion around terminology of ‘clerical fascism’ and ‘fascism as political religion’ is propagated by a reluctance among scholars to specify conceptual approaches or clear definitions (Griffin 2007). To make progress in the research, it is necessary to actively address the essential criteria needed in any social science: a degree consensus over the definition of terms and agreement over the degree of conceptual generalizability.

Clerical Fascism

Since 1925, when Don Luigi Sturzo, an Italian priest and the founder of the Italian Popular Party – who strongly opposed some Catholics’ support for Mussolini – first coined the term ‘clerical fascism’, it has mainly been treated as a moral judgment rather than an analytical tool. To find a working definition for clerical fascism, this study revisits the 14 case studies on ‘Clerical Fascism’ across all three major Christian confessions (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant) that were presented in the workshop. Although some European countries were missing (notably France, Slovakia, and the Baltic countries) and this analysis would be more robust if more than one study was included for each case, the workshop provided a heuristic pool of comparative cases. The scholars invited to the workshop were given two tasks: firstly, to determine to what extent it is legitimate to label the interaction between fascist movements and institutional Christian faiths as ‘clerical fascism’ and secondly, to discuss if ‘political religion’ is an appropriate analytical framework for studying fascism.

In order to propose a new definition for ‘clerical fascism’ and to identify the behavioral pattern of fascism as a syncretic coalition between political religion and politicized religion, this paper has applied a cluster analysis to identify common characteristics among fascist movements and religious groups explored in the workshop papers. Sturzo’s use of the label for members of the Catholic Church may have been a moral judgment, but the present concern is far more with Sturzo as one of the first scholars on totalitarianism. In Sturzo’s view, the main problem posed by totalitarianism was the threat it represents to the separation of state and religion; a totalitarian regime resulted from an imbalance of these two foundational concepts. In his Opera Omnia, Sturzo had already explored the concept of how totalitarian powers could co-opt the religion of a population to increase control, arguing that in order to keep the population mobilized ‘an abusive exploitation of the human religious sentiment’ is necessary (Schäfer 2004, 22–31).

Hugh Trevor-Roper, an Oxford historian and a British intelligence officer in Berlin in 1945, was another scholar who wrote on the interwar conflict between secular and religious forces. He argued that despite the rhetorical confusion, two distinct ideological systems underlie what
we call fascism: ‘clerical conservatism’ and ‘dynamic fascism’. Most fascist movements include both elements, but the proportion varies greatly based on class and societal structure (Trevor-Roper 1968).

Eatwell’s evaluation of the application of ‘clerical fascism’ argues that it is misleading to apply the term to groups lacking similarity to the Romanian Legionary movement. Most of the workshop participants also found ‘clerical fascism’ to be ‘not useful’ as an analytical tool, except for some cases, such as with Western Ukraine, Croatia, Romania, Austria, and Britain.

In the strictest sense, ‘clerical fascism’ is defined as professional clerics, theologians, or elites in an established religious tradition or doctrine, who can maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with fascism (Griffin 2007). Griffin identifies two types of clerical fascism: ‘confluence’ and ‘synthetic’. Confluence is understood as that which happens when two separate, or even conflicting, ideologies are brought together out of self-deception – such as when the cleric is convinced that common enemies are enough to merit collaboration – while the synthetic type represents a genuine identification and deeper connection in the minds and practices of clerics.

There was no consensus among the workshop participants over the definition of ‘clerical’ and the extent of its involvement in the fascist movements to define a movement as clerical fascism. Another source of confusion is rooted in the interpretation of religious practices as either traditional or transformed (or even travestied); this infuses nontraditional elements into Christianity – such as the introduction of the Aryan Paragraph (Arrienparagraf) within the Evangelical Church and Christian teachings in interwar Germany and Austria – or represents Christian doctrines and ceremonies in an absurd way, such as the adoption of the Apostles’ Creed by the British Fascists for their Children’s Club (Jackson 2010).

Other concerns come from the definition of Roger Griffin’s ‘fascist minimum’, where he defines ‘palingenetic ultranationalism’ as a minimum condition to define a movement as fascist (1991). This has resulted in some scholarly hesitation in applying clerical fascism as a label for movements where there is a lack of ultranationalism or a weaker kind of palingenesis. However, ultranationalism as observed in the self-empowered regimes, German National Socialism, and Italian Fascism are both exceptions as instances of full-fledged fascism. Thus, the term palingenetic nationalism might provide us with a better analytical tool for studying the variety of national permutations short of fascism.

To identify patterns of a political use of religion by fascist movements as well as types of clerical fascism, either confluence or synthetic, separate cluster analyses (using NVivo 10) were conducted on the fascist movements (Figures 1–3) and on the religious entities (Figures 4–6) discussed in the workshop. Based on the connotation approach to concepts, the cluster analyses here used 14 denotations of ‘clerical fascism’ allowed for a heuristic model for this concept. Religious groups, either as nationally implemented or as free movements, are arguably best categorized as ‘clerical fascist’ when they are characterized by the following: a transformed religious doctrine, a negative religious nationalism, and a relationship with fascist groups, in particular those connected to youth or education groups with free association with fascist parties and expanded social or political roles.

Fascism: A Syncretic Coalition Between Political and Politicized Religions

The scholarship on fascism and religion explores the relationships between fascist movements and religious groups from different perspectives. The first concerns fascism as political religion, which leads to the sacralization of politics or a diffusion of the sacred from above (Kallis 2007). Political religion is the application of a level of fervor that is traditionally reserved for religious beliefs to a secular entity, often resulting in the veneration of the entity as a god and answer
to human existence, whether the entity is a class, nation, race, or revolution (Gentile 2006; Dagnino 2012). Political religion contains three myths: the ‘sacralisation of politics’, the ‘cult of the leader’, and the ‘new man’, which constitutes its canon, along with a messiah (i.e., Lenin and Hitler), a prophet (i.e., proletariat and Aryan race), and sacred texts (i.e., Communist Manifesto and Mein Kampf).

The concept of political religion has remained controversial within the literature on totalitarianism. Some scholars, such as Ian Kershaw (2004), dismiss it as a redecorated version of paganism, which has become a fashion (Roberts 2009). But this ‘new religion’ was not simply a return to paganism but a return to the awareness of totalitarianism’s strange power and novelty (Dagnino 2012). Other scholars, such as Eatwell (2003) and Hans Mommsen (2007), argue that the term ‘political religion’ does not bear enough explanatory power for such concepts as ‘myth’
or ‘Rausch’ and indicate a need for either another analytical framework or ‘a more convincing way of accounting for them [features of “political religion”] and the roles they played, in interface with others’ (Roberts 2009, 409). Eatwell (2003) points out that while approaching fascism as a political religion strengthens the heuristic perspective, taken as a singular approach it could be problematic.

Scholars, such as Emilio Gentile (2006), Griffin (2007) and Michael Burleigh (2005), who embrace ‘political religion’ as an analytical tool, assert that their approach accounts for both definitions: political religion and totalitarianism (Roberts 2009). A major shortcoming of political religion theory lies in its skepticism of traditional religions’ response to liberal aspects of modernism. Griffin’s approach to political religion – which is based on Peter Berger’s ‘sacred canopy’ – ‘the creation and sustaining of a distinctly “human world” or “culture”’ – indicates the enlightenment’s role in dismantling the unified Christian perspective in the West, which in turn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Similarity of Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legionary Movement (RO); OUN (UA); Zbor (RS); 4th of August Regime (GR)</td>
<td>Dominant confession is Orthodox Christianity, generally shared the education of youth with the religious entity, the role of religious institutions increased in the socio-political arena of the society. The fascist groups in Greece and Serbia used religious nationalism positively and the other two groups used it as an “us vs. them” frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUF (UK); NSAP (SE); RNS (SE)</td>
<td>Protestant dominant; religious nationalism was positive; the role of the Church remained traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Arrow Cross (HU); The Blueshirts (IE)</td>
<td>Catholic dominant; religious nationalism was positive; the role of the Church remained traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fascist (IT); Nazi (DE)</td>
<td>These groups did not share the education with the Church, although the Church had its own youth groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ustaša (HR); New State (PT); FLN (BE); Patriot Front (AT)</td>
<td>Dominant confession is Catholicism; youth education is either shared (Ustaša and FNL) or monopolised by the church (Portugal and Austria); used negative religious nationalism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Clustering of fascist groups in interwar Europe (similar attributes). OUN, Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists; BUF, British Union of Fascists; NSAP: Nationalist Socialist Labour Party; FLN, Flemish National League; RNS, National Federation of the New Sweden.

Figure 4. Cluster grouping of religious entities (3D).
fostered the 19th century’s deep need for meaning, a vacuum which opened the door to finding meaning in movements such as fascism and Stalinism (Shorten 2012, 63). However, the more important concern, raised by David Roberts, is the extent to which political religion can explain totalitarianism’s departure and its variations.

Categorizing fascism as political religion, the whole religious symbolism of ritual, symbol, myth, and mission speaks to a more interesting and powerful influence than either manipulation or aesthetic satisfaction. It is shared belief, common purpose that is at issue, transcending the political hierarchies of a regime (Roberts 2009). This not only sheds light on another aspiration of totalitarian movements, the myth of ‘New Man’, but also provides new avenues of discovering how an alliance between political and politicized religions might refashion targeted societies. Roberts (2009, 387) suggests that approaching ‘political religion’ as a set of religious symbolism goes beyond the older model of ‘totalitarianism’ in complexity, from simple top-down domination to a finer understanding of the dimensional relationships between leaders and the led.

The second perspective deals with politicized religion, which leads to the converse, a ‘fascitisation’ of religion, or a diffusion of the sacred from below, which will be discussed in more detail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Similarity of Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Church of England (UK); Orthodox Church (RO); German Christians Movement (DE); The Manhem Society (SE)</td>
<td>Share anti-Semitism, anti-Communism, and anti-liberal values as common enemies with the fascist movements in their country; use negative religious nationalism; mainly Protestant (except Romania); they show tendency to fascism especially on the ground of national rebirth; infused some non-traditional elements in to their interpretation of Christianity (transformed or travestied)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek Orthodox Church (GR); Bogomolci Movement (RS); Clerical People’s Party (SE)</td>
<td>The first two groups are Orthodox and the third one is Protestant; they developed a confessional type of clerical fascism; forms of politicised Christianity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Catholic Church (IE); Catholic Action (IT); Croat Catholic Church (HR); The Catholic Church (PT)</td>
<td>Negative religious nationalism; established relation with Vatican; their cooperation with the fascist group is out of mutual interests; politicised Catholicism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Catholic Church (HU); Greek Catholic Church (UA); The Catholic Church (AT); The Catholic Revival Movement (IE)</td>
<td>Share anti-Semitism, anti-Communism, and anti-liberal values as common enemies with the fascist movements in their country; use negative religious nationalism; mainly Catholic (except Western Ukraine); Have connections with Vatican; politicised Catholicism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. Cluster grouping of religious entities (horizontal dendrogram).

Figure 6. Clustering of religious entities in interwar Europe (similar attributes).
details in the following sections. In the process of sacralization, fascist movements and religious institutions legitimize each other (Kallis 2007).

One approach that has not been given enough scholarly attention is approaching fascism as a syncretic coalition between political and politicized religion. A. F. K. Organski (1965), who first used the term syncretic fascism, distinguished between fascism under German National Socialism, where the country was already an industrialized state and fascism in newly industrialized nations such as Italy and Portugal. Organski argues that in the latter form, fascism is a coalition between two social forces, a traditional agriculture society and an emergent industrial one. Further, Organski contends that these two forces, at both the elite and the member levels, are in conflict with each other and within.

Borrowing from Organski, the model of fascism posited here is based on a syncretic coalition between two conflicting forces: a traditional religion and an emergent political religion (Figure 7). A political process approach to study this alliance examines the structures through which fascist and religious movements mobilize masses to achieve their political ends. This approach enables us to study of not only how fascist and religious forces respond to political opportunities but also how these collectivities reshape political contexts in their favor to create new opportunities (Schock 2005). In most cases, the watershed struggles for the ‘custody of youths’ and the ‘rebirth of nations’ provided both political and politicized forms of religion with opportunity structures to cooperate or struggle.

To achieve their own interests, these two ‘religions’ – political and politicized – have at different times supported and contradicted one another, especially when any sign of intervention into their claimed spheres by the other side seemed apparent. Both institutions have a totalitarian nature; where a fascist regime extends total control over all social, political, and economic arenas, a religious institution recognizes itself as the only legitimate authority (Dagnino 2012). In 1939, for example, Pope Pius XI’s announcement made clear that the church should be the only acceptable totalitarianism, since man is God’s creation and the church is God’s authority on earth (Fattorini 2011), an especially Catholic view.

The relationship between politics and religion under fascism is neither a matter of subordination nor a matter of interdependence. Instead, it more closely aligns with the logic of Plato’s ‘juxtaposition’ – the rhetorical principle, where two contrasting terms are discussed

Figure 7. A syncretic model of fascism: conflicts between conservative forces.6

in conjunction. However, this conjunction of opposites is not simple but conflictual (De Vries 2006). This raises the issue of two interrelated concerns of the ‘separation of church and state’ and ‘secularization’ under fascism.

Some consider fascism’s separation of church and state to be hostile (Linz 2004). This paper argues that discussion of a hostile separation is more valid under Bolshevism – the other end of the totalitarian spectrum – where Lenin institutionalized violence against all religious institutions and left no space for cooperation. Under fascism, malevolent and benevolent behaviors sometimes occurred simultaneously toward religious entities. Even Mussolini and Hitler did not bother to declare war against churches and did not support the hostile actions taken against Christians by those in their regimes (Gentile 2006). Similarly, one might challenge the idea of fascism’s political religion as a process toward secularization and see it as a direct competition, offering a replacement religion with its own new (albeit secular) rituals and symbols. While German and Italian fascisms can be categorized in that way, other incarnations of fascism direct a religious attitude more toward nationalism and national rebirth. The scholarship on fascism is required to re-evaluate fascism as political religion with respect to the current understanding of secularization. The sacralization of politics has two intertwined components: ‘ideological’ and ‘ritualistic-symbolic’. While the former component might be hostile to a traditional religion, the latter constituent is beholden to that religion (Adamson 2014, 54). In other words, the sacred did not vanish from society, as the classical approach to secularization expects. ‘Rather, the twentieth century experienced a diaspora of the sacred, where re-sacralisation became the consequence of secularisation itself’ (Dagnino 2012, 216). Fascism’s politico-religious configuration is a by-product of modernity, one that violates previous logic of subordination in both Calvinistic and Hobbesian logics.

The association of institutional Christian faiths and religious movements with fascism in interwar Europe is rooted in a variety of politicized religious traditions – or, in their extreme ends, in their ersatz ideological tendencies. In central and eastern Europe, the unity of church and state had long been an Orthodox tradition, and so cooperation between fascist forces and Orthodox churches has often resulted in an ultraconservative vision of negative religious nationalism in a majority of countries in the region (Plekon 2008).

Political Protestantism, on the other hand, is the opposite of the Orthodox tradition. It inherits the Western doctrine of ‘two swords’ – embodying a recognition of secular and religious authority as a matter of jurisdiction, as separate but equal peers within their spheres, for the purpose of accountability— as well as the emergence of nation states and the breakdown of the Christendom, which led to the generally apolitical position of Protestant churches (Freston 2009). This dualism in past traditions has resulted in opposing politico-theological patterns in interwar Germany and some Scandinavian nations.

The Catholic Church has nearly always been politically connected, hand-selecting armies, alliances, and even leaders. For the goal of a united Christendom, the church has leveraged both spiritual and political authorities, at least until the Reformation and its focus on national churches progressively limited the political influence of the church. Pope Pius IX in 1864 and his successor Pope Leo XIII issued encyclicals condemning modern and liberal values, especially religious tolerance (Hertzke 2009).

In interwar Fascism, extreme conservative forces of faith and nation invaded each other’s spheres in such a way that their ‘twin toleration’ (Stepan 2000) in many cases turned into a twisted fanaticism. Anti-Communism, anti-Semitism, and fear of liberal values provided fascist and religious groups with a variety of opportunities for cooperation; however, as the following cases demonstrate, both groups in different instances reshaped political context and framed their cause with enough appeal to gain each other’s political support.
The German Christians Movement

Three main forces worked within the Protestant Church in interwar Germany: the German Christians Movement, the German Faith Movement, and the responding opposition movement called the Confessing Church. The German Christians (Deutsche Christen) were organized and led by Ludwig Müller in 1932 as a Church Party (Kirchenpartei), marked by activity in the electoral process and being comprised of mainly Protestant SS members. The organization advocated the leadership principles of the Third Reich and adopted the ‘Aryan Paragraph’, denouncing the practice of any non-Aryan clergy (Bergen 1996) and focusing on three goals: to adapt National Socialism constitutionally, to apply Nazi policies within the church, and to follow the political leaders with the same devotion in the church as in the nation at large. In practice, this meant excising the ‘Jewish’ Old Testament.

The Faith Movement (Deutsche Glaubensbewegung), founded by university professor Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, advocated National Socialism’s ideology of blood and soil, pagan rituals, and the cult of Hitler’s personality.

I believe in the God of the German Religion, who works in nature, in the supreme human spirit and in the power of His people. And in Germany, which is creating a new humanity.10

The Protestant crisis under the Nazi regime was rooted in theological differences over these conflicting forces. Whereas the ‘German Christian’s’ movement found its legitimacy in the political theology of Carl Schmitt and Emanuel Hirsch’s Renaissance of Luther Movement, which proclaimed a ‘regard for history as a continuous revelation of God’, the opposing movement, the Confessional Church, referred to Karl Barth’s dialectic doctrine and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s ‘visibility of church’ stated that God revealed himself only once in Jesus Christ.11

Following Hitler’s seizure of power (Machtergreifung) in 1933, the German Christians issued their statement, revealing their political agenda and their subordination to the totalitarian state. In the series of national meetings, they emphasized Germanic heritage as a God-given gift, refused universal Christianity, praised the Reformation as a specifically German movement, and prioritized race and blood. Protestant groups who opposed the German Christians argued that the elites of the movement were obeying an authority other than, or in addition to, scripture. As for the Faith Movement, opponents feared their combined view of scripture and spirit with force and terror.

The Reich Synod elections provided a major opportunity for the Nazi Party and German Christians to extend their collaboration. Their pamphlets read as follows:

He who does not vote for the German Christian list is our enemy. He who is our enemy is the enemy of the state. The enemy of the state will be put on the black-list and will find himself in the concentration camp.13

However, the relationships between paganist members of the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) and pro-Nazi Christians were not friendly either. Many Nazi paganists wanted to publicly distinguish themselves from Christians, especially the NSDAP, whose clear hostility toward Christians was a marker of tension between Christianity and paganists among the Nazis. Himmler, one of the most anti-Christian and anti-Church paganists in the party, often expressed paradoxical tolerance of the lay Christian SS members (Steigmann-Gall 2007).

Both German Christians and Nazi elites reshaped political contexts whenever the opportunity arose. German Christians seized upon Martin Luther’s 450th birthday as an opportunity to call for a ‘second reformation’, wherein they proposed to eliminate the
Old Testament’s authority and remove any conflicts with the New Testament – ultimately replacing the central figure of the scriptures with a militant Nordic persona that matched the Nazi cause rather than a pacifist figure from Nazareth.\textsuperscript{14} Rosenberg also framed German religious pilgrimages to the Vatican as betrayals of Luther and the reformation, opening opportunities to attack Catholics as a replay of the 19th-century \textit{Kulturkampf}. He was one of the key proponents of paganism in the Nazi Party. His ‘Mythus’ raised serious reactions within Christian circles, both Catholics and Protestants. His paganism was influenced by the racial theories of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, an Englishman, and Count Gobineau, a French diplomat (Coyne 1935), as well as the ‘Aryan Jesus’ and ‘Nordic Christianity’ of Ernest Renan, a French philosopher (Steigmann-Gall 2003). Rosenberg presented his ‘Mythus’ – ‘the sacred blood of the German race’ – as a new religion and distinguished the Nordic race as ‘noble, progressive and heroic’ (Coyne 1935, 183). He even went so far as to call for a ‘fifth Gospel’ (Steigmann-Gall 2003, 109).

In addition to the opportunities created by the Christianization of National Socialism and the Nazification of Christianity, another aspect of Nazism’s political religion arose around the cult of the Führer. Hitler was in general anticlerical but always referred to his mission for Germany as a God-given task. His political achievements in the 1930s, which stabilized the economy, re-established the military and provided an ideological direction for millions, lent support to a popular perception of Hitler that very soon reached a religious pitch.\textsuperscript{15}

To keep the masses enthusiastic about Hitler in the midst of war, in the 1940s, Nazi elites saw Christmas as a public relations opportunity to develop a Messianic role for Hitler. On Christmas Eve in 1941, for instance, Joseph Goebbels narrated the following through the state broadcasting:

On this evening we will think of the Führer, who is also everywhere present this evening wherever Germans gather, and place ourselves in the service of the fatherland. At the end of the war, it shall be greater, lovelier, and more impressive. … We follow him. Without the shadow of a doubt, we follow him, bearing the flag and the Reich. The flag and the Reich shall remain pure and unscathed when the great hour of victory comes.\textsuperscript{16}

German Christians also adopted one of Luther’s great hymns to serve the Nazi program:

\begin{quote}
A Mighty Fortress is our God!
Luther’s song and the Deutschlandlied —
They should be in harmony!
Church and people —
They should stand together inseparably in joy and sorrow, in death and need!
The cross of Christ and the swastika —
They should and must stand alongside each other!\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

On December 31, 1944, Goebbels published an article about the Führer in \textit{Das Reich} that provoked much criticism. Based on a report published by the \textit{Führungsbericht} of Himmler’s \textit{Sicherheitsdienst} (or security service) in the Stuttgart area, Germans reacted negatively to the following points: ‘Hitler’s modesty, Hitler – the German God, the Führer’s love of peace, and Hitler’s foresight’.\textsuperscript{18} This report is especially important as post-Reformation Württemberg had been largely Protestant.

The aim of education became focused on the training of Hitler’s ideal ‘New Man’, emphasizing a fanatic nationalism and advocating a belief system around resolving conflicts through racism and war. Nationalism was the cornerstone of pro-Nazi religious teachings,
and any remaining scriptural references supported the spirit of the cause. Teachers compared the love and sacrifice of Jesus with Hitler’s love and sacrifice for Germany or compared the betrayal of Jesus by Judas with the betrayal of Germany by modern-day Jews. Another example is the German Christians’ attempt at the Nazification of Luther’s ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (see Appendix), which received varying reactions from the press. A headline in the Glasgow Herald (April 8, 1936) read “Meek” replaced by “Manly’, and the Canberra Times (June 6, 1936) called it ‘Modernised not Translated’. Both of these newspapers referred to the elimination of Old Testament references as key features of the Germanized version of the Sermon on the Mount.

Although the Third Reich and many Nazi Protestants took a variety of measures to merge Protestantism with National Socialism, their attempts for a successful syncretic coalition ultimately failed. Hitler and other leading Nazis rejected the compatibility of National Socialism with Protestantism; nor did they support the development of a coherent political religion such as that offered by Alfred Rosenberg’s ‘Positive Christianity’. Indeed, Hitler was so indifferent to Rosenberg’s *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* that it even did not become a mandate for the NSDAP, claiming ‘this doesn’t serve me; that doesn’t work; we are not getting any further’ (Linz 2004, 129).

As Linz (2004) argued, had Hitler been less romantic and more cynical, he may have found a further use for a politicized Protestant church, instead of being impelled to create a new and separate political religion.

**Action Française**

In response to the intervention of left-wing forces, such as Georges Sorel and Edouard Berth, in the belle époque Dreyfus Affair (Sternhall 1994), a group of conservative intellectuals led by Maurice Pujo and Henri Vaugeois established the far-right political movement Action Française. However, the movement largely gained its popularity from its charismatic ideologue and founder of its newspaper, Charles Maurras, whose doctrine of infusing integral nationalism with Catholicism sealed the political fate of the movement. While royalist and antirevolutionary, and opposing the legacy of the French Revolution, it was yet revolutionary due to its reactionary sentiment, although the Maurrassian iteration was ended in 1944 after the liberation of France.

Action Française was one of the movements that developed some fascist characteristics before the emergence of fascism across Europe. Under the influence of Maurras, the movement reshaped political contexts in different historical moments to foster its specific taste of French nationalism. Action Française not only shared with generic fascism its key negations, antisocialism/leftism, anti-Semitism, and antiparliamentarian democracy but also, like many fascist movements, benefited from an evolutionary coalition between nationalism and traditional religion.

It is noteworthy to mention that Maurras’ political ideology was very similar to Carl Schmitt’s, who is often dubbed a ‘conservative revolutionary’ (Griffin 1995, 138). Both of these ideologues, while atheist, enthusiastically supported established religion, although only as long as the political remained the ultimate secular authority. Schmitt endorsed the concept of the ‘total state’ and considered all religious, cultural, and even business organizations subordinated to the state (Hollerich 2004). Similarly Maurras’ support of the Catholic Church was based more upon religious national identity as a marker of Frenchness; he considered it more a cultural than religious force, and his true religious fervor reserved for nationalism.

Action Française emerged as a force when Maurras entered the Dreyfus Affair to defend Colonel Henry as a patriot and to denounce Dreyfus as a Jewish traitor. Maurras’ approach
won Action Française the support of the Church and military; it was a great victory for Maurras’ nationalism. Ernst Nolte identified Maurras’ approach as one of the ‘living lies’ that characterize the fascist position, arguing that these are critical in the emergence of a fascist movement. In Italy and Germany, it was the ‘living lie’ of a demobilized paramilitaries that marked the start of fascism. This living lie for Il Duce originated from the ‘battle of Vittorio Veneto’ while the Führer’s living lie was ‘the legend of the stab in the back’ (Nolte 1966, 57–58).

Maurras’ instrumental use of Catholicism is thus better understood if he is seen as disciple of both Auguste Comte and Arthur Gobineau. Comte was a French philosopher and the founder of the doctrine of positivism. His philosophy had two main tenets: a three-stage progress (theological, metaphysical, and positive), in addition to hierarchy and natural order. Maurras favored the idea of order from Comte’s positivism (Sutton 2002). While a supporter of monarchy, he believed in a regime based on institutions and hierarchical order (Winock 1998). Gobineau was a French aristocrat, whose racial theory marked scientific racism. Maurras’ idea of a purified France stemmed from Gobineau’s theory of the Aryan master race. Yet at its most essential, Christianity claims lordship over man, and so Maurras had to be at war both with it and Catholicism, which ultimately desires a temporal authority over men as well (Hollerich 2004). His order-centered positivist approach and Aryan-based nationalism accordingly resulted in a deformed version of Catholicism, which was neither traditional nor politicized but travestied. Just as his later German counterparts would, Maurras centered his theology on his nation (Davies 1988).

The mutual interests of the Vatican and Maurras provided opportunities for both sides to collaborate until 1926, when the Pope forced Maurras to choose between his political and ecclesiastical interests. Maurras never hid his sympathy for Italian Fascism and, on many occasions, lent his support for Mussolini’s policies. Like the Catholic Action in Italy, Maurras supported Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia and framed it as a great opportunity for a national rebirth.

Maurras despised Nazi Germany as much as he hated Jews. However, in 1940, he saw a great opportunity to relaunch his political agenda and mobilized Action Française in support behind General Philippe Petain, to the extent that he praised Petain as a ‘divine surprise’. Maurras, welcoming the idea of a defeated France, shed doubt on his genuine nationalism the same way that his transformed religious belief revealed his heretical Catholicism (Nolte 1966). One might argue that his framing strategy of events – based on reshaping political contexts through the lens of faith and nationalism – provided Action Française half a decade of surprising influence in the domestic and international affairs of 1940s France.

The Catholic Action

German Nazism first took root in the Catholic state of Bavaria, but fascism gained an uneasy alliance with Catholicism throughout the early 20th century in other places as well; in Italy, Austria, Portugal, Spain, and Poland, strong Catholic influence stood beside fascist inclinations. However, the relationships between fascist movements and the Catholic Church varied from one country to another. For instance, in Italy the ‘Roman Question’ provided an opportunity for collaboration between Mussolini and the Vatican, who were plagued by their continued struggle over youth education. In Spain and Portugal, due to historical connections between Catholicism and authoritarianism, alliance between fascism and Catholicism emerged out of a mutual compatibility. But the relationship between Dollfuss regime and Austrian Catholics unfolded differently. Despite similarity to the Spanish and Portuguese model, in particular the role of religious vote, Austrian Nazis showed hostility to the Dollfuss regime for his embrace of Austrian Catholicism and his rejection of an Anschluss (Atkin & Tallett 2003).
The Vatican’s foreign policy aimed to eliminate the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 and to reform the Holy Roman Empire. Both goals were initially agreed upon by Nazi policy, since Hitler rhetorically allied the Holy Roman Empire with the Germanic Empire (Murphy 1944b). In contrast, both Mussolini and the Catholic Church capitalized on each other’s influence, drawn by the power of the other’s reach (Koon 1985).

The interwar Pontiff, Pope Pius XI, belonged to the Jesuit-dominated tradition that considered any branch of Christianity other than Catholic as illegitimate (Lehmann 1944, 57):

As concerns the relations of the Catholic Church with other religious associations, there is no doubt that all religious associations of unbelievers and all the Christian sects are regarded by the Catholic Church as entirely illegitimate and devoid of all right of existence.

Both the Pope and Hitler were dogmatic in regard to the rightness of their ideology. Although vastly more conservative in practice, the Jesuit-sponsored Catholic Action – established in 1905 by Pope Pius X as an excommunication drive to contain modernism among church members – believed in religious cleansing as the only way to settle differences. While the fascist forces took that cleansing process to an extreme and violent level, Catholic Action’s ideology was similarly (but not violently) intolerant of anything other than the goal of reconstructing Vatican-centered Christendom.

Pope Pius XI, in his Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, described the direction, aims, means, and appropriate political structure for the success of Catholic Action, which aimed to fight liberal values and form a united crusade against communism, with the ultimate goal of restoring Christendom (Murphy 1944a). The outline planned to eradicate corrupt Catholic branches, to purge secularism from the clergy and laity, and lastly, to develop a totalitarian-type structure as the optimal form of rule to ensure success.

To achieve his first goal, the Pope betrayed liberal Catholic parties such as the Center Party in Germany and the Popular Party in Italy. Pope Pius XI depended upon the Catholic Action network’s influence with the Catholic laity to support this restoration, but church and state clashed over the Catholic Action youth groups. The conflict over the instruction of youth was more a power struggle than ideological one; in fact, both groups persisted in dominating the influence of young people (Koon 1985).

Catholic Action soon became a network of Catholic activists spread across Catholic-dominated countries, with *Christus Rex* (Christ the King) as their slogan. In Belgium, Léon Degrelle, whose followers called him ‘Adolf’ Degrelle due to his admiration for Hitler, led the Catholic Action, and his fascist movement was referred to as ‘Rexists’. He even organized his own storm troopers, formations de combat, which served with the Waffen-SS during WWII. Belgium’s collaboration with the Nazi state was his priority: ‘We must make our choice now. We have faith in the Führer as the greatest man of our time. …’ (Lehmann 1944, 61).

In Franco’s Spain, the Catholic Action was entrusted with many roles in social and political arenas of the state, and they served Franco’s political ends, even though, unlike fascist Italy and Germany, the entire education system was entrusted to the Catholic Church. Any opinions or ideologies that opposed Catholic thought, or any propaganda to that effect, were denounced as heretical and absolutely rejected as a false religion: ‘Spanish fascism must be a Catholic fascism, but it must be understood that it is not only Catholic but Spanish Catholic’.

Franco outlined his plan to protect Catholics as such, since Catholicism was the religion of the state, no proselytization and no public worship for other faiths were to be allowed. Catholic law
and authority would be one and the same with Spanish law and authority, and state would administer the church.

Father Pietro Tacchi-Venturi – a Jesuit priest, who served as a liaison between Mussolini and the interwar Pontiffs – once described himself as a ‘good Jesuit and a good Fascist’. While he had been close to Mussolini and mediated negotiations between the pontiff and Il Duce with other National Fascist Party representatives, Tacchi-Venturi warned that a complete break between Fascism and the church would signal the regime’s collapse (Koon 1985, 126). Even fascist intellectuals such as Mario Tinti believed that a new Italian civilization could only be born and normalized by turning to the grand traditions of Catholicism as a universal societal authority (Dagnino 2014).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that eschatological framing and identity formation, if appropriate circumstances or opportunities exit, hold the potential to lead to the most violent and evil acts of men, such as the Holocaust under Nazis, genocide under the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, and the brutality and hate crimes of Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations toward Jews in North America.

A varying range of crises and events, both at the international and national levels, was under discussion, including common enemy (communism and liberalism), foreign invasion (i.e., Italian invasion of Ethiopia), old cleavages (i.e., the Roman Question), religious ceremonies (i.e., Christmas), elections (i.e., Reich Synod), youth education and ethnic nationalism, and how these provided fascist movements and religious forces with a variety of political opportunities to collaborate or struggle.

The first part of this paper offered a working definition for ‘clerical fascism’ and argued that fascism is best understood as a syncretic coalition between political religion and politicized religion. While their coalition provided both sides with some opportunities, the cost to both domains – political and politicized – was ultimately both fragility and failure. In addition, the need to re-evaluate the application of ‘political religion’ to our new understanding of secularization was suggested, as well as traditional religion’s response to modernism.

The second part of the paper centered on development of fascist fervor in three different religious movements. Specifically, the goal was to demonstrate that fascist movements, which utilized the religious sentiments of the nations and entrusted religious entities with some socio-political roles, fulfilled their political ends more successfully. In other words, fascism in Spain might not have developed as fully as Nazism in Germany and Fascism in Italy, but Franco utilized religion behind his political agenda more effectively than Hitler and Mussolini. Variation in politicized Christianity evoked differing responses to fascism. While an interpretation of Protestantism based on Carl Schmitt’s ideology led to a politicized form of Christianity that was Nazi friendly, an interpretation based on Bonhoeffer’s work resulted in the formation of a strong resistance movement against the Nazi regime. Meanwhile, the Vatican played an important role in emergence of a ‘confluence’ type of clerical fascism, as Maurrasian’s take on Catholicism paved the way for a deeper connection between Christianity and fascism.

Finally, this paper has concluded that the development of fascist characteristics is not limited to religious movements that have direct encounters with a fascist movement; rather, the characteristics might develop under occupation, such as in Belgium and France, or perhaps even in the absence of a national fascist movement such as in the case of the Christian Identity movement.
Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Leonard Weinberg, Matthew Feldman, and anonymous reviewers for their comments on the earlier version of this text. I am grateful to the Hoover Workshop on Totalitarian Regimes, the Hoover Archive, and the Hoover Library, which have facilitated the completion of this article.

Short Biography

Eliot Assoudeh is a PhD candidate of political science at University of Nevada Reno. His research interests are political violence, political religion, and totalitarian regimes. He is a 2014 recipient of the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA) research grant for his project on *Apocalyptic Politics and Totalitarian Behavior*. He holds an MA in Liberal Arts from Western Washington University (2010).

Notes

*Correspondence: University of Nevada Reno, Department of Political Science, Mail Stop 0302, Reno, NV 89557-0302, USA. Email: eassoudeh@nevada.unr.edu*

2. Earlier scholarship on the relationships between church and state applied the term ‘clerical conservative state’, rather than a clerical fascist state, see Thomas C. Bruneau ‘Church and State in Portugal: Crisis of Cross and Sword’. *Journal of Church and State* 18, no. 3 (1976): 463–90.
3. For instance, for Thomas Linehan (2007) lower clergy who showed synthetic support for the British Union of Fascists are clerical fascists. But Bruno De Wever (2007) refuses to apply clerical fascism to the clergy of the Catholic Revival Movement (CRM) – who genuinely cooperated with the Flemish National League (FNL) in Belgium – because of the CRM’s comparatively lower rank.
4. For Anton Sândulescu (2007), the religious practices of the Iron Guard stem from politicized Orthodoxy, but for Radu Ioanid (2004), the legionary movement making saints out of their martyrs is considered a transformed Christianity and is more similar to a political religion.
5. Each concept is a set of signs (denotations) and meanings or attitudes (connotations) associated with those signs. For discussion on these terms, see, for example, Eco (1979).
7. See, for example, Bradstock (2004); Van Kley (1996)
9. See Linz (2004, 107), where he demonstrated that even a theocracy in its extreme end meets ersatz ideology.
15. *Friends of Europe*, no. 22, p. 5.
16. See ‘German War Christmas (1944)’ collection, German Propaganda Archive. Online at: http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/weihnacht44.htm
17. See Hahn (1934).
Works Cited


Works Presented at the International Workshop on Clerical Fascism:


Further Reading


Appendix

**Luther’s Sermon on the Mount**

Blessed are [Selig sind] they who are spiritually poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they who bear suffering, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

…

Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

**Müller’s Sermon on the Mount**


Benevolence to him who bears His suffering manfully. He will find the power to never doubt uncourageously.

Benevolence to him who always maintains good comradeship [Kameradschaft]. He will get on well in the world.

…

Benevolence to those who maintain peace with the members of their Volk, they do God’s will.

Benevolence to those who live honorably and faithfully, and work, but who have been nevertheless persecuted and slandered—they keep communion with God.
You ought not to think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets. I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill.

You have heard how it was said to the ancients: Thou shalt not kill; but he who kills shall be due judgment.

But I say to you: he who is angry with his brother is worthy of judgment. But he who says to his brother: Raca, is answerable to the council. But he who says: you fool, is in danger of hellfire.

You have heard further that which was said to the ancients: you shall not give false oaths, and shall not give oaths by God. But I say to you that you should not swear at all, neither by heaven for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth, for it is his foot-stool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is a great king’s city. Also you should not swear by your head for you cannot make a single hair white or black. Let your speech be: Yes for yes, no for no; anything beyond that is evil.

You ought not to think that I want to change or dissolve the divine truths and challenges that you have received from your fathers. I intend to fulfill them.

You carry it in your blood and your fathers have taught you: You shall not commit assassination -- such a murderer is guilty and must be sentenced to death. You must, however, recognize and make it clear to yourself that murder is the result of an inner development that begins with jealousy, envy and hate. He who allows such a mentality in himself is already guilty. But he who insults and persecutes his fellow Volk members out of such a mentality makes himself even more guilty. But he who seeks moral destruction or threatens violently, destroys the Volk community and makes himself due before God and man for the most harsh of penalties.

Further, you have as a Volk law the holy tradition that you must hold to a sworn oath and that perjury is a crime.

I say to you: you must hold the honor of God, of your Volk and your own honor so high and sacred that you do not swear to every little thing. You ought to so live with each other that one’s word given as a man is of value.

Then yes is yes, and no is no. All ambiguity is dishonorable and untrue.
Appendix (Continued)

Luther's Sermon on the Mount
Müller's Sermon on the Mount

But I say to you that you should not resist evil, but if anyone should strike you on the right cheek, turn the other one also.

... You have heard how it is said: you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you: love your enemy, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who offend and persecute you.

... No one can serve two masters, either he will hate the one and love the other, or will stay with one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon.

... If you, being evil, could nevertheless give your children good gifts, how much more will your father in heaven give good things to them who ask him?

... I say to you: it is better, so to live with other members of your Volk that you get along with each other. Volk community [volksgemeinschaft] is a high and sacred trust for which you must make sacrifice. Therefore come out to meet your opponent as far as you can before you completely fall out with him. If in his excitement your comrade hits you in the face, it is not always correct to hit him back. It is more manly to preserve a reflective calm. Then will your comrade be truly ashamed of himself.

... A message from ancient times says: ‘Love your friend and hate your opponents’. I say to you: if you wish to be God’s children you must take a different stance toward your fellow Volk-members and your comrades. Be comrade-like not only to your friend, but also to those who oppose you. Be calm and composed toward those who are hateful for the moment; take pains yourself to attain a noble and calm attitude toward an offender and persecutor.

... It is a simple truth that no one can serve two masters. He can only serve one with his whole effort, and not the other in the same way with the same joyfulness. Thus you cannot serve both God and the demon of Gold.

... If earthly men now give their children good gifts, will not the eternal God help much more those who in concern for their inner life ask for his strength and power?...
Therefore, whatever you want that men should do to you, do so to them; that is the law and the prophets.

And now I tell you the great secret of true Volksgemeinschaft and real comradeship: a truth which most men pass over without noticing and which could still help them so much in their daily lives. It is a divine truth that lies deep in your blood and which your fathers have passed on to you. A simple truth that nevertheless embraces all of God’s greatness. And this truth is: everything that you would wish men to do to you, do also to them!

... (Zabel 1976, 208–210)