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Elements of a Socio-History of the Relation Between Nation and Religion – the Case of Catholicism

Patrick Michel

CNRS and École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris)

Abstract: The Nation has been key to the modernisation process in the social and the political spheres. Especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, the Nation paradoxically became itself an object of sacralisation, as well as creating a new type of enchantment.

This led to the homogenisation of its social diversity which in turn produced a sense of ‘sameness’. Today, the reality of pluralism makes the fiction of ‘sameness’ untenable at the global level (it has not, however, quelled all forms of resistance against this global process). In this, we see a reaffirmation of a sense of ‘sameness’, and, at the same time, of some absolute beliefs. To explore these issues, this paper will focus on the paradoxical relations between the Catholic Church and the Nation and how these have led to complex contemporary dispositions in the organisation of the religious

*“All individuals, all nations, cultures and civilizations have their own part to play and their own place in God’s mysterious plan and in the universal history of salvation.”*¹ This formula by John Paul II in *Slavorum Apostoli* evidences the status now accorded to the “nation” by the Holy See – that of a link in the chain, which ties man to civilization. The order in which these concepts are enumerated is not devoid of significance. While putting nations and cultures in a subordinate position, as intermediaries, the pope locates civilization at the end of the chain, as if civilization was to maintain a special relationship with religion or even to merge with it.

More down to earth, religion and nation are intimately involved in the reshaping of legitimacy, that is to say in the successive (and partially overlapping) attempts at reordering existing systems of beliefs, as well as in the institutionalization of religion. These multiple changes have allowed beliefs to remain connected to fluid realities, to inhabit them, if not to transform them. Therefore, the reshuffled couple “religion-nation” deserves to be investigated if one wishes to discern and to shed light on the contemporary redeployments of these complex configurations. Over the course of history, a kind of legitimacy based on divine right has been replaced with a form of legitimacy associated with the nation. This legitimacy was produced by and epitomized in the advance of modernity. However, it was from the outset built on ambivalence. It was simultaneously a privileged instrument of modernization (*id est* of disenchantment) of politics *and* an instrument thanks to which enchantment was perpetuated in a new form. Hence the legitimacy associated with the nation also offered a privileged site for the refusal of modernity. In other words, the proclamation of the sovereign nation clearly constituted an essential part of the transition to a modern political stage. Although this new source of legitimacy was nearly everywhere sacralized, its promotion made space for the perpetuation of the previous kind of politics and polity, which was based on transcendence (and therefore on enchantment).

¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Slavorum Apostoli* on the occasion of the eleventh centenary of the brother saints, Cyril and Methodius’s work of evangelisation. Rome, June 2nd, 1985 (19), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/fr/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_19850602_slavorum-apostoli.html

This endeavor to perpetuate enchantment has taken one main guise, that of an attempt to forcibly homogenize societies in order to produce “Sameness”—be it fictitiously. While the ascent of the nation reflected an increase in differentiation (in line with the logic of modernity), this mode of organization only managed to prevail in XIXth and XXth Century Europe through the (re)production of un-differentiation, often at the cost of multifaceted violence.

In a contemporary situation which is characterized with a new distribution of differentiated and undifferentiated—since social actors are aware of the ongoing transition to a globalized world—, the specific contents of either “religion” or “the nation” are of little interest. What matters are the successive socio-political operationalizations of these contents and even more so, the way they have acquired credibility. In the relationship between “religion” and “the nation,” the focus should not be on the relationship *per se* but on what it tells us about societies’ response to today’s movement. Therefore, we have to consider religion as an intermediate object, an object which is not deemed relevant in itself. Rather the assumption is that, once adequately contextualized, the analysis of religious matters may shed light on developments that are associated with, but not subsumed under religion.

Nation and religion both tend to resist all attempts at definition. Some authors have even suggested that definitions of religion resembled a Tower of Babel.² One might rightfully use a similar image to speak of the nation. In the early XXth century, the Founding Fathers of social sciences already admitted that they were perplexed when faced with this notion. As Durkheim put it, “the concept of the nation is beyond doubt a mystical, an obscure idea.”³ As in the case of religion, attempts to define the nation have gravitated towards two poles. On one end of the spectrum, primordial definitions of the nation border on essentialism. On the other end, scholars opt for various shades of functionalism. As a fact, the notion of the nation does not easily lend itself to unified definitions. For any such definition leans towards de-contextualization.⁴ Since it was originally coined, the notion of nation has evolved at the intersection between a diversity of complex and, in part, contradictory logics. More precisely, the nation was intended by its very promoters to embody and to reconcile conflicting logics, while allowing them to retain their own dynamics.

A renewed form of legitimacy, the nation imposed itself in the nineteenth century as a new framework of collective identification and a political frame more in tune with modernity. Its promotion went alongside the destruction of previous constituent markers of traditional identities (both collective and individual) and the erosion of imperial logics. Thereby, the nation became a privileged site for those who wished to explore symbols, identity and politics and, more importantly, to conceptualize their articulation.

Nationalism, meanwhile, appeared on European soil as a kind of “in-between.” It embodied the gap that existed between the initial ambitions (and the original meanings) of “national

² Yves Lambert, “La tour de Babel des définitions de la religion,” *Social Compass* 38/1 (1991): 73–85.

³ Emile Durkheim, *Textes III* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1975), 49. Dominique Schnapper’s *La communauté des citoyens. Sur l’idée moderne de nation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) is prefixed by this same quote.

⁴ Though there was indeed some relevance in distinguishing a “political nation” from a “cultural nation,” a nation according to Renan from a nation in the German sense, a contract-based nation, and therefore based on autonomy, a nation organised by the idea of belonging, and, consequently, by heteronomy, one wonders what this distinction becomes when a territorial principle has been introduced, since January 1st, 2000, in the German Nationality Code? Children of foreigners born on German territory, from foreign parents who were also born in Germany, and who have been living there for a long time, are German since birth.

https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Droit_du_sol_-_cite_note-21

movements” and the concrete realities produced by the instrumentalization of the mobilizing powers of the national idea in the service of the State. To put it otherwise, and to cut a long story short, nationalism emerged as a social phenomenon because Cavour obviously failed to create the Italian state that Mazzini had dreamt of; because Bismarck, far from achieving German unity, used the existence of diffuse aspirations to unification amongst the general public to pursue the historical rise of Prussia,⁵ and, perhaps most important, because Napoleon III never championed the rights of nationalities. Each in his own way, Cavour, Bismarck and Napoleon placed references to the nation at the heart of strategies, which were designed to induce and to legitimize a reconfiguration of extant orders. The nation was a device used to promote and sanction specific kinds of political order. References to the nation also played a key role in the development of a European movement.

Gellner’s argument is well-known: Nations do not produce nationalism. Rather nationalism fosters the creation of nations.⁶ But, as Amir Mahieddin notes, “nations are not as homogenizing, homogenized, and unitarian as the nationalist discourse claims they are. Ambivalent and conflicting, they are less territorial and contiguous areas of consensus than symbolic and fragmented spaces of dissent as far as their definition and their future themselves are concerned.”⁷ The point observers tend to miss is that the kind of nations nationalism often produces tends to be fairly nationalistic. When scholars lament the “return of the nations,” they are in fact depicting a revival of nationalism. However, subsuming one phenomenon under the other might raise analytical problems. Both notions should be clearly distinguished, as Polish historian Bronisław Geremek rightly argued as early as 1989. At the time he invited Western observers not to fear “nations” but rather “nationalisms.”

The relationship between religion and nation is far from being univocal. In history, this couple has come under many disguises. Let us consider the “religion vs. nation” variant. A telling example is that of Pope Pius IX and his *Syllabus*. In the eyes of the pope, both the nation and political modernity pertain to this *libertas perditionis*, this senseless endeavour of building a world emancipated from God, denounced by St. Augustine as well as by Louis Veuillot. Symmetrically, “the nation” has often been opposed to religion. From France’s Third Republic to Kemal’s Turkey, from Germany’s *Kulturkampf* to Bourguiba’s policies at the dawn of the Tunisian independence, with its lay overtones, there are many examples of the political construction of a tension aiming at conditioning the progress of the nation upon an effort to contain religion. In France, the Catholic Church was turned into a symbol of what had to be overcome, and the Republic into the vector of this process. Thereby, the coincidence between the Republic and the Nation which has long been pursued was achieved.

There are also numerous examples of situations where “religion” was placed in “the service of the nation,” as evidenced, for instance, by the mobilization of Catholicism for the purpose of

⁵ The entity born out of the process of German unification, under the aegis of Prussia, is a good example of it. The German Reich legitimises its position through the nation, by its pretention to realise and to embody it. This led to institutions apparently in phase with political modernity (the Reichstag being elected by universal suffrage). But, in reality, this entity was much more the result of the instrumentalization of a national movement in the service of Prussian State’s interests, the product of a violence exerted on the part of German territory that did not recognize this construction. The German chancellor – who was necessarily Prussia’s chancellor – was not responsible before Reichstag, but before Prussia’s Landtag, who was elected for his part not by universal suffrage, but according to the law of “the three classes” which gave exorbitant privileges to the Junkers. The aim was in fact to perpetuate a legitimacy of divine-right monarchy, with the system that was associated to it, behind the appearance of a construction relying on national right.

⁶ Ernest Gellner, *Nations et nationalisme* (Paris: Payot, 1989).

⁷ Émir Mahieddin, “Sacrees nations !, Démons de l’analogie entre nationalisme et religion,” *Revue du MAUSS permanente*, February, 15th, 2014, <http://www.journaldumauss.net/./?Sacrees-nations>

building a “Croatian national identity” in the 1990s. We may also recall the role earlier played by Catholicism as a “central socio-cultural operator” on the Polish scene (to borrow Krzysztof Pomian’s expression). This configuration may well be reversed. In such cases “the nation [is placed] in the service of religion.” It serves a higher purpose that only few enlightened prophets are able to reveal. Russian Vladimir Soloviev wrote, for example, that “although deprived of its political independence, Poland has not perished. It perseveres in its national vocation, which has often included a theocratic component, albeit in a distorted form. Introduced mainly within the Russian Empire, the Poles do not want and can not melt away into the Russian sea because not content to build their own national unity, they represent a spiritual idea—that of Catholicism.”⁸

Moreover, this relationship between nation and religion cannot be approached independently of the dynamics in which it operates. For example, the Italian nation that the Catholic Church defends in the late twentieth century, establishing itself as the last bastion of the Unity, as its guarantor, is not the nation that condemned this same Church in the middle of the nineteenth century. Gian Enrico Rusconi welcomed the “firm” position of the Church in front of or against the League, but he immediately added: “The Church has combined his pastoral concerns [...] with the fear of a socio-political situation that its organizational structures would be no longer able to control.”⁹ And indeed, if Rusconi could be satisfied with the support of the Catholic Church, his point was not, unlike the latter, to defend the fiction of Italian Unity, but to plead for his passing, and to build a real political identity, that would be precisely released of this fiction.

We are witnessing the end of the nation-state cycle. Stating this is not underestimating the difficulty of rebuilding political benchmarks in this part of Europe freed (or orphan) from the reference to communism. This is also not prophesying for tomorrow the collapse of nations. We still have kings and queens today, long after the end of the monarchy by divine right cycle. It is simply to say that the nation-utopia, which was the privileged instrument of calling into question an “order,” has been successively replaced by an institutional nation-religion¹⁰–

⁸ Vladimir Soloviev, *Conscience de la Russie* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1950), 71 (The quoted text had been written in 1884 and was published in St. Petersburg in 1904). The same argument is taken up in the contemporary period by the Polish Jerzy Lewandowski in his book dedicated to the *Theology of the Nation*: “the Polish Nation is aware God has assigned it a double task: first, a task at home, which is relevant to it, to the members of the Nation, the second task is external, concerning the other Nations, all the divine Economy. In either case, it has general and specific roles to play. (...) Thanks to its identity and its individuality, it is at the service of the other Nations, complete what they do lack, and what lacks to the entire Family of Nations” [Jerzy Lewandowski, *L’Eglise et la Nation polonaise selon le cardinal Stefan Wyszyński*, (Berne-Francfort/M.: Peter Lang, 1982), 158].

⁹ Gian Enrico Rusconi, *Patria e repubblica* (Bologne: Il Mulino, 1997), 7–8. The support the Church granted to the nation has a particular meaning. At the time of the exhaustion of the central reference to the legitimacy of divine-right monarchy and therefore the shift from a political landscape which tends to organize itself according to the logics linked to nation-state, and no longer according to an imperialistic logics, the Church has reorganized itself: it extracted itself both from time (positioning itself therefore as an instance of anticipation of the failure, unavoidable according to it, of modernity), and space, holding its ground on a sort of extra-territoriality which would allow it to resurface everywhere and to take it to its logical conclusion, aiming at constituting the Pope into a monarch, thus breaking with the fiction of “*primus inter pares*.” See my paper, “Le dernier pape. Réflexions sur l’usage du politique sous le pontificat de Jean-Paul II,” in *Tous les chemins ne mènent plus à Rome*, ed. René Luneau and Patrick Michel (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 390–415. The double approach which is to reaffirm today its universality (the adoption of a universal Catechism, for the very first time since the Council of Trent) and to defend the nation-state would tend to indicate that the Church is aware that the world has reached a turning point in its history, and is reorganising itself in order to face it.

¹⁰ As Emilio Gentile puts it, nationalism becomes a form of “religion” as it constitutes “a sacralization of politics which manifests itself in the modern age and asserts itself when the political dimension, *after gaining its*

an official worship—and then by a highly secularized nation, facing indifferentism, to which “we belong without believing,” to paraphrase the sociologist Grace Davie’s formula (*believing without belonging*) used to describe the attitude of contemporary British vis-à-vis religion.¹¹

This change may seem difficult to accept. Guy Hermet was thus concerned, after the end of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, to see “the Czechs, Hungarians, becoming foreign to what they are,” “Poles resigned not to confuse faith with nationality”¹²... Without going into the—abysmal—task which would be to identify “what” the Czechs and Hungarians¹³ are, in order to measure their new foreignness in relation to this ontological reference, the very idea of a “Polish resignation” actually said more about the author’s fantasies than about what he claimed to describe. It is true that Hermet stood there in good company, finding Chateaubriand, Lamennais, Michelet, or, in his way, Jarry, in the construction of a purely imaginary Poland allowing all projections.¹⁴

The problem is of course that this Poland has little to do with the real one. One can remember, from this perspective, the outcome of the 1993’s parliamentary elections or the 1995’s presidential elections, which were widely reported, even in Poland, as the sanction of the Church’s pretensions to perpetuate on a pluralist scene a centrality acquired in the time of communism, and purely operative. Concerning more precisely the relationship between Catholicism and national identity, the sociologist Ewa Nowicka had published in 1997 a very interesting study, where she commented on the results of several investigations. To the question “What do you think makes someone a Pole?,” only 9.2% of respondents felt that the Catholic faith was very important, somewhat important 17.1%, 19.1% not very important and 41.1% not important at all. More significantly, perhaps, the question “What condition must meet a stranger to become Polish,” the “being Catholic” answer arrives in ninth (and penultimate) position, with 1.3%, as the most important condition, and the first position, with 30.3% as the least important condition.¹⁵ More recently, the anti-clerical party, launched in 2011 by Janusz Palikot, who came from PO (center-right Liberal), won 10% of the votes in

institutional independence, vis-à-vis traditional religion, acquires its *own religious dimension*, in the sense that it acquires an autonomous sacred dimension that allows itself to claim the prerogative of defining the meaning and the ultimate goal of human life, at least on the earth, for the individual and the collective.” Emilio Gentile, *Les religions de la politique. Entre démocratie et totalitarisme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), 14.

¹¹ Grace Davie, *La religion des Britanniques* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1996).

¹² Guy Hermet, *Histoire des nations et du nationalisme en Europe* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1996), 281.

¹³ Assuming moreover that they all are so *in the same way* which seems pretty far from being demonstrated.

¹⁴ Hermet is, admittedly, sometimes disconcerting in his analysis of nations and nationalism (*Histoire des nations et du nationalisme en Europe*). He faults Gellner (55–56) for being more “concerned to develop a theory than shading light on complex realities.” He then gives facts which are rather in line with Gellner’s theory but this is to better put them aside by using the argument that they partake in the Austro-Hungarian or Russian empires (“conglomerations of the most diverse populations”) and proposes therefore to stick to Western Europe (57). Without going as far as considering Italy, Germany or Belgium (which must doubtless refer to complex realities of Russo-Austro-Hungarian type which shall consequently be discarded), he uses—without regard to the scaffolding of a theory—two examples. That of Coventry’s craftsmen in 1713 (in order to reflect the frame of mind of English masses) and the declaration by the King Henri IV to the grandees of Lyon (the facts in line with Gellner’s approach pertained, for their part, to average conscripts, poor emigrants, or peasants). Théodore Zeldin, in his *History des passions françaises*, seems to be infinitely closer than Hermet to “complex realities” when he points out that, at the beginning of the first chapter, dedicated to national identity, of the second tome of his book: “In 1864, a Schools Inspector, on a tour on the mountains of Lozère, interviewed children in a school in a village: ‘In which country is situated Lozère? Not a single pupil could answer. ‘Are you English or Russian?’ They could not tell.” (Paris: Le Seuil, 1980), 5).

¹⁵ Ewa Nowicka, “Roman catholicism and the contents of ‘Polishness’”, in *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irena Borowik and Grzegorz Babinski (Cracovie: Nomos, 1997), 81–92.

parliamentary elections that year. Pro-abortion, pro-gay marriage, pro-European, this party camped on progressive positions and declared itself in favor of a strict separation between Church and State.¹⁶

It is significant, in this respect, that the contemporary uses of religion in the political field are all based upon a reference to tradition. Recent mobilizations in France against the “marriage for all” have amply evidenced this phenomenon. But as Michel de Certeau has noted, this political use of religion expresses a general uneasiness and unveils something that otherwise would have stayed in the dark.¹⁷ Should we then say that “it’s all about religion,” or should we rather say that it’s about the way religion is being used to reject a development that seems to dissolve individual and collective identities? Is the contemporary demand for religion, as the alleged keeper of the tradition and of the myth of origin, not a strategy to save these individual and collective identities?

What is fundamentally at stake here, and what explains the call for religion as the emblematic part of a whole, is the exhaustion of a certain identification mode linked to the nation-state and the growing evidence of plurality replacing the fiction of a homogenous society. This plurality is induced by a permanent implantation on European soil of populations having roots in other parts of the world; as time goes by and generations succeed each other, these populations identify themselves increasingly as “French” (or “German,” “Italian,” etc.) and as “European.” It was in reference to this reality that Umberto Eco evoked, as one plausible scenario for the 21st century, the concomitant end of a Europe of nation-states and of a “white” Europe. Speaking about this “coloured Europe,” Eco added that he was “not thinking (or not only) about the colour of skin: maybe there will also be ‘coloured’ religions. “Why not,” he went on asking, “a Sunni Christianity, an Anglican Avicennism, or a Buddhist Sufism?”¹⁸

The challenge therefore lies in this dialectic between homogeneity and heterogeneity, which is at work today and which underpins the European debate. It applies particularly to the problem of contemporary identities, which are blurry, moving, plural, and therefore potentially seen as “uncertain.” But little progress will take place concerning the intelligence of these identities with what Régis Debray obviously seems to believe: that “religion becomes an identity card.”¹⁹

In a period marked by the strong distortion between the time of rapid change (visible) and the time of slow change (more difficult to imagine), the religious actually appears to be permanently used to serve as a vector of adjustment. This vector is basically neutral, as hard as that is to accept for all the supporters of an essentialist reading of religion as a whole, or of one specific confession. Taking a position *vis à vis* the movement can mean either accompanying it (and providing religious resources to justify and even to celebrate it); or refusing this movement (the religious being erected in a privileged space of a call to a tradition invented for this purpose—and presented as *the* tradition). It is not a matter of condemning this or that modality of the movement, but the movement itself, in that it is seen

¹⁶ The party which has been the victim of the excesses of its founder (attempt to remove the crosses from the compound of the Diet and other provocations), changes its name in 2013 and becomes “Twoj Ruch.” It has been brushed off during the 2014 European elections.

¹⁷ Michel de Certeau, *L’absent de l’histoire* (Paris: Mame, 1973).

¹⁸ Jean-Claude Carrière, Jean Delumeau, Umberto Eco and Stephen Jay Gould, *Entretiens sur la fin des temps*, (Paris: Fayard, 1998), 315.

¹⁹ Régis Debray, *Ce que nous voile le voile: la République et le sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

as undermining all stabilities; or finally—which is perhaps the most common situation—“taming” the movement, by slowing it, flattening it, translating it, in order to make it graspable in the very categories of tradition.

We can clearly see the first two figures, in which religion is no longer a justification of violence or, conversely, asserts itself as such. At the conception advocated by the Dalai Lama (“Notions like ‘my nation’, ‘your nation,’ ‘my religion,’ ‘your religion’ have become secondary. We have to insist, on the contrary, that the other is of equal worth to us. This is humanity!”) will oppose any political re-uses of a religious which will be made of it a radical reading, aiming at legitimizing absolutized identities, and thus “loopholes” in the words of Amin Maalouf.²⁰

It is less clear, however, how to figure out the meaning of the third figure. It is worth emphasizing here how the fascination for Islamism can lead to obscure the reality of processes that play through and across Islam. If, as Jocelyne Cesari²¹ said, in her study of French Muslims, “investments in Islam [by the banlieue youth] actually reveal a quest for identity that cross the entire French youth,” then Islam is a tool of the socio-political integration of young Muslims.

As they experience acute awareness of the progress of globalization, nations become an identification register among others. Nations are questioned at three levels: as a source of legitimacy (we are moving away from the era of the ‘Same’ to that of plural identifications), as a political spring (the relevance of the national space is questioned both from below and from above) and as a community (applying “closed” membership criteria is becoming increasingly challenging). But this prospect raises many resistances. Hence the emergence of political entrepreneurs who position themselves as defenders of the nation as a stable reference (this reference is characterized by its ability to be reinvented in the very process of being shielded from changes), who denounce higgledy-piggledy *metissage* and make-do, and who stigmatize the process of individualization underpinning practices of mixing. In this situation, the relationship between “nation” and “religion” now appears in new clothes. Religion may either constitute a register, a space and a vector for the continued relevance of the nation or for its superseding.

Religion is able to confirm and to perpetuate the relevance of the nation because religion establishes the validity of the closed criteria used to define the nation. Contemporary societies are facing a multifaceted transformation process, which breaks references, redistributes relation to space and time, questions identities and shakes any stability. No surprise, therefore, that all of these mutations lead to the invention of a new “Other,” in situation to be used as a reference.

There are several reasons explaining why “the Arab” (and more generally “the Muslim”) has become the negative reference in which all European fears are mirrored. One is the new visibility of pluralism, due to the massive presence of Islam (this explains the French law against “ostensible signs” or the Swiss vote on minarets), defying the fictive homogeneity upon which rested the nation-state. In this respect, it doesn’t make any difference to say that, in Europe, Islam intervenes basically as a resource employed to redraw the lines of a stable identity; that is, a temporarily stabilized identity, an identity serving to negotiate with a host-society that, the closer you come to it, the more inaccessible it seems. All recent research

²⁰ Amin Maalouf, *Les identités meurtrières* (Paris: LGF - Livre de Poche, 2001).

²¹ Jocelyne Césari, “Musulmans français et intégration socio-politique,” in *Religion et action dans l’espace public*, ed. Pierre Bréchon, Bruno Duriez and Jacques Ion (Paris: L’Harmattan, coll. “Logiques politiques,” 2000), 63.

conducted in different European countries (United Kingdom, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy) shows that for the overwhelming majority of immigrants coming from Muslim countries, Islam is a precious resource in terms of integration into the new society. If we were to draw ultimate consequences from this observation, we would take up a phrase of Léon Poliakov saying that the difference between a Catholic and a Jew is that the Catholic no longer goes to the Church, while the Jew no longer goes to the Synagogue, and we would say that a Muslim is someone that no longer goes to the Mosque—or will cease to go to in the future. Religious practice among French originating from the Muslim immigration, be they second or third generation immigrants, is much lower than among the children and the grandchildren of Portuguese immigrants.

Still, Islam is generally not perceived as vehicle of a “silent revolution” of integration of the overwhelming majority, but rather as a banner of a violent revolution conducted by an infinite minority. Even the idea that Islam is used in an ideological and instrumental way seems sometimes hard to admit. And those who warn against the Islamic “danger” to national cohesion, national identity and national culture are rarely contested; rarely do we hear someone responding to this by saying that these warnings say more about those who spread them than about the reality they pretend to describe. Rarely do we hear someone saying that these ideas reveal the fears and secret intentions of those who defend them. In his letter to diocesans from 12 September 2000, the archbishop of Bologna, Cardinal Biffi, warned already for two major threats to the Italian society: “the constant inflow of populations coming from distant and different countries,” and “the diffusion of a non-Christian culture among the Christian population.” Society is defined here with criteria of a stable identity, and the reference to Catholicism plays a central role. The victory in the Polish parliamentary elections of 25 October 2015 of Jarosław Kaczyński’s Law and Justice Party (PiS) shares the same logic, articulating anti-European rhetoric, anti-migrants (and anti-Muslims) discourse and promise to “bring back the Catholics values in Poland”.²² It is true that shortly after September 11, the Primate Glemp had already warned, in the same perspective, against the dangers Muslim immigration would pose to Polish identity. And Radio Maryja’s objective is still a re-catholicization of the Poles, which inevitably means a disqualification of the Jews, ex-communists and other Freemasons (Father Jankowski, of Gdansk, was able to assert that “the Jews have no right to represent the nation” without being condemned by the Church or by politicians). The religious appears central in the management of political disenchantment. The Church intervenes—religion is invoked—to slow pluralization, that is to say to perpetuate a reading of reality, where the public space is conceived as a total space, undifferentiated, and where the other’s “citizenship” is questioned. This tends to show that those are right who claim that, in a last resort, “the only ‘unity’ that is noticeable in Europe is that of fear, of everything that Europe is not—without exception: the Islamist “integrism”, immigration, “totalitarianism,” the collapse of the socialist states, China, the United States... Europe is a constant and absurd management of fear.”²³

Although religion may be used to reiterate the relevance of the nation, the purpose of those who resort to it may well be to move beyond the nation. This configuration needs to be seen in connection with the progress of globalization and in a context where the market of symbolic goods has become increasingly competitive. The system put in place by John Paul II was based on the couple formed by the unending assertion of a unique central truth, that of *Splendor veritatis* and its adjustment to the diversity of local realities through the pope’s travels. This resulted in a constant movement back and forth between the center and the periphery, feeding continual transactions. The massive use of canonization and beatification,

²² Jacek Kowalski, the city councillor PiS of Nowy Dwór, in *JDD*, Paris, October, 25th, 2015, p. 8.

²³ Alain Badiou, “Note sur l’Europe,” *Penser l’Europe et ses frontières* (Strasbourg: Ed. de l’aube, 1993).

initiated by Pope John Paul II and continued by his successors, participates in this movement when local authorities/religious entrepreneurs and believers are likely to benefit from getting a “blessed” or a “saint” of their own. In the process, the Vatican is able to reaffirm its centrality. One example among others is provided by the opening in 2005 of the cause of beatification of the “Father of Independence” and the first president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere Kambarage (1922-1999). Marie-Aude Fouéré has analyzed this case in which the state “tends to lose its legitimacy to produce imaginary of the nation” because of “the inability of elites to realize the hopes raised by the democratization and economic liberalization.” As for the Catholic Church, its ability to monopolize the enunciation of a religious truth being challenged by new churches, its status as the preferred partner of the Tanzanian state was being questioned.” Against this background, the state and the Church had a shared interest in using the “promotion of the revisited figure of Nyerere” as a symbolic resource.²⁴

Since the time when Pius IX listed “the main errors of our time” in his 1864 *Syllabus* and concluded his inventory stigmatizing the idea that “The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with, progress, liberalism and modern civilization,”²⁵ and make compromise with these ideas,” the Church has been in a position of having to constantly renegotiate its relationship to space, time and authority.²⁶ True, the arrangements put in place at the end of the nineteenth century by a Church which conceived of itself as an anti-modern alternative to modernity have been revised by John Paul II: The bracket of modernity is now supposed to be closed. Hence the Church does not need to situate itself in relation to it. However, this thesis has reached its limits. Furthermore, the acceleration of a multifaceted movement that works and upsets all societies raises anew the question of the relation to space and time. While Islam and Evangelical movements are still able to build a relationship to territory which suits the requirements of societies more or less suddenly drawn into globalization, the Catholic Church remains, because of its institutional logic, locked in a conception of the religious sphere/of legitimacy/of the world that current developments are questioning more and more (even if Francis considers that “it is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense—the Pope says—I am conscious of the need to promote a sound “decentralization”).²⁷

The configuration is the same when it comes to the relationship to time. In Latin America, several Indian movements have been asking the pope to acknowledge their entitlement to a belief system of their own. Some North-American observers additionally argue that Latin

²⁴ Marie-Aude Fouéré, “La fabrique d’un saint en Tanzanie postsocialiste,” *Les Cahiers d’Afrique de l’Est* 39, (Nairobi: Institut français de recherche en Afrique, 2008): 47–97.

²⁵ For the text of the *Syllabus*, (“Syllabus of the principal errors of our time, which are censured in the Consistorial Allocutions, Encyclical and other Apostolic Letters of our most Holy Lord, Pope Pius IX,” December 8th, 1864). See http://www.salve-regina.com/Magistere/PIE_IX_syllabus.htm.

²⁶ Pope Pius IX, eager to respond to an evolution which, with the end of the Ancient Regime, the establishment of the nation-state and the acceleration in the transition to industrial society challenges in time (the Church is not “modern”) and space (the Pope has no State any more) the very existence of the Church, has implemented a system where the Church, excluding itself from modernity, constitutes itself into an anti-modern alternative to this modernity, denounced as a “senseless endeavour of the building of a world emancipated from God,” according to Louis Veuillot’s expression. Deprived of its own space, the Church pretends, notably through the missions, to occupy all space. At least, by the pontifical infallibility, the Pope grants for himself a spiritual authority in a way none of his predecessors had enjoyed.

²⁷ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* of Pope Francis, Rome, November, 24th, 2013. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

America was never truly evangelized. Faced with these challenges, Benedict merely stated that “the proclamation of Jesus and of his Gospel has not, at any time, entailed the alienation of the pre-Hispanic cultures; nor could it be equated with the imposition of a foreign culture.”²⁸ In the same vein, when considering the evangelization of the country, the Vatican’s text on the “martyrs of China,” emphasizes “the desire to bring people to the light of the Gospel in order to develop further the treasures of their rich and deep cultural and religious traditions.” Christianity is and is “seen as a reality that was not opposed to the highest values of the traditions of the Chinese people; nor was it superimposed on them. [Christianity] endowed them with a new light and a new dimension.”²⁹ In any case, for Evangelicals as for Catholicism, the reference to the nation appears purely instrumental. If the progression of neo-Pentecostalism bears testimony to the pluralization of societies, to the renewal of axiological systems in connection with the accelerated transformation thereof, and to the advances of neo-liberal globalization, the invocation of the nation among Latin American Evangelicals (“the *nación para Cristo*,” the proclamation of *Jesus’ para transformar the nación*) is primarily designed to disseminate a model ideologically informed. In a similar perspective, the exaltation of specific nations through religion observed in Latin American Catholicism aims primarily to promote a “*Patria grande*” which is part and parcel of the “*Pueblo universal*.”

Highlighting the relative neutrality of contents (regardless of the register we consider—religious or national) does not entail that we deem these contents interchangeable. Each discourse is intended to provide a coherent narrative. Each one of them is born of a particular context and has developed in specific situations on which it sheds light. These localized contexts help to elucidate the various elaborations and re-elaborations of existing narratives. Therefore, what is at stake is not the existence of specificities, but that of a fictitious insularity which endowed these specificities with a unique quality, and thus certified their existence. In a world that is characterized by generalized movement, insularity tends to no longer exist. Correspondingly, the very notion of centrality is getting eroded. As a result, although contents can still supply, reproduce, justify and legitimize the existence of specificities, they do so with an ever decreasing plausibility. They are constantly confronted with and subjected to an undeniable fact: contents are merely relative.

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²⁸ Benedict XVI, inaugural address of the V^e Conférence of the episcopate of Latin-America and the Caribbean, May, 13th, 2007, CELAM, *V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe. Documento conclusivo*, CELAM, Bogotá, 2008, p. 8.

²⁹ http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20001001_zhao-rong-compagni_fr.html.

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