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The Impact of Religion on Political and Social Policies in Contemporary Italy and the US

When it comes to the way people live in society, where do politics and religion stand in relation to one another? Where does one begin and the other end? Does religion impact the way a society functions? What if all the people in a society share different religions? Can a citizen's private religious life carry over into public life? In this paper, I will discuss the impact of religion on political and social policies in contemporary Italy. I will also compare how the Italian situation differs from that of the US.

The Catholic Church has a large force over the hearts and minds of Italians, as well as a great presence in every aspect of social and public life. Italian political leaders acknowledge the place of the Catholic Church in Italian society. The Catholic Church has been a great social and political force in Italy for centuries and is at the heart of Italian social life. In the United States, the prevailing church is the Protestant Church, which has a longstanding history as well, being the church upon which the Founding Fathers based their society and political policies. However, in the US, when it comes to the issue of the separation of Church and State, the issue today becomes very complex. Also in Italy, it is difficult to tell where the Church ends and the Government begins.

Where do the Church and the Government stand in relation to one another in modern society? And to what extent can they work together in building a fair and just society? To what extent do they work contrary to each other? Are there instances in the US and in Italy in which the force of Religion in public life becomes too strong for the rules of a secular society? At what point does the presence of the Church in public and political life impede upon citizens of different religious beliefs?

Firstly, it is important to establish a working definition of Religion. For the purposes of this paper, Religion will be defined as a set of beliefs and practices centered around interpreting and communing with an idea of a higher power. In particular, Religion will refer to the particular way in which a person or set of people interpret that divine power or life truth in his or her own language and/or social conditions.

It is also important to differentiate between the terms political policy and social policy. In this paper, social policy will refer to policies affecting the social conditions under which people live. Political policy will refer broadly to the policies guiding the idea of the government of the modern nation-state. Finally, public policy will refer broadly to both social and political policies.

In modern society, religion is generally practiced privately, whereas in the past it was more of a public function around which society was built. The Catholic Church, which has remained in Italy for hundreds of years, has seen many major changes in the ways in which society is built and the level of involvement of religion therein.

Today, religion is not the central organizing force of society. Yet even in the secular nation-state of Italy, religion plays a major role in society and public life. Whereas in the past, religious practices were central to the functioning of public life, today they are farther removed. Before the rise of modernity in Europe, religion was thought of as a characteristic of a people, like the color of someone's hair or the language a person speaks (Alford 2008). All of the people of a territory or tribe practiced the same set of public religious practices together in a social setting. However, as the modern period approached, nation-states were formed that encompassed religiously diverse citizens. Because many citizens practiced differently from one another, religion came to be thought of as more of a private choice than a public function (Alford 2008). Thus, because a nation-state can encompass religiously diverse citizens, political policies must not impose a certain set of religious practices on all of its citizens (Alford 2008). Political policies must instead find a set of common values on which everyone can agree. These common values are not necessarily religious.

One of the most obvious places to look for an explanation of these societal rules is the Constitution of the Italian Republic. Article 19 says that “All persons have the right to profess freely their own religious faith in any form, individually or in association... provided that the religious rites are not contrary to public morality” (Constitution 6). The most important thing in this case is the idea of “public morality,” and that any citizen can practice any religion as long as it falls under the umbrella of commonly accepted morality. Political policies are based on common values on which everyone can agree. Religion is not necessarily involved.

The rise of modernity in Europe may have weakened the link historically between religion and political policies. However, it has also created new ways of linking religion and political policies that may prove just as strong. For instance, new forms of participation in politics have arisen in the nation-state structure. The Christian Democratic parties are the most obvious example of this phenomenon. A few examples that Alford mentioned in class are the German Center Party, the Belgian Catholic Party, the Netherlands’ RKSP Catholic Party, France’s ARP Anti-Revolutionist Calvinist Party, and the Italians’ PPI and Christian Democratic Parties (Alford 2008). These parties arose out of a necessity to link religion with a secular political sphere. Since these parties are based out of religious worldviews, they provide a forum within the modern secular nation-state for religious political views to be properly represented. Therefore, it can also be argued that religion still has an impact on the realm of political policy today. However different it may be from the past, these religiously-driven parties play a major role in modern political life in Italy and in Europe.

Religion also affects political and social policies in the United States but in a different way. The Italians have religious political parties, such as the PPI, whereas the Americans do not. American citizens instead elect officials to represent them based on their political policies rather than their religious affiliations. However, there are some instances of citizens who will vote for a particular political candidate based on his or her religion. This may be because sometimes an elected official’s religious viewpoints influence his or her public policies. For example, US

President George W. Bush continues to support the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, OFBCI, an organization that helps citizens in need by providing government funding to faith-based and community organizations. This organization is committed to solving mass societal problems such as addiction, homelessness and HIV/AIDS (FBCI News Archive 2008). This program has however sparked much debate over where to draw the line between religion and political policy. Since President Bush is a United Methodist, some American citizens think that President Bush's private religious beliefs have affected his public policy decisions when it comes to the FBCI's and other similar causes. Other American citizens think that the faith-based and community organizations provide a much needed service to society and do not care if religion and politics have converged on this issue. These are most likely the citizens who share the same religious worldview as the President.

When it comes to government monetary support of faith-based programs, there are many citizens who agree and disagree. The New York Times poll by Goodstein in 2001 finds that "Americans [generally] approve of giving government money to religious groups that provide social services but only if the groups getting the money are either Christian or Jewish" (Goodstein 2001). Yet, there is still a percentage of the population that is neither Christian nor Jewish, yet whose tax dollars will go to support those faith-based programs. It is only natural for citizens to want to support their own religion over the religion of another. The only way FBCO's would be completely fair is if they equally supported all the religious programs including unfamiliar non-Western groups such as the Muslims and the Buddhists in proportion to the percentage of the population practicing these faiths. But even this approach is unfair from a secular nation-state point of view. Firstly, there are not nearly enough actual Muslim and Buddhist programs set in place in society as there are Protestant ones, because the Protestants were in America first and had more time to establish their programs and their place in society. And secondly, what about the Atheists, who do not practice faith at all? To what programs will their proportion of the government FBCO money go? As you can see, this issue gets complex very quickly because if the government supports one faith, it must

equally support them all or none at all in order to maintain religious neutrality. However, the fact remains that faith-based community programs do have merit on their own as they provide much needed social services to society through longstanding community structures already set in place such as the Church.

In contemporary Italy, faith-based community organizations provide a service to society as well. Most of these are provided by the Catholic Church. The Catholic religion in Italy is even stronger than the Protestant faith in the United States, with as many as 95% of citizens proclaiming themselves to be of the Catholic faith. Compare this to the 49% of Americans who proclaim themselves to be Protestant. In the case of Italy, the Church has the force to run its own social programs and actually support itself fiscally. The Church is everywhere in Italy, and its programs have been in operation for centuries. In Italy resides the heart and home of the Catholic Church, and its social programs reach into realms of public life that in other countries are left to the government.

One of the areas the Church takes care of in society is unemployment. Whereas in a country like America, the issue of unemployment is left to the government, in Italy the issue of unemployment is largely considered by the Catholic Church. When people are unemployed in Italy, the Church has structures set up to feed and shelter them for a certain amount of time. For instance, in the city of Rome there are several shelters in which people without work can come and eat and take shelter. One of these is called the “Ostello Caritas,” a voluntary action promoted by the Church to assist poor people and immigrants. The prevailing objective of this organization is that of “the promotion of the human person” (Area Mense 2008). The meal provided includes two plates, crackers, fruit, bread, drink and ice cream (Virtu 2008). In addition to meeting the basic human need of hunger, the meal also provides a chance for human contact (Virtu 2008). The Caritas Roma website says that “The meal is an occasion to establish human relationships between guests and volunteers in an atmosphere of fraternal welcome” (Area Mense 2008). So, in addition to meeting the need of hunger, the Caritas also meets the human need of contact and community. Community is indeed a building block of society. Society functions around communities. The entire idea of

employment is based around communities. So, in order to integrate these unemployed people back into society, the Caritas focuses on caring for the whole person in community.

Compared to the idea of the Faith Based Community Initiatives in the US, the idea is along the same vein of thinking. The Faith Based Community Initiatives are set up around the idea that there are already structures in place in society, the Church, to help promote community and help the unemployed and those in need.

However, the major difference is that of funding. Whereas organizations like the Caritas are completely privately funded, the organizations funded by the governmental FBCI's are not. Instead, they receive public money to go towards these social causes. This is where the distinctions between political and social policies get mixed. Whereas the Caritas can be thought of as a privately funded social policy, the FBCI's can be thought of as a publicly funded political policy.

It is a well known fact that in many public buildings in Italy, including political institutions, there are religious symbols displayed such as the Christian Crucifix. Indeed, also in the United States there are instances of religious symbols appearing in public spaces. However, these symbols are slowly being removed from American society. Take for instance the removal of the 10 commandments monument at the courthouse in Alabama's state judicial building in November of 2003. The Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, called this action "a tremendous victory for the rule of law and respect for religious diversity" (qtd. in CNN). Yet, a CNN-USA Today-Gallup poll found that 77 percent of the 1,009 Americans interviewed disapproved of U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson's order to remove this Judeo-Christian monument. This massive disapproval shows the force of the Judeo-Christian belief system in the hearts and minds of many American citizens. In this way, religion has a great force in political decisions that affect public life. A courthouse is a building that all citizens share, regardless of their race or their religion. The question is, do these symbols of the Judeo-Christian belief system impede the freedoms of the atheist in the courthouse? Or do they instead, properly represent the worldview and religion of the majority of Americans who use the courthouse? Take also for

instance how when a person testifies in an American court, he or she must swear upon the English Bible – the original symbol of the Founding Fathers’ commonly shared religion. The courthouse is a public space, but it is yet inevitably affected by the force of religious belief.

Indeed religion and political-social policies are affected by one another in both the United States and in Italy. When US President George W. Bush visited Italy on June 12th, 2008, he visited both Prime Minister Berlusconi and Pope Benedict XVI, giving nearly equal time to both (Excite). See “Picture 1” to see the American President pictured with both Italian figures. The fact that the US President upon visiting Italy spent almost equal time visiting both the political leader and the religious leader in Italy shows how important both realms are in Italian society.

Indeed the realm of religion in Italy may have the upper hand on the realm of politics when it comes to the hearts and minds of the Italian people. After Berlusconi visited Benedict XVI at the Vatican on 5 June of this year, he said the following:

Now you have to work harder [said Berlusconi to encourage the government] with more passion and more enthusiasm. Between Italy and the Holy Seat there is a strong commonality of views, the priorities of which are the sacredness of the person and the family. (Excite)

This quote, while it is the pontification of an elected official, shows the supremacy of the Holy Seat over the Italian government. The views held by the Holy Seat are the views that many Italian citizens share. In this way, religion affects the political realm. Because religion is such an intimate part of social life in Italy, “the sacredness of the person and the family,” it only makes sense that these views would extend into politics. You can see these values in “Picture 2,” in which Prime Minister Berlusconi kisses the hand of Pope Benedict XVI, an action which suggests a certain amount of respect for the Church, and also an element of submission. What does that submissive gesture on the part of the political figure say about the impact of religion on the socio-political realm in contemporary Italy?

Where do the Church and the Government stand in relation to one another in Italian society? What is the nation-state's official level of involvement with the Church? During that same visit, Berlusconi also said the following about government activity and the Church:

The government activity can only please the Pope and his Church. We are on the side of the Church. We believe in values of Christian tradition, in absolute value of life, in the role of the family and in defence of human rights. (Excite)

Again, this quote shows the supremacy of Christian values in the minds of elected government officials such as Berlusconi. While Berlusconi may or may not privately follow the Christian religion very closely, by virtue of his position as Prime Minister of Italy he is in support of the values of the Catholic Church and the values of the vast majority of the Italian citizens. Berlusconi claims that Italians "believe in the values of the Christian tradition" and the "role of family and the defence of human rights." These are causes that the government must confront when making political policy. When it comes to making laws to govern citizens of a nation-state, these certain issues must be confronted. In the case of Italy, these issues are confronted in the government with Christian values in mind.

The state is, however, independent of the Church in Italy however much lip-service it may pay. The state does not judicially come underneath the Church, but instead it is an entirely autonomous and separate entity. Even though the minds and hearts of elected officials may pay great respect to the supremacy of the Church, the governing power of the state remains the same. Religion may greatly influence political policy, however it does not hold any tangible control over it. This idea is reflected in the end of Berlusconi's quote upon visiting the Papacy as follows:

We believe that our vision of the relationship between church and state is respectful of the liberal principles contained in our Constitution, in the sense that we feel that between church and state there can be a dialogue on any and all subjects. (Excite)

In this quote, it becomes more evident that the nation-state must think of itself as more of a separate entity from the Church. While many people may believe in Catholic values, the function of the

nation-state is to be “respectful of the liberal principles contained in its Constitution,” meaning that the state must make laws that respect all people and do not enforce one particular religion over another. The state must respect religious diversity. Yet, there is still room for a close and friendly dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Italian government. They remain in close relationship to each other and continually affect one another in the areas of social and political policy.

It has become evident that Italian political and social policy are closely related to religion in Italy. The values of the Catholic Church are respected by many citizens living in Italy and inevitably affect political and social policies. However, the borders of the nation-state are clearly drawn, or at least attempt to be clearly drawn. It is important that the state, as per its Constitution, does not impinge upon the freedoms of any one of its citizens, even if that citizen does not hold fast to Catholic values.

Remember that 95% of Italian citizens profess themselves to be Catholic. Article 8 of the Italian Constitution reflects this fact in the specific wording of the article. “Religious confessions other than the Catholic one have the right to organise...” (Constitution 3). Just the wording, “other than the Catholic one,” suggests the large number of Italian citizens who profess themselves to be of the Catholic faith. It is only natural that this social fact would impact the very language of the Italian Constitution. The fact that so many are Catholic impacts the wording of the law. It is indeed a reality in this particular nation-state that cannot go ignored in the wording of the Constitution. The Constitution does, however, provide for equal religious rights for all citizens regardless of their religion. Nevertheless it cannot be ignored that the wording of this article divides its citizens into two categories: Catholic and non Catholic. This particular religion is at the heart of Italian society and cannot be ignored in the wording of this article. Religion indubitably impacts the laws of the state no matter how much the state proclaims to be separate from religion.

Remember that Berlusconi said that “between Church and State there can be a dialogue on any and all subjects” (Excite). These words echo article 7 of the Italian Constitution which says that

“the State and the Catholic Church are independent and sovereign, each within its own sphere” (3). This means that the church and the state, as provided for in the state law, act separately from each other and are each sovereign in their own spheres. However, their spheres overlap when it comes to how society actually functions. Take for example the issue of unemployment, a sector regarded in the US as the responsibility of the state. In Italy, it is actually the responsibility of the Church. The definitions of what is state and what is church are somewhat unclear.

The function of the nation-state is however to create and maintain order for its citizens to inhabit freely. In both the US and Italy, the struggle to maintain the appropriate distance between religion and public policy continues. And yet, it seems as though religion will always affect the decisions of public officials because of the very nature of religion. Religion is a worldview, a way of looking at the world and making decisions. It is only natural that the officials making political policy would see things through their own particular worldview and make decisions accordingly. Religion does indeed have an intricate and complicated way of influencing the social and political landscapes in the US and in Italy. From influencing laws to public policy to social programs, religion seems to touch every aspect of personal and public life.



Picture 1: President Bush visiting the Pope and the Prime Minister

<http://politica.excite.it/news/9760/Dopo-Berlusconi-Bush-incontra-il-Papa>



Picture 2: The Prime Minister and the Pope

<http://politica.excite.it/news/9573/Berlusconi-in-visita-da-Benedetto-XV>

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