

EMILIO GENTILE

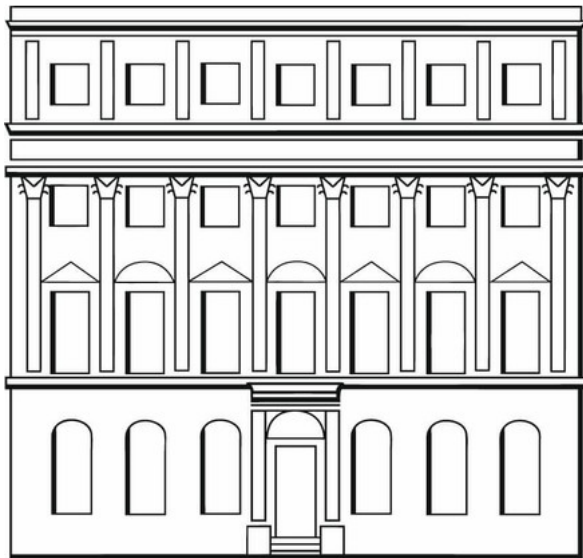
Fascistese: The Religious Dimensions of Political Language in Fascist
Italy

in

WILLIBALD STEINMETZ (ed.), *Political Languages in the Age of Extremes* (Oxford:
Oxford University Press, 2011)

pp. 69–82

ISBN: 978 0 199 60296 4



German
Historical
Institute
London

The following PDF is published under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND licence. Anyone may freely read, download, distribute, and make the work available to the public in printed or electronic form provided that appropriate credit is given. However, no commercial use is allowed and the work may not be altered or transformed, or serve as the basis for a derivative work. The publication rights for this volume have formally reverted from Oxford University Press to the German Historical Institute London. All reasonable effort has been made to contact any further copyright holders in this volume. Any objections to this material being published online under open access should be addressed to the German Historical Institute London.

DOI:

Fascistese: The Religious Dimensions of Political Language in Fascist Italy

EMILIO GENTILE

This paper will focus on the religious dimensions of fascist political language, which, for brevity, I will call *fascistese*. *Fascistese* is substantially made up of three dimensions: religious, military, and bureaucratic. However, the religious dimension was, in many ways, the predominant one in fascist rhetoric, being more closely linked to the fundamental structure of the political culture of the fascists. This culture was based on the supremacy of mythical thought and on the concept of politics as a total life experience, both in individual and collective terms. This is an extremely complex subject and can only be developed here in a very condensed form, by means of some general reflections, supported by examples, selected to represent the behavioural patterns that we may consider as constituting the essential characteristics of fascism, universally shared by all, or the majority of those who were fascist.¹

The analysis of fascist political language has already been initiated within several research projects, but there are no in-depth studies in existence as yet. Up to now, the study of fascist political language has concentrated on the language used by Mussolini. There is no doubt that much of *fascistese* was the invention of the writer and orator Mussolini. He was an extremely able creator of neologisms and rhetorical formulas which were received and imitated in all fascist linguistic expression, from the highest fascist

¹ On fascist language see H. Ellwanger, *Sulla lingua di Mussolini* (Milan, 1941); M. T. Gentile, *Educazione linguistica e crisi della libertà* (Rome, 1966); E. Leso, 'Storia delle parole politiche: Fascista (Fascio, Fascismo)', *Lingua nostra*, 32/2 (1971), 54-60; id., 'Aspetti della lingua del fascismo: Prime linee e di una ricerca', in M. Gnerre, M. Medici, and R. Simone (eds.), *Storia linguistica dell'Italia nel Novecento* (Rome, 1973), 139-58; E. Leso, M. A. Cortellazzo, I. Paccagnella, and F. Foresti, *La lingua italiana e il fascismo* (Bologna, 1977); G. Fedel, 'Per uno studio del linguaggio di Mussolini', *Il politico*, 43/3 (1978), 467-95; A. Simonini, *Il linguaggio di Mussolini* (Milan, 1978); 'Parlare fascista', *Movimento operaio e socialista*, 7/1 (1984); G. Klein, *La politica linguistica del fascismo* (Bologna, 1986); E. Golino, *Parola di duce: il linguaggio totalitario del fascismo* (Milan, 1994).

party *Gerarca* to the lowest exponents of fascist power in the lowest grades of the hierarchy. In political circles within fascist Italy, *Mussoliniese* as well as *fascistese* was usually spoken. However, having recognized Mussolini's vital contribution to fascist political language, it is important to clarify that *fascistese* does not correspond precisely to Mussolini's language. This is because fascist language was not just a creation of the *Duce*, but a much more complex phenomenon, which cannot be understood without first understanding the totalitarian nature of fascism and the significance of its religious dimensions.² These were not limited to the language, or to symbols, myths, rites, and monuments, but were present in all cultural, ideological, institutional, and behavioural aspects.

The historian Franco Venturi expressed this effectively in 1961 when he stated that 'the totalitarian regime was the kingdom of the word. Or rather, of the word together with the loudspeaker. To believe in the magic virtue of words and make use of the technical instruments which were becoming more commonly used in precisely that period, the radio, the rotary press, film, etc., without restraint or scruple [*sic*].' Fascist rhetoric, Venturi went on to clarify, however, was

an important element of the totalitarian State, not a feather that could be removed, as many good people of the period hoped and thought. It was not a mere whim of the regime. It was something far more important: the reduction to the limits of the absurd of the ideological currents from which fascism had originated. Contrary to solid fact, scientific coherence, and rational modern consciousness, ideological values, myth, and magical idealism had been discovered. All this was reduced to a firm and profound faith that words rule the world and that the changing of calendars, names, terms, and designations is enough to change years, men, concepts, and instruments.³

The totalitarian state, then, was the kingdom of the word. However, I think it would be a mistake to study this 'kingdom of the word' by analysing political language in terms of mystification,

² For the interpretation of fascism as totalitarianism and political religion according to the present writer's view, see Emilio Gentile, 'Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion: Definitions and Critical Reflections on Criticism of an Interpretation', in Roger Griffin (ed.), *Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion* (London, 2005), 32–81; Emilio Gentile, 'The Sacralization of Politics: Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections on the Question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism', in Constantin Iordachi (ed.), *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives* (London, 2010), 257–89.

³ Franco Venturi, 'Il regime fascista (II)', in *Trent'anni di storia italiana (1915–1945): lezioni con testimonianze presentate da Franco Antonicelli* (Turin, 1961), 183–97, at 186.

manipulation, and demagoguery alone, because these aspects are not sufficient to allow an understanding of its fascist political language, and, above all, its religious dimensions. The interpretation of fascist rhetoric as an instrument of demagogic mystification is doubtless a valid one, but it is also, in a sense, banal, because it is in itself so obvious and corresponds so closely to the reality of historical fact as not to require many examples and arguments to be persuasive. The fascists themselves were entirely aware of the demagogic role of the word. They probably shared the conviction of Gabriele D'Annunzio, who stated that the 'science of words' was the only supreme science. Whoever knows this, declared the poet, knows all, because nothing exists if not by means of the word. There is nothing more useful than words. With these, man creates all, brings down all, and destroys all.

One prominent fascist ideologist, Antonino Pagliaro, the editor of *Dizionario di politica*, the political dictionary published by the fascist party in 1940, but also a renowned glottologist and scholar of Dante, stated that 'the value of language as a political factor is incomparably great'. And, he added, it was an indispensable propaganda tool:

Since the broadest realms of the population to be reached have no will nor opportunity to apply themselves to the particular knowledge of political doctrines and systems, and less still the opportunity and will to establish comparisons between the various systems and to weigh them up to then accept the useful or the most pleasing ones, the most effective propaganda is that which stimulates easily accessible ideas through their concise expression. There are words that have attained such a high level of meaning that just saying them is enough to evoke an ideal world and an entire political agenda . . . A politician's greatness also depends on the greatness of linguistic creation, that allows him to engrave an entire agenda of will and action upon the souls of the people with a word or a phrase.⁴

Consistently with these assumptions, fascism attributed a key role to the diffusion of *fascistese* for achieving a revolution which aimed to transform the Italian conscience, mind, and character. The totalitarian regime, obsessed by the project of regenerating the Italians, was also obsessed, for a while, with linguistic regeneration. It launched a campaign for the purification of the Italian

⁴ A. Pagliaro, 'Lingua', in Partito nazionale fascista (ed.), *Dizionario di politica* (Rome, 1940), ii. 785-8.

language, and the abolition of words of foreign origin and the formal 'lei' form for 'you'. This was carried out as part of the fight for cultural reform, together with the anti-bourgeois campaign and the adoption of racist and anti-Semitic legislation. Giuseppe Bottai, speaking as Minister for National Education in November 1938, said: 'We insist on having a fascist school, fascist education, and a fascist teaching method to create the all-round fascist man.' He wanted children, 'at some point, to speak fascist just as naturally as they begin to babble the first words in their language at their mothers' bosom. This is the way for school to become one with politics.'⁵

The fascists theorized openly about the demagogic use of the word. *Fascistese* was largely a demagogic language of propaganda, consciously employed to influence, manipulate, and mystify the masses. As a consequence, the adoption of a demystifying approach to the study of fascist political language, as with any public language that attempts to influence people, is undoubtedly valuable. And as I have already said, it is the most commonly used approach by those studying fascist language. That said, there are other aspects of *fascistese* that cannot be satisfactorily explained using a demystifying approach. Nor can they be analysed using the categories of demagogy and manipulation alone.

At this point I should like to draw attention to an important aspect of fascism which, perhaps precisely because of its self-evidence, often escapes those who study fascist rhetoric. I refer, to be succinct, to the 'sincerity' of *fascistese*. Fascism made unscrupulous use of demagogy and mystification to attract the attention of, and to manipulate, the masses. However, if we stop to look at the contents of its political language, we must note that fascism never tried to mask its ideas and intentions.

The paradox of the fascist spell resides precisely in the 'sincerity' of its political language, and, above all, in the 'sincerity' of its religious dimensions. Indeed, with *fascistese* we find ourselves facing a frank and brutal declaration of aversion to freedom, and of scorn for equality, happiness, and peace as ideals; we find ourselves facing a political language that glorifies irrationality, the will to power of the elected minorities, the obedience of the masses, and the sacrifice of the individual for the greater good in terms of state and nation. It exalts all of these ideas in the name of a religious

⁵ G. Bottai, *La carta della scuola* (Milan, 1939), 216.

concept of life. The fascists never proclaimed a will to defend freedom, critical thought, and rationality in the world. They said that reason counted for little in politics, where strength and consensus founded on myth and faith rule. Fascism never promised emancipation and freedom for mankind. Both before and after it gained power, fascism showed its aversion to the self-government of the masses, and it always declared openly that it considered the masses as material to be sculpted in order to achieve its political objectives of domination and power. And all of this was proclaimed publicly on the streets, formalized in doctrinal treatises, preached in schools, engraved on people's consciences, and stamped on the façades of houses and on the streets. The fact that all these convictions and intentions were expressed in predominantly religious language makes the aspect of fascist 'sincerity' an even more complex and important issue.

Faced with fascist 'sincerity', the demystifying approach clearly seems insufficient and can be misleading if it professes to explain everything by classifying it as demagoguery, manipulation, and deception. This is particularly true of the religious dimensions of *fascistese*. At this point we find ourselves faced with the fundamental question which I intend to discuss. Why was fascist political language predominantly a religious language? Of course, in a country where the Church was a large and powerful institution, and in a society that was still, for the most part, traditional and traditionalist, demagogic propaganda addressed to a population that was still generally imbued with traditional religious beliefs could not do without a religious language that was easily understandable by the masses and, at the same time, bestowed the authoritative charisma of sacredness on the demagogue. However, in this case too, the demystifying interpretation responds only in part to the question of the religious dimension of *fascistese*, because this response is limited to the public and deliberately propagandistic area of fascist political language as a demagogic tool. The part of the question that remains unaddressed, however, is the most important because it relates to the role of fascist political language not as an *instrument of mystifying propaganda* of fascist demagoguery, but as a *genuine form of expression* of fascist culture.

The question of the religious dimensions of *fascistese* does not relate to the language which the demagogue used to address the common people, to mystify and manipulate them. More

importantly, it concerns the language in which one fascist addressed another, that is to say, the language through which fascism created and defined its own identity, interpreted and built on the reality in which to act and work on its principles, values, and aims. With this in mind, *fascistese* must be studied not as a language of *mystification*, but as a language of *mythification*, in the sense that it expresses fundamental values of a culture founded on the supremacy of mythical thought, as a basic category of interpretation of reality. Thus it is not a language that 'masks', but rather a language that 'reveals' the identity of a group that uses it to define itself, the meaning and purpose of its existence and actions.

In this sense, the question of the religious dimensions of *fascistese* cannot be examined except as part of the broader question of the omnipresence of the religious dimension in all its symbolic, ritual, and aesthetic manifestations, and in the behavioural, ideological, and institutional elements of fascism. At this point it is appropriate to note that the importance of the religious dimensions of fascism, manifested above all in its language and style, was recognized for the first time, and right from the start, by the same anti-fascists who were the first to guess at the true nature of fascism in terms of its totalitarian vocation. It is well known that the term 'totalitarian' was coined by the anti-fascists in the first few months after the 'march on Rome' to define the new system of government implemented by the fascist party in order to gain a monopoly of political power.

At the same time as the terms 'totalitarian' and 'totalitarianism' were invented and introduced into the political discourse, that is, from the beginning of 1923, the anti-fascists defined fascism as a political movement with religious pretensions because it conceived of its ideology as an irrefutable dogma, to which everyone had to subscribe. Terms such as 'lay religion' and 'political religion', although they had not yet been invented, came into use at that point to refer to fascism. What makes these early insights of anti-fascist culture regarding the nature of fascism particularly important for historical analysis is the fact that they were expressed before the fascist party had gained a monopoly of political power, when the *Duce* was still playing the role of a restorer of law and order and respecting the rules of the parliamentary regime, and the majority of both sympathizers and adversaries of fascism con-

sidered it a movement without an ideology and without autonomy, destined to dissolve within the space of a few months.

Developing these anti-fascist insights regarding the connection and interdependency between the totalitarian dimension and the religious dimension, I have come to an interpretation of fascism as a totalitarian phenomenon of which the religious dimension is a constituent, integral, and fundamental part.⁶ From this perspective, the religious dimension of fascist political language is analysed not in order to verify its instrumental and mystifying role in line with fascist demagogic intentions—to which, I feel, little can be added—but to evaluate its meaning and the functions in defining the fascist identity and its totalitarian politics. In my interpretation fascist political language, apart from being a demagogic tool, was the logical expression of its nature as a totalitarian movement. This was also the first and most consistent manifestation of the political sacralization of the last century.

The sacralization of politics comes about every time any political entity, such as nation, state, race, class, or party, assumes the characteristics of a sacred entity, that is to say, a supreme power that is indisputable and intangible, and that becomes the object of the faith, reverence, worship, loyalty, and dedication of citizens to the point where they are prepared to sacrifice their own lives. As such, it is at the centre of a string of beliefs, myths, values, commandments, rites, and symbols. Fascism was the first totalitarian experiment of the twentieth century to display the fully developed characteristics of the sacralization of politics, even though it was not the first political movement to use a religious kind of language. All the modern nationalisms are secular religions based on the sacralization of the nation as a supreme entity to which its members owe complete loyalty and dedication. In Italian nationalism, the religious dimensions of political language have been present since the era of the Risorgimento, above all through the political theology of the nation devised by Giuseppe Mazzini. But the socialist left, despite the atheist and materialist ideology of Marxism, also developed the religious dimensions of its political language. In 1916, Antonio Gramsci, for example, declared that socialism was the new religion that would have to destroy Christianity and take its place in the consciousness of modern

⁶ See Emilio Gentile, 'Fascism in Power: The Totalitarian Experiment', in Adrian Lyttelton (ed.), *Liberal and Fascist Italy: 1900–1945* (Oxford, 2002), 139–74.

man.⁷ Gramsci remained faithful to this idea, even during his years of imprisonment, in his reflections on the Communist Party as a Modern Prince who had to replace the divinity in our consciousness. When he was supporting the socialist party, Mussolini also maintained that socialism was not just a scientific concept, but had to become a 'faith': 'We want to believe in it, we must believe in it; humanity needs a creed.'⁸

The entire 'generation of 1914', to which the promoters and main protagonists of fascism belonged, actively aspired to create a foundation of lay religiousness in order to achieve the regeneration of the Italians. Gabriele D'Annunzio contributed a great deal to the making of a nationalist political language, inventing religious metaphors, symbols, and rites for the worship of the nation. Fascism drew on this heavily to furnish its symbolic universe, which for the most part was based on the experiences and the myths of the First World War. The war itself contributed to the sacralization of politics, providing new material with which to build a national religion, with the myths, rites, and symbols born in the trenches.⁹

All of the religious rhetoric of fascism was a reworking and adaptation to its own ideology of this tradition of lay religiousness, which was already widespread in Italian political culture before its birth. In the fascist press of the era and in the private writings of the fascists, such as letters and diaries, religious language predominates in the way in which they define their identity and the reasons behind their actions.

Fascistese was already imbued with religious rhetoric when the movement was made up of just a few hundred militant activists. In 1921, the official body of the fascist movement proclaimed: 'We have gone beyond the defenders of a generation which has long since left its historical reality behind and marches inexorably towards the future . . . We are the perfection of perfection . . . The Holy Eucharist of war formed us out of the same metal of generous sacrifices.'¹⁰ During the Biennio Rosso (two red years), for example, the fascists compared themselves to 'missionaries of Christianity, lost in unexplored regions between savage idolatrous

⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Cronache torinesi 1913-1917*, ed. S. Caprioglio (Turin, 1980), 329.

⁸ See Emilio Gentile, *The Origins of Fascist Ideology* (2005), 3-38.

⁹ See id., *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

¹⁰ G. Leonardi, 'Noi siamo i superatori', *Il fascio*, 14 May 1921.

tribes'.¹¹ The violence which the *Squadrisimo*, the fascist action squads, perpetrated against the proletariat was legitimized and exalted by a religious rhetoric that presented it as a redeeming crusade against the 'triumphant beast' of Bolshevism, in order to destroy those desecrating the homeland and restore religion to the nation.

For fascists, the foundations and essence of political militancy were always summed up as the principle of 'faith', a key word in fascist political language. The prototype of the new fascist man, as a believer and militant of a political religion, was defined once and for all in the fascist military regulations published at the beginning of October 1922:

The Fascist Militiaman serves Italy in purity; his spirit is pervaded by a profound mysticism, subject to an immutable faith, controlled by an inflexible will; he scorns opportunity and prudence, as he does baseness; sacrifice is the ultimate aim of his faith; he is convinced of the weight of his terrible apostleship, to save our great common mother and give her force and purity . . . Leader or follower, he obeys with humility and commands with force. In this voluntary militia, obedience is *blind, absolute, and respectful* to the peak of the hierarchy, to the Supreme Leader and the Leadership of the Party. The Fascist Militiaman has a morality all his own. Common morality, morality with a familiar face, political, social morality, prismatic, many-faceted, loosely linked, is of no use to the Fascist Militiaman. For him honor is, as it was for the knights of old, a law that seeks, without ever reaching its goal, the peak of a limitless perfection, even if he falls into error; it is all-powerful, absolutely just, even outside, and always superior to, written and formal law. Absolute honor is the law of discipline for the militiaman and is defended not only by the political organs but by the leaders of the hierarchy. The Fascist Militiaman refuses the impure, the unworthy, and the treacherous.¹²

After the fascist accession to power, the development of the religious dimensions of *fascistese* involved both symbolic and propaganda representation and theoretical elaboration. It should not be forgotten that the main promoters of the religious dimensions of *fascistese*, during the regime, were not party propagandists, but highly cultured intellectuals, such as Giovanni Gentile, who considered fascism a religion because it had 'the religious sentiment for which one takes life seriously . . . as worship given up by the

¹¹ R. Forti and G. Chedini, *L'avvento del fascismo: cronache ferraresi* (Ferrara, 1923), 90.

¹² Regulations of the Fascist Militia, 3 Oct. 1922, in Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 19.

soul of the Nation'.¹³ Some of these intellectuals were also fervent Catholics, such as the first theorist of 'fascist mystique', Pietro Misciattelli, a scholar of literature and medieval mysticism. In 1923 he defined fascism as 'a form of Catholic mysticism', maintaining that 'Catholic Truth and fascist Truth have come together through mystic intuition'. He described the violence and intolerance of the fascist action squads as mystical, comparing it with the violence of the 'mystic followers of Savonarola', who had fought against pagan Florence, just as the fascists were fighting against the Bolshevik deniers of the homeland, God, and the family. Misciattelli concluded that 'there is a sublime violence within every mystic movement'.¹⁴

The transformation of fascism into a political religion had been accomplished by 1925, when its main arguments were laid out in the organ of Italian fascists abroad:

The mystical element in Fascism is the chrism anointing its triumph. Reason is incommunicable, so is feeling. Reasoning does not attract; it convinces. Blood is stronger than syllogism. Science pretends to explain the miracle, but in the eyes of the masses, the miracle remains, seduces, and creates its own neophytes.

A century from now, history may tell us that after the war a Messiah arose in Italy, who began speaking to fifty people and ended up evangelizing a million; that these first disciples then spread through Italy and with their faith, devotion, and sacrifice conquered the hearts of the masses; that their language was one in disuse, that it came from such a remote time that it had been forgotten—they spoke of duty when others spoke of rights, of discipline when all had abandoned themselves to license, of family when individualism was triumphant, of property when wealth had become anonymous, of a fatherland when hatred divided its citizens and alien interests slipped through the frontiers, of religion when all denied it from fear of the ultimate judge. But in the end they won: because they returned good for evil; because they protected their very enemies; because every day they accomplished miracles of love; because every hour told tales of their humble heroism; because when men met them, they became better men; because through their activity Italy became more orderly, peaceful, prosperous, and great; because they had a joyful song in their hearts, and in their eyes shone their sacrifices; because they fell with a cry of faith, and for each man who fell, a hundred sprang up; and because when the truth shines in every part, not even an owl can gainsay it.

¹³ Giovanni Gentile, *Fascismo e cultura* (Milan, 1928), 58.

¹⁴ Pietro Misciattelli, 'La mistica del fascismo', *Critica fascista*, 15 July 1923.

This is how Fascism won: through its militia . . . The chalice of sacrifice is offered to the best, and we must drink of it. Then, as Christ said when he drank from the sponge soaked in vinegar, we can say, *Consummatum est*. Its sacrifice is the triumph of others. What matters a single individual? What counts is the race, the stock; its renewal is vital for the good of the fatherland and the world. The *Duce* has spoken . . . His command is our law—or, better yet, is the unfolding of our own law, that which is already within us. From every part of the world people look to Italy as a beacon to lead mankind to salvation . . . We are the princes, those who cast the die among the new legions of civilization.¹⁵

During the regime, the religious dimensions of fascist political language expanded and intensified so much as to give rise to growing fears on the part of the Catholic Church.¹⁶ Soon after the signing of the agreement, the secretary of the fascist party, addressing young people, stated that they should 'believe in Fascism, in the *Duce*, in the Revolution, as one might believe in the Divinity'.¹⁷ In 1930, Bottai stated that fascism was 'something rather more than a doctrine. It is a political and civic religion . . . it is the religion of Italy'.¹⁸ In 1930 a school of fascist mystique was set up, and important intellectuals and artists of the regime taught at it. In 1932 the Young Fascists' Organization proclaimed: 'A good fascist is religious. We believe in a mystical Fascist because it is a mystique with its martyrs, its devotees, and humbles a whole people before an idea.'¹⁹ In 1932 Mussolini decreed once and for all, in the official text of the fascist doctrine, published by the Italian Encyclopaedia: 'Fascism is a religious conception of life.'²⁰

Consistently with this concept of politics, from 1926 on, fascism propagandized its ideology as a religious doctrine, condensing it in handbooks and catechisms. In 1938 the fascist party published an official catechism of the fascist religion addressed to young

¹⁵ 'Santa milizia', *I fasci italiani all'estero*, 2 May 1925. Quoted from Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 54–5.

¹⁶ See Emilio Gentile, 'New Idols: Catholicism in the Face of Fascist Totalitarianism', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 11/2 (2006), 143–70.

¹⁷ *Il popolo d'Italia*, 29 Oct. 1926. Quoted from Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 63.

¹⁸ G. Bottai, 'Il pensiero pensiero e l'azione di Giuseppe Mazzini', speech given in Genoa, 4 May 1930, reprinted in id., *Incontri* (Milan, 1943), 124. Quoted from Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 73.

¹⁹ Pietro Maria Bardi, 'Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista', *Gioventù fascista*, 10 July 1932. Quoted from Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 65.

²⁰ Benito Mussolini, *La dottrina del fascismo*, repr. in id., *Opera omnia*, 44 vols. (Florence, 1951–80), xxvi. 118. Quoted from Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 59.

people. In a question and answer format, it intended to give fascists a 'simple guide, such as might be needed for the cultivation of the mind as for the relationships of daily life'.²¹ *Critica fascista*, the most 'rational of the fascist reviews', considered this book to be a 'precious tool, to compare with those booklets of the "doctrine" that can go anywhere and through which it is possible to form and support much sincere faith', precisely because the fascist culture was a culture 'to be taught, just as the catechism is taught'. Bottai's review encouraged the distribution of this fascist catechism so that 'every generation should get used to considering it "the primer" of its faith'.²²

The Church, as I have already mentioned, took fascist religious rhetoric very seriously, in the sense that it considered it not just as a propaganda device, but as an alarming manifestation of convictions deep-rooted in the fascist mentality, which the regime put into practice through its totalitarian politics. While it accepted compromises, the regime did not abandon its ambitions. In 1931, the Pope had energetically condemned, in an encyclical, the religiousness of fascism that idolized the state. During the second half of the 1930s, the Catholic press condemned the abuse of religious language to consecrate the nation, the state, and the race as earthly divinities. In 1939, in a secret address to the Lombard bishops, Cardinal Schuster, who had been an apologist of the regime during the war with Ethiopia, denounced the dangerous spread of the 'fascist religion': 'In contrast to the apostolic faith and Catholic Church of divine origin, we have then a fascist creed and a totalitarian State that, exactly like the Hegelian one, now claims divine attributes for itself. In religious terms, the Concordat has been stripped of its substance.'²³

However, it is important to make clear that there were also Catholics who believed that fascism, precisely because it was a 'religious conception of life', could not dissociate itself from Catholicism. It could only find its religious foundations, they suggested, by recalling the Catholic tradition, just as this, in turn, recalled Roman traditions. As the review *Rassegna nazionale* stated in 1942, advocating the coming together of Catholicism and

²¹ Partito nazionale fascista (ed.), *Il primo libro del fascista* (Rome, 1938), 7. Quoted from Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 64.

²² G. Bottai, 'Dogana', *Critica fascista*, 1 May 1939.

²³ See Gentile, 'Fascism in Power', 172.

fascism, Roman and Christian traditions provided the initial foundations of fascist doctrine. It thus attained its supreme value as a supernatural and divine ethic.²⁴

The expansion of the religious dimensions of fascist language was also a consequence of the intensification of the totalitarian experiment in the last years of the fascist regime. This was characterized by an obsession with accelerating the revolution of mankind through racism, anti-Semitism, and a campaign for cultural reform, including the 'cleansing' of the Italian language of foreign influences. Similarly, from a theoretical standpoint, the ideologists of the regime stressed the irrationalist and mystical definition of the fascist identity, founded on myth. The *Dizionario di politica* affirmed that myth

expresses an interpretation of history or life, incites those men who believe in it to actions that are sometimes heroic or superhuman. In the name of an absolute that allows no doubt, in a language that is both accessible and imperious, and for as long as it goes on living, myth becomes a faith, a religion, and is capable of the boldest enterprises.²⁵

The Second World War was naturally a time when the religious dimensions of fascism were accentuated. Fascism had never stopped considering war as the highest, most sublime moment of the individual's total dedication to the nation, through the sacrifice of human life. The experience of defeat itself, for those who did not abjure the belief in fascism after the fall of the regime, was interpreted as an opportunity to prove and strengthen one's own faith. The language of the social republic was imbued with religious rhetoric, but it is important to note that here, once again, we find ourselves facing not just a language of propaganda, but one that defines a political identity. I will limit myself to quoting just one example that is highly significant in itself. It is a written call, entitled 'Brothers in Mussolini', from one fascist to other fascists in August 1944. 'We', it concludes,

have our national and social agenda, and a living, human flag in the form of the *Duce*: around him we pull together, without doubts, without fears, Fascism is everything . . . and we are truly side by side, ready [to] sacrifice ourselves for others . . . Just as the first Christians felt, and

²⁴ See Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, trans. George Staunton (Princeton, 2006).

²⁵ C.[arlo] Curcio, 'Mito politico', in Partito nazionale fascista (ed.), *Dizionario di politica*, iii. 186.

indeed were, brothers in Christ, thus we must and can feel ourselves to be brothers in Mussolini. He is the only vertex where we can meet.²⁶

The religious dimensions of fascist political language survived the fall of fascism. We still find religious dimensions of *fascistese* in the neo-fascist movement that in republican Italy gave life to the strongest neo-fascist party of the West, the descendants of which, having become post-fascists, today make up part of the coalition that governs Italy and, by number of votes, constitute a third of the Italian majority. To compare fascist language and neo-fascist language could offer new elements to reinforce the interpretation that I have put forward. In conclusion, it can be summarized as follows. From the start, the religious dimensions of political language had a fundamental role in fascism because it was through these that the fascists defined their political identity, through a concept of life and politics as the faith-based support of a myth, finding religious language to be the most congenial means of expressing it. Perhaps that is why fascists and neo-fascists have never been able to produce a critical explanation of the fascist experience through rational historical analysis, but have remained tied to apologist commemorations in mystical terms.

²⁶ Private collection (Emilio Gentile, Rome).