Political religion or civil religion? The historians's debate

The present paper is intended as a critical analysis regarding the usage of the concept of political religion in fascist studies. More exactly, starting from different definitions of numerous scholars in this particular field of interest I will present different understandings of this concept and the changes operated by scholars like Eric Voegelin, Robert O. Paxton, Roger Eatwell, Emilio Gentile, Roger Griffin, George Mosse, and others in their use of the concept. The origins of this concept can be traced according to Stanley Payne1 [1] and Michael Burleigh2 [2] to the French Revolution when a new approach of politics was built by the Jacobin regime. In order to shape a different understanding of the political reality and to secularize any perception of politics, the Jacobins fabricated a ‘civil religion' which was used to achieve political uniformity. The first scholar who applied the term political religion to the German fascist movement was Eric Voegelin in his epoch-making book, The Political Religions (1938). He defined the fascist ideology as a


political religion inspired by the gnostic heresy of the Church. Chiliasm, apocalyptic literature and other anti-modern Christian myths were drawn into consideration by Voegelin in order to explain the rise of the Nazi Party. The notion of ‘experience' of the political body played an important role and was depicted as a spiritual counter-reaction against secular Modernity in order to reconstruct the medieval political dichotomy between the Pope and Emperor.

Nevertheless, the main issue of this paper tends to focus not on Voegelin's parochial understanding of the concept, but rather on its expansion by such ideologues of fascism as the Italian political scientist, Emilio Gentile. Inspired by the epoch-making insights of George L. Mosse3 [3], Emilio Gentile, in an article from 1990, named "Fascism as Political Religion"4 [4] stated that:

fascism constructed its own system of beliefs, myths and rituals, centered on the sacramalization of the state."5 [5] In other words, "fascist religion placed itself alongside traditional religion, and tried to synthesize it within its own sphere of values as an ally in the subjection of the masses to the state, although it did stress the primacy of politics.6 [6]

This primacy of politics that Gentile is speaking about is nothing more than a "civil religion" which was a consequence of the historical development of Italy. Elements like faith, the quest for a secular religion in order to break up with the Conservative Catholic Party, experience and rebirth of the nation were present for quite a long time in the Italian history. When Mussolini


came to power in 1922, this civil religion became a political religion7 [7]. Fascism as a political religion was depicted in the leader cult and the need for a regeneration of the Italian race and to continue the Risorgimento movement.8 [8] Other elements of the secularized political liturgy inspired by the Fiume's ceremonies developed by the Italian poet D'Annunzio were adopted together with rituals and beliefs, all centered focused on the nation's rebirth and faith in il Duce, depicted as the embodiment of Italy. Another important feature was the cult of the martyrs. Even if they were dead for the fascist cause or had fallen in the WWII, the cult of the martyrs was overwhelmingly present during fascist ceremonies. All these features tried to emphasize according to Emilio Gentile a process described as "sacralization of politics" and had as purpose the "socialization of the fascist religion"9 [9] in which the nation, il Duce and the State became one entity.

In 2001 Emilio Gentile published another cornerstone monograph on the relation between religion and politics refining his understanding on political versus civil religion. La religioni della politica: Fra democratie e totalitarismi (Roma: Gius. Laterza&Figli, 2001)10 [10] Emilio Gentile's book provides a new definition of fascism as political religion:

*a political religion* is a form of sacralization of politics that has an exclusive and fundamental nature. It does not accept the coexistence of other political ideologies and movements, it denies the autonomy of the individual in the relation with the collectivity, it demands compliance to its commandments and participation to its political cult and it sanctifies violence as a legitimate weapon in the fight against its enemies and as an instrument of regeneration. In the relation with traditional religious institutions, it either adopts a hostile attitude and aims to eliminate them, or it attempts to establish a rapport of


10 [10] For us it was available the following English translation: Emilio Gentile, Politics as Religion (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2006).
symbiotic coexistence by incorporating the traditional religion into its own system of beliefs and myths while reducing it to a subordinate and auxiliary role.11

Emilio Gentile's new definition of political religion draws a sharper distinction between different understandings of the concept of religion and between "secularization of politics" in totalitarian and democratic regimes. Consequently, he clarified the terms for the scholar involved in this debate by expanding his definition and enriching the context of the debate through a clear separation taken from Political Sciences between totalitarian and democratic ideologies.

2. Iron Guard as a political religion.

The emergence in 1927 of the Romanian fascist movement has been highly researched12 and has been regarded by the scholars as one of the most puzzling fascist movement from the 20th century. There is no scholarly consensus regarding the fascist involvement of the Romanian fascist movement13. Coming back to the issue at stake, the present section will attempt to find out if the Iron Guard can be labeled as a political religion or not.14 On theoretical grounds, it would be challenging to compare the two contemporary understandings of the political religion according to Emilio Gentile's view in order to see the possible similarities and


14 [14] According to Mihai Chioveanu in Legionarismul ca religie politică, Idei în dialog 9 (24), September 2006, p. 48-49 it seems that Iron Guard was a classic example of political religion.
dissimilarities between their theories on fascism and the Iron Guard's case. There a couple of issues why Iron Guard as a political movement was a political, but I will start with those elements pointing out precisely the contrary.

First, according to Roger Griffin, the possibility of the Iron Guard to be labeled as a political religion are weak regarding the fact that Codreanu and his followers never gain absolute power15 [15]. Constructed as a nationalist organization with terrorist means to achieve power, The Legion of the Archangel Michael was suppressed several times (1933, 1938 and 1941) and although gained power for a short time (6 September 1940--23 January 1941) was never able to control and revolutionize the Romanian society because the ‘National Legionary State'16 [16] was nothing more than a coalition between the Army represented by General Ion Antonescu and the Iron Guard. Therefore, although the ideological core of fascism was present, Roger Griffin considered the Romanian fascism movement an incomplete fascist movement17 [17] because they were never able to gain absolute control over the Romanian society and to implement the palingenetic myth from the stand of the highest chair in the Romanian State.

Another important issue in contradiction with Gentile's theory which states that fascist regimes always tend either to subordinate or eliminate the Churches, either to live in a symbiosis with them represents the ambivalent position of the Romanian Orthodox Church towards the movement. Although the high clergy preferred a glacial relationship with Corneliu Codreanu's supporters, the low clergy chose to enlist in Codreanu's movements, depicted by them as a spiritual revival of popular devotion towards Orthodoxy's millennial principles. According to some sources 2000 from a total of 11 000 priests joined the Iron Guard, but the number was insignificant if we have to compare it to those supporting other parties such as the National Liberal Party or even the National Peasant Party. During the movement's existence (1927 -1941) the relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Iron Guard was never characterized by such words as


16 [16] The Iron Guard was named ‘The Legion of the Archangel Michael' and this is the reason why sometimes its members were called ‘legionnaires'.

‘elimination', 'subordination' or 'symbiosis', but rather the Romanian Orthodox Church fails to appear in the texts and speeches belonging to the Iron Guard. What mattered mostly was the personal devotion of every member and less the whole Church as an institution.

Speaking about Christian devotion, nobody can deny the Iron Guard's genuine Christian devotion associated with a flamboyant and revolutionary ideology. Because of it, many theologians and Christian intellectuals as Nichifor Crainic, Fr. Liviu Stan or Nae Ionescu joined the movement depicted as the traditional counter-reaction of Romanian peasant inspired culture against the corrupting influence coming from the decadent Western civilization. Even such scholars as George L. Mosse18 [18] or Eugen Weber19 [19] has acknowledged the importance played by Christian Orthodox ritual inside the movement and the sincere devotion expressed by the movement's members in different stages of the movement's existence.20 [20] Theoretically speaking, considering the Romanian blend of fascism a political religion represents a possible answer to the "mystical" character attributed which made the Guard so unique by different scholars.21 [21]

According to Gentile22 [22], fascism as a political religion is described by several elements: leader's cult and the importance of leader's charisma, the cult of martyrs, the importance awarded


20 [20] The personal memoirs of Corneliu Codreanu, the Iron Guard's Leader, written during his last detention (16th of April -29th/30th of November 1938) spent in Văcărești Prison are a strong testimony of Codreanu's Christian inspired imagination.


to ceremonies and symbols, the cult of the Nation, the subordination of the society, the belief in
the movement, the primacy of violence and exclusion of political or racial enemies, etc. All these
elements were present in the history and the ideological agenda of the Iron Guard, but I will focus
only on two of them: the leader's cult and the political liturgy.

Regarding leader's cult and leader's charisma in the Iron Guard, there are several attempts
which proves without any doubt that Iron Guard's leader, Corneliu Zelea--Codreanu was the
incarnation of the values present in the person of other fascist leaders23 [23] meaning a certain
God given mission to reform history and to lead the Romanian people into a new age. Codreanu's
charisma was also cultivated by Nae Ionescu and Ioan Moța who were the main ideologues of the
Iron Guard. In his Testament24 [24] he invested Codreanu with a certain investiture which was
considered to be almost messianic. Codreanu was depicted as the true leader of the Romanian
people, as a providential person sent from above to bring relieve to the Romanian people.
Codreanu's charisma was reinforced also by Nae Ionescu statements which passed into the
intellectual environments in which he was the main figure. "When God does not send to his people
a King, he sends a Captain" was one of many statements which made Codreanu and Nae Ionescu
charisma in the student's environments infectious.

Another feature which gathers together all the features of the Iron Guard as a political
religion was the burial of the Iron Guard's martyrs Ioan Moța and Vasile Marin (13
February1937)25 [25] . Although uniforms were prohibited by the Romanian government, this
event had all the characteristics which enable any scholar to consider the Iron Guard as a clear

23 [23] Please see Stephen Fischer--Galați, „ Codreanu, Romanian National Traditions and
Charisma" in Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions Vol. 7, No. 2, 2006, p. 245 -- 250 or
Constantin Iordachi, Charisma, Politics and Violence: The Legion of the 'Archangel Michael' in


25 [25] For details, please see Armin Heinen, op. cit., 293--295 and Valentin Sândulescu,
„Sacralised Politics in Action: the February 1937 Burial of the Romanian Legionary Leaders Ion
Moța and Vasile Marin" in Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions Vol. 8, No. 2 (2007),
p. 259 and following. In the last article "sacralization of politics" seems to be the historical
metaphor describing the event and not political religion.
example of fascism as political religion. Leader's cult, the request addressed by Codreanu to the Romanian Orthodox Church to consider Moța and Marin as martyrs and saints dead for Christianity, the ritual and fascist symbols (the flags, the fascist salute, the swastika, the black leather costumes and green shirts, the militarist hymns sung by the Iron Guard's members) bound together with the religious service for the dead, the cult of death for the Nation26 [26] were all richly displayed into a secularized liturgy of the nation. The most interesting moments in the whole political liturgy, namely the appeal addressed to all those present by Vasile Iașiinschi ‘to baptize themselves in the legionary faith' or the famous rally-call of the names of the dead to which the whole gathering replayed with the word ‘Present!', emphasized the political character of the burial and the undermining of the religious services seen as an ancillary ornament for the particular display of social power employed by the movement. Nothing was spared in order to depict the Iron Guard as a political religion trying to offer a different alternative of making politics.

Final Considerations

The Iron Guard seen as a political religion according to Emilio Gentile's over-generalizing definition represent a typical way of applying to the Romanian fascism movement an ideal type inspired by the fascist studies. Nevertheless, someone can argue that the Legion of the Archangel Michael has some peculiarities which were not common to other fascist movements from Europe. The importance given to Orthodoxy and the close--relation with the Romanian Orthodox Church are categories which cannot be simply explained through the formal categories of fascism as a

26 [26] Among other hymns sung by the Legionnaires the most interesting was the Death's Squads Hymn: "With a smile on our lips

We look death in the eye

For we are the Death team

That must win or die."
political religion. Despite their way of interpretation, there is another question which remained undelivered: what happens when the followers of a fascist movement are members of a Church and they act politically according to their Christian involvement? More precisely, when the members of a fascist movement are committed Christians can someone still speak about a totalitarian secularized religion?

To these question which can be applied to the Romanian fascist movement I believe that the best answer was delivered by Richard Steigmann-Gall when he stated bluntly that "Nazism was not the result of the ‘Death of God' in secularized society, but rather a radicalized and singularly horrific attempt to preserve God against secularized society."27 By shifting the whole concept of religion, Steigmann-Gall changed the understanding of the concept of political religion as well. Into an article28, Steigmann-Gall explains why the concept of political religion becomes totalitarian in itself: "Far from being a secularist movements replacing Christianity with a new object of worship, Nazism sought to defend German society against secularization."29 In other words, fascism as a political religion was not caused by the "secularization of politics" present in Gentile's understanding of political religion, but rather "for Steigmann--Gall, Nazism was no political or secular religion, but ‘religious politics', that is, politics in conformity with Christian (Protestant) precepts."30 The same goes in the case of the Romanian Iron Guard which can be depicted as a form of "religious politics" at least until 1938. The strong Christian commitment of its members and the highly fueled critique addressed by Iron Guard's intellectuals against modernity and secularization brought up by the Romanian State in order to achieve a different political discourse represent a direct application of Richard Steigmann-


-Gall's theory regarding the construction of fascism/ Nazism as a political religion from the Christian roots of its members.