



Religion and Politics in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century: A Story of Diffusion and Appropriation

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A rocky road had to be travelled at the beginning of the nineteenth century from the political order of the Ancien Régime to political institutions based on mass-participation and representative parliamentary systems. There were several challenges to overcome. One of the greatest was to create a political space, in which citizens, who were no longer treated as mere subjects, could experience the nation beyond an idea as a living and warm community. The second task was to shape monarchy in a new way. The so called “monarchical principle” by which this aged institution of political domination was transferred to the nineteenth century in most European countries was to install monarchs within the juridical framework of a written constitution and to restrict their power by that of constitutional parliaments. Monarchs of the nineteenth century could no longer refer to their ancient dynastic roots or to God legitimating them. They had to create a new image of their power that responded to their undoubtedly revolutionary origins.

This paper focuses on how in this constellation religion gained a new role in politics. From the French Revolution onwards religion was taken as a rich pool of performative elements and discourses that could be plundered to fashion politics within the constitutional framings of mass-participation and to invent the transcendent nation as a community that could be experienced by citizens in their daily life.

I will stress two points. First my paper shall deal with monarchs and monarchy and their attempts to stabilize their political power and to gain legitimation. The second part is concerned with the role of religion in the difficult process of forging nations in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Monarchs and monarchies

Napoleon was the first who demonstrated a new cynical functionalizing attitude towards religion in public. In his splendid coronation as an Emperor in December 1804, he humiliated the Pope in Notre Dame by forcing him to consecrate a person who in the same moment swore an oath on a constitution in which the secularisation of the church’s possessions was stipulated by law. After his fall his successors, the Bourbon kings Louis XVIII and Charles X had to search for a new tradition for monarchy which would revitalize the Old Regime but also had to invent new forms. Louis XVIII therefore failed to organize a coronation and Charles X. celebrated one at the cathedral of Reims – like all French Kings before him did – which was estimated by the contemporaries as a mere theatre on a stage built by cardboard. In other kingdoms in the postnapoleonic continent as in Prussia or in Bavaria, one also could observe the difficulties of monarchs to use religion as a fundament of power and to discipline churches of Catholic or Protestant confession at the same time. To escape from this contradiction they often ruled without coronation and only celebrated jubilees of their dynasty in which religious ceremonies did not play a central role.

Despite these tensions between power and religion it was interesting for European monarchs to present themselves as a devout Christian of their confession. So did the enlightened Hanoverian George III and so did also Ludwig I of Bavaria, who also was well known as a rationalist. But others went much farther in this. The two French restoration kings mingled their politics with that of a reactionary secret order, called the Chevalliers du foi, who acted not only as conservatives but as Popish Catholics. Such a contamination of politics with religious interests

not only happened in catholic kingdoms. In Prussia Frederick William III and his son Frederick William IV, two deeply pietist influenced and devout kings used the construction of a protestant Prussian church as a substitute for the refused parliamentary representation of the Prussian nation. And they also bound their politics to the advices of a group of pious romantic intellectuals who organized themselves in a not secret but exclusive Wednesday –Society.

The public use of religion also proved to solve another crucial problem of 19th century monarchy. In the Old Regime monarchs had drawn a substantial part of their legitimation from their specific dynastic origin. Within a constitutional framework dynasty became somewhat of an alien element because stressing its importance always meant neglecting the constitutional foundations of monarchical power. This suspicion could be vaporized by presenting dynasty as a family whose members were bound together not by mere hereditary interests and rights but by deep emotions. Family relations at this point not only became a model for the dynastic constitution of monarchy but also a monarchical ruled society in its whole. European monarchs in the first half of the 19th century presented themselves as fathers loving their subjects deeply and being admired and beloved by them. Public piety executed by monarchs and their dynastic relatives proved to be a perfect mode to show the relations within the dynasty and between their members and the nation as strong emotional bonds. The King and his Queen could be imagined as a perfect couple in harmonious bliss who loved their children and their other relatives and who fell in deep mourning if one of them died. Weddings and funerals of the members of the dynasty therefore became events of public and political significance, in which dynastic relations could be brought on to the public stage as private matters. Religion in this way became a media in which public and political matters could be transformed in private ones and in which interests and power underwent a transmutation to emotions.

From this it was only a short step to create new martyrs. The notorious life loving and womanizing Duc de Berry, who was murdered when he was visiting the Parisian Opera one evening in February 1820, died as a faithful husband, leaving behind a pregnant wife and sacrificing his life in a nightlong pious death to rescue the French nation from its sins. This could also happen in protestant countries. Prussian romantic intellectuals such as Novalis or Heinrich von Kleist and Clemens Brentano mobilized a lot of poetic fantasy to create Queen Luise, who died in 1810 as a shining Queen of heaven similar to the Virgin Mary. Her death similar to that of the French Duc was transfigured to a sacrifice for the sinning fatherland, as Theodor Körner wrote in one of his funeral-hymns about her.

Nations

Forging the subjects of a monarchy together into a sacred community the French Revolution invented a new notion of nation. Up to that time the concept of nation discriminated between people of different regional origins. From the French Revolution onwards the concept of nation defined imagined communities which were integrated by emphatically shared convictions and values and which were continuously occupied to figure out what their identity might be. Nations therefore worked themselves out as communities of commemoration and they needed proper stores of imagination which were filled up by ancient history at first, and then also by Christian religion. Its rituals, in addition, could be used to perform the transcendental notion of a nation in the experience of every day life.

One of the first imaginaries that showed nation as a sacred community was the Christian altar of the fatherland. Invented by the French Revolution, it was exported to many places in Europe, although in protestant nations it had to be transformed into an ancient place of sacrifice, because for protestants the pulpit in the church was more important than the altar. Another way of performing the nation within the experienced realm of every day life was to arrange public celebrations and feasts. By creating this new type of nationwide celebrations in the first half of the 19th century, many elements of worshiping were used and services held a central position in these public ceremonies. They were also used to display the holiness of the monarchy and further more that of the monarchs person itself. The Commemoration of these new communities was concentrated on their new martyrs and heroes by state funerals – also a newly

invented type of public celebration – and organized collective mourning. Confession in this aspect caused few differences. Protestant England, for example, showed fewer requirements in these religionizing aspects of national identity than catholic France but in protestant Prussia one could observe in contrary a very dense melange between nation and religion. The struggle against Napoleon by Prussia was fought as an holy war in which a nation chosen and blessed by God defended itself against the antichrist, so that every soldier could die the holy death of a martyr.

Summing up my observations about using religion in the public and performed concepts of nation and monarchy in the first half of the 19th century, one may understand why Christian religion got an organized presence in public sphere it hardly ever had before. But on the other hand this also caused the danger of alienating and unfamiliarizing its symbols and discourses. The idea that religion did not have to be based on revelation but could be invented and constructed according to the needs of society was one of the self suggesting consequences which first were drawn by romantic intellectuals.