Defining ‘political cultures’ is at least as difficult and controversial as defining religions. It is therefore necessary to begin by abandoning all claims to objectivity and declare unambiguously how religion and political culture are addressed in this short chapter. By ‘political cultures’ we mean, in a broad sense, the codification of politics, both from an intellectual perspective and from an administrative, juridical and institutional point of view. Religion – that is, popular beliefs in a higher (or divine) reality which determines and dominates the lower (or human) reality – is essentially considered herein as a social fact.

The relationship between religion and political culture typically follows a chronological order: the latter necessarily comes after the former; but, as we shall see, the intervention of political culture almost always influences and modifies religion, triggering an interaction mechanism that is characteristic of all natural processes. However, the ability of political culture to influence and modify religion has been wrongly assumed as a universal law by those who believe that politics can dominate religion: these so-called secularists ignore the third law of political dynamics, according to which religion in turn influences and modifies politics.

Thus religion and political culture enjoy a dialectical relationship, that is, that of reciprocal influence, inasmuch that one sometimes assumes the appearance of the other and vice versa. If religion emerges as a social fact, and political culture (a code or philosophical principle) is only its intellectual and/or juridical reflection, the latter may also assume the forms and contents of the former: the Reformation is an example of how the intellectual contestation of the religious form of feudal society (Catholicism) was transformed into religion. The same is true of Buddhism, which emerged as a contestation of Vedic Brahmanism; for Islam, which emerged as a protest against Arab polytheism; but also for the successive metamorphoses of Judaism in a process of internal dispute, evidence of which can be found in different layers of the Tanakh – beginning with its progressive transformation into a monotheistic religion.

Religion is a social fact: it emerges – or develops, or regains popularity – for a variety of reasons, but they are all generally connected with the need to give meaning to certain facts that are apparently meaningless. This ability to provide consolation (albeit imaginary) in the face of inconsolable reality (not in the least imaginary), gives religion the status of faith, that is, of a belief based on feeling and not on reason and thus unquestionable and unappealable. The more
the surrounding reality is disordered and incomprehensible, the more acutely the need for order is felt and the more the religious feeling becomes central to the existence of those human beings – generally perceived as a sum total, a mass, rather than as individuals.

This mechanism appears clearly in the correlation between social religiosity and social wealth: it is empirically demonstrated that the less affluent a country is, the more religious it is, and the wealthier it is, the less religious. If we compare ten countries with the highest per-capita GDP\(^1\) to ten countries with the lowest per-capita GDP setting them in descending order along the horizontal axis of a graph, while on the vertical axis we set the ‘religiosity rate’,\(^2\) this fact becomes clearly visible: eight out of ten richest countries have a religiosity rate equal to or less than 40 percent, and three of them equal to or less than 20 percent; conversely, nine out of ten of the poorest countries have a religiosity rate of 90–100 percent, and the ‘least religious’ (Zimbabwe) has the rate of 88 percent.

Obviously, religiosity cannot be measured only in quantitative terms. On the contrary, it is evident that the religious feelings of those who maintain their faith in a social environment where religion has lost much of its relevance are qualitatively more intense and solid than the feelings of those who practice to conform to collective norms.

The greater is the social relevance of religion, the greater political relevance it acquires. It is clear that in order to be able to acquire social relevance, a given religion needs legs on which to march, that is, people in flesh and bone who would act as its promoters and propagators: if the need for religion (that is, a fantastic explanation of a rationally incomprehensible or unfathomed fact) is a fact that imposes itself objectively, the type of explanation offered – that is, the choice of religion – depends subjectively on the specific belief of those who promote it. If we imagine for a moment that these heralds of religion are completely immune to any political contamination and that their unique and exclusive role is spiritual in nature, in this case we have a clear separation between politics on the one side and religion on the other. In this theoretical case (hypothesised as is hypothesised the absence of friction in the first principle of dynamics), it is the political culture that will not be able to remain extraneous to religious culture at length: since politics is the art of seizing and preserving power, all social factors likely to favour seizing

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**Figure 1.1** Religiosity by country

Source: The author
and preservation inevitably end up falling into its sphere of interests. So that is how – in a world bereft of friction – the religion that has social relevance inevitably ends up acquiring political relevance.

However, friction is present in the real world. With the exception of certain particular cases, from the very moment a given religion acquires social relevance, it is rare that its heralds remain insensitive to the appeal of political sphere, that is, to the struggle for power (and when they do remain extraneous, it is precisely because their religion has no social relevance, as in the case of Jehovah’s Witnesses). In general, they initially enter this sphere to negotiate from the position of force such and such favour for their religion, that is, to exchange their influence on the masses into political currency; from that moment on, religious boundaries with politics also become more and more blurred.

It is at this stage – when we get to the level of reciprocity – that we can talk about the relationship between political culture and religion. Yet in the real world, reciprocity often results in intertwining and hybridisation of fields, or, to be precise, into the shift of the realm of the divine to the domain of humans: when the divine is annexed by the human; when the divine has invaded the field of the human; or, finally, when the human and divine coincide (as in the case of theocracy or of many divinised political functions, from Roman to Japanese emperors).

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The reaction of political culture to the social relevance of religion depends on both the strength of this relevance and the level of the political culture’s self-confidence. Usually – with the exception of theocracies and other forms of consubstantiality of the divine and human – the process is quite regular: at first, political culture tends to ignore or underestimate an emerging (or re-emerging) religion; when the latter becomes socially perceptible, politics usually reacts with annoyance and, in extreme cases, with various attempts at containment; finally, when the weight of religion is sufficient to influence social stability, political culture tends to lose confidence in its abilities and therefore moves from repression to co-optation. Bearing in mind that the social relevance of a religion does not necessarily concern its popularity, this process is crystal clear in the case of the first diffusion of Christianity and Islam.

During the first century CE, Christianity was first ignored, then confused with one of the many Jewish sects, and finally, starting from the second century, attacked by political culture. Pliny the Younger (112 CE) spoke of it as a ‘superstitio prava, inmodica’, a depraved and excessive superstition (Letters to Trajan, X, 96); Tacitus presented Christians as ‘per flagitia invisos’, hated for their abominations (Annales, XV, 44); for Suetonius, they were ‘genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae’, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition (De vita Caesarem, Nero, 16). Only in the following centuries there was some sporadic persecution to punish their obstinatio and amixia, their obstinate refusal to perform the rites of civil religion and take part in public life; but the most frequent attitude of the authorities was indifference (Moreschini, 2013: 45–48; Crossan, 1999: 3–4). Only between the late third and the early fourth centuries, in the part of the empire where Christianity had really taken root (the eastern provinces and Egypt under the control of Diocletian), did the persecution become official.

According to Rodney Stark, at the end of the first century there were 7,530 Christians throughout the Roman Empire, i.e. 0.012 percent of the population; at the end of the second century there were 217,795 (0.36 percent), while at the beginning of the fourth century between 5 and 7.5 million, about 10 percent (Stark, 1997: 6–7). For all they are worth, these figures confirm what has been said: the social relevance of a religion depends not only on the number of its followers but also and above all on their quality. The true authors of significant turning points in the
human existence are so-called creative minorities, according to the definition of Arnold Toynbee: those few who are capable of finding innovative solutions to the challenges of time and who, therefore, become a source of inspiration for growing sectors of society. Between the late third and the early fourth centuries, political culture was confronted with a choice between an extreme attempt of the eradication of the Christian ‘creative minority’ (which was Diocletian’s policy) and its cooptation (which was the policy of Constantine).

The legalisation of Christianity was a building block of Constantine’s policy of unification of the empire. However, in order to complete its structure it was also essential to unify the very Christianity which was then divided into a series of communities, each with its own beliefs; the bishops at the head of each community were continuously at war with one another to such an extent that Constantine, in a letter to the Bishops at Tyre, accused them of ‘do(ing) nothing but that which encourages discord and hatred and, to speak frankly, which leads to the destruction of the human race’ (Drake, 2000: 311). To put an end to this state of affairs, in 325, he convened and presided over the Council of Nicaea, during which he dictated fundamental religious canons, which today are still recited in the Creed with minimal changes. As Graham Fuller said, ‘for the state, theology is too important to be left to the theologians’ (Fuller, 2010: 48).

Constantine is considered the prototype of ‘caesaropapism’, which is, according to the famous definition of Max Weber, a secular ruler who ‘exercises supreme authority in ecclesiastical matters by virtue of his autonomous legitimacy’ (Weber, 1968, II: 1160–1161). A particular but no less effective form of caesaropapism runs throughout the entire history of Islam too.

On its way to success, Islam followed the same steps as Christianity, although condensed within a much shorter period. At first derided, then expelled from Mecca, Muhammad extended his influence over an increasingly large and determined creative minority insomuch that he forced his former persecutors to allow him to return to the city and to grant the new cult the monopoly over the Kaaba, the traditional site for pilgrimage of merchants of all faiths. Islam’s founder possessed both religious and political authority; whereas the priority of his successors, caliphs, was dealing with a series of political and military problems, while ceding the management of religious affairs to a class of specialists – the ulema.

The ulema were trained to derive practical guidance from approximately two hundred commandments which, in the Quran, distinguish between what is lawful (halāl) and what is illicit (harām) ‘sharia law’. But, as Olivier Roy explains, in the ‘political society’ in which the Muslim community had been transformed, ‘no ruler could accept the complete autonomy of sharia’ (Roy, 2013: 114). As Richard Bulliet puts it, ‘rulers who were tempted to go beyond the law, and thereby achieve absolute power, had to devise ways of coopting, circumventing, or suppressing the ulema’ (Bulliet, 2004: 62). Examples are hard to find of the ‘learned’ men daring to stand up against the authority of caliphs, writes Sadakat Kadri, and they often paid for it with their lives. He then concludes, ‘The Abbasids had managed to turn God’s law to the service of their regime’ (Kadri, 2012: 58).

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When religion becomes instrumentum regni, it in turn transforms political culture in instrumentum religionis, at least in part: in exchange for the support guaranteed to Constantine and his successors, Christians ensured that their religion was the only one recognised, protected and imposed by the state. However, the relationship between politics and religion is always unbalanced: usually the weight of the former tends to dominate but it is not always the case. Depending on the historical circumstances, and above all on how deeply entrenched and organised is the religion in question, power relations can be balanced or even reversed. This seems to be the case of the Catholic Church. Which, however – insofar as the Church has fused together in itself spiritual and temporal power
attributes – somewhat strays from the subject of this chapter that deals with the relationship, and not
the fusion, of politics and religion.

Yet there is a fundamental aspect that remains consistent with the purpose of this text: the
Catholic Church’s unscrupulous use of its duality. As an institution of a political nature, it has
interacted with other institutions of a political nature exploiting its religious nature, of which it
maintained a monopoly. Its duality stems from its early experience in the western part of the
Roman Empire, when the Church was immediately forced to fill the void left by deliquescent
central and peripheral political powers, growing into a more political rather than a religious practice.
The bishop of Rome did not attend the Council of Nicea, sending instead two of his legates who
could at least understand Greek; yet the successors of the Greek bishops became anonymous
servants of basilicus, whereas the successors to the bishops of Rome became the leaders of the most
powerful and enduring political-religious institution in human history. They became such because,
due to their apprenticeship, they were capable of coping with other political authorities for at least
the next thousand years, starting from the turbulent relationship with that emperor – sacred and
Roman – that they themselves had invented and invested.

When the bourgeoisie began to challenge the feudal order, the first offensive was inevitably
launched against the Catholic Church: progressively, and with increasing vigour, political culture
had set the goal of circumscribing and then eliminating its influence. Given the total confusion
between the spiritual and the temporal at the time of Christianity, this emancipation initially took
a religious form, first with the medieval ‘heresies’ and then with the Protestant Reformation
(which immediately became the instrumentum regni in a series of caesaropapist kingdoms of
Northern Europe). But the real great schism, which manifested itself in that same sixteenth cen-
tury, was between politics and religion. The former began to separate from the latter, at least on
the cultural level (think about Machiavelli and Jean Bodin), and in the following century moved
to the practical level: with the Peace of Westphalia, in 1648, the great powers agreed to exclude
the Catholic Church from issues of international politics. In the seventeenth century, philoso-
phical thought began to contest not the Church but religion. In the eighteenth century, this
schism reached its apogee with the Enlightenment, the revolutionary separation between state
and Church and the birth of secular ‘civil religions’.

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In the Middle Ages, the princes’ legitimacy was based on the divine law, which the Church
guaranteed. Progressively excluding this source of legitimation, the state had to sacralise itself on
its own; this was the task of ‘civil religion’ and its forms that echo those of the old traditional
religions: a mythology (history of the fatherland), places of worship (fatherland altars, monuments
to the fallen), collective ceremonies (parades, demonstrations, rallies), sacred symbols (the flag),
rites (oaths, anthems, elections, national holidays), prophets and saints (the founding fathers), as
well as new immanent deities (Homeland, Reason, Progress, etc.).

In the era of secularisation, the expansion of political space is directly proportional to the
contraction of religious prerogatives, but this transition takes place everywhere in mimetic ways.
In the twentieth century, the militants of pro-Russian parties had the faith, insofar they could
see what the unfaithful could not, such as the Soviet Paradise, and they behaved with the same
average intolerance to others as did believers of conventional religions. Many of the political
features of China’s so-called Cultural Revolution resembled those of Afghanistan under the
sway of the Taliban: there was only one true god and one only holy text, and in both cases,
male–female mingling, public display of feelings, music, songs, dance, and any other form of
amusement were strictly forbidden and severely punished, with the ritual objects of the previous
cults destroyed. The same sort of rigorous puritan bigotry can be found in the Calvinist
Republic of Geneva in the sixteenth century, as well as in the Massachusetts ‘Bible Commonwealth’ in the seventeenth century and under France’s Comité de Salut Public at the end of the eighteenth century.

‘Civil religion’, however, can only take root when the state that it sacralises is able to respond to real needs and to give meaning to what it apparently does not have. In a novel published in 2002, a Frenchman named Hector travels to a developing country and reads a sign on a wall that reads ‘The Good Lord Protects Us’, and then, writes the author of the novel, ‘he understood that the people here still had faith in God, much more so than in Hector’s country, because there, the people still counted on Social Security to protect them’ (Lelord, 2010: 68).

To put it short, if the state – or another earthly entity – responds to the need of ‘protection’, recourse to God wanes, at least at the grass-roots level. At the social level, this phenomenon is called ‘secularisation’, or – to use the famous definition of Max Weber – ‘die Entzauberung der Welt’, the disenchantment of the world.

Secularist political culture believes that secularisation is a product of reason. It is, yet again another concession in the face of metaphysical temptation made by a political culture that claims to base its emancipation from religion on conscious intellectual adherence, neglecting material satisfaction, which is the only means truly capable of ‘disenchancing’ the world. But when, for one reason or another, the state is no longer able to provide the aforementioned protection, when it is no longer able to respond to the needs and demands of its population, then the rationalists find themselves in the same situation of avant-garde patrols surrounded by the enemy, abandoned by their retreating troops.

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The eighteenth-century revolutionary bourgeoisie had promised heaven on earth; once it came to power it found itself dealing with the most prosaic, and sometimes definitely hellish, reality of industrialisation. Like the sorcerer’s apprentice in Goethe’s ballad who could not control the forces that he had unleashed, where only recourse to the master could prevent the disaster. In 1892, Friedrich Engels described this reconversion: ‘Nothing remained to the French and German bourgeoisie as a last resource but to silently drop their free thought, as a youngster, when sea-sickness creeps upon him, quietly drops the burning cigar he brought swaggeringly on board’ (Engels, 2006: 23) Traditional religions were thus seen as extrema ratio regum. But also as extrema ratio populorum when peoples lose their faith in civil gods.

The most recent episode of collective loss of faith in civil gods occurred starting in the 1970s; since then, we have seen a progressive restoration of the social relevance of religions. In the long process of forming and consolidating nation-states, the trend to secularisation seemed irreversible. When it reached its climax – from the late nineteenth century through the first two-thirds of the twentieth century – the large majority of intellectuals considered religion as anachronistic, an obstacle to progress, even a psychological disorder; some went so far as to assume its inevitable demise. The new ruling classes of younger countries, anxious not to upset the fragile social balance from which they originated, had no trouble persuading themselves, albeit erroneously, that the superiority of the ‘advanced’ countries lay in their ideas and institutions; they hoped to reach modernity by simply adopting both. Among their key measures were the secularisation of the state, the confiscation of clerical properties and the relegation of religion to the private sphere. From Italy to Mexico and from Iran to Spain, examples of countries that had already followed this pattern are legion, the most famous and the most accomplished of all being Mustafa Kemal Ataturk’s Republic of Turkey.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the incompatibility of religion and politics was taken for granted. The popularity of the state as a major economic player and provider of jobs, social services and
security reached its peak. It was now the state that seemed able to fulfil prayers that in previous generations had been addressed to gods.

Things began changing, as was said before, in the 1970s. In much of what was then called the Third World, the very rapid process of industrialisation poured millions of peasants into the cities, disrupting in just a few years a social balance that had prevailed for centuries; and in the ‘advanced world’, industrial society failed to keep its promises of continuous improvement of living standards. The crisis of modernity – although experienced very differently in different parts of the world – restored to all religions the role of anchor of solace and consolation when exclusively ‘civil’ solutions revealed their limits.

The social and political transformations that have since succeeded one another at an increasingly rapid pace – ‘globalisation’ – have blurred, confused and mixed identities, making acute the need for reference points that would appear stable. As Peter Berger wrote in 1999, ‘modernity, for fully understandable reasons, undermines all the old certainties; uncertainty, in turn, is a condition that many people find very hard to bear; therefore, any movement (not only a religious one) that promises to provide or to renew certainty has a ready market’ (Berger, 1999: 7).

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Religions have a decisive advantage over non-religious movements promising certainty for three reasons: (1) because they pre-dated the birth of the nation-state; (2) because the nation-state has imposed itself by fighting against them; (3) and, finally, because today when the nation-state is in crisis, they are always there, and are even inspired by renewed enthusiasm: it is this continuity that offers an appearance of stability in a world undergoing rapid and convulsive transformation. Religions are perceived as eternal not because of any promise of eternal life but because they are seen as the roses in Bernard de Fontenelle’s 1686 fable, upon perceiving their gardener:

> If roses, which last but a day, were to tell stories … they would say, ‘we have always seen the same gardener, in our roseate memories we have seen but him, he has always looked like himself, surely he does not die like us, he simply does not change’.

*(Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes 1686)*

Yet roses are unaware of how the gardener looked before their birth. The Catholicism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has also very little to do with that of the age of Christianity (and even with that of prior to the Second Vatican Council), and today’s Islam bears only vague traces of that of the era of the triumphant Muslim civilisation. But what matters is that Islam and Catholicism – like other religions – are presented to today’s public as formally uninterrupted continuity, and those who feel an urgent need for answers believe in that continuity while cautiously avoiding the investigation of historical and even theological hiatuses that have intervened in the meantime.

Invested by this apparent continuity, Islam and Christianity – but also Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, etc. – provide a more secure and cohesive foothold of collective identity than the state: in fact, in the collective imagination, they represent a mythological golden age when populations identified within themselves a common religious feeling which served both as a banner and as a protective shield; the era of the modern state – when it no longer seems to offer the protection which it had been able to offer in the past – becomes retrospectively, and just as much mythologically, the era in which division (of interests, ideologies, parties) has spread, and in which a potpourri of populations of the most disparate origins, with their baggage of alien and alarming religious beliefs, has torn the uniform fabric of society. Even in France, the most secular of all secular nations, the rediscovery of the country’s ‘Christian roots’ is becoming more and more popular.
among the population and politicians. It is worth mentioning that the adjective ‘Christian’ in this phrase has no spiritual, but only political and identitary value, and is the synonym of unpronounceable (but nevertheless intensely thought) ‘non-Muslim’.

The need to believe is metaphysical: it must ignore the facts of reality which risk undermining the certainties of the faith thus nullifying its soothing effect. The facts of reality in this case are those exposed by two Catholic historians, René Rémond and Paul Kennedy. For the former, the romantic idea of Christianity ‘arises in considerable part from nostalgia for a largely mythologised past’ (Rémond, 1998: 130), and ‘it would be a great illusion to represent medieval Europe as a homogenous and unified world’ (Rémond, 1998: 151). For the latter, unlike the Ottoman, Chinese and Mughal empires, ‘there never was a united Europe in which all parts acknowledged one secular or religious leader’ (Kennedy, 1987: 4). On the contrary, for almost all of its history Europe has been the theatre of particularly wild and devastating internal wars. Playing on the counterfactual history, Richard Bulliet launches a counterattack against Gibbon’s famous thesis of the outcome of a possible Arab victory at Poitiers (734) suggesting that if Europe had become Muslim, it would most likely be less torn, more peaceful and certainly richer and more cultured than it was under triumphant Christianity (Bulliet, 2004: 7).

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As stated before, the reaction of political culture to the social relevance of religion depends on the intensity of this relevance and on the self-confidence of political culture. In the 1970s, the level of self-confidence of political cultures in developing countries was extremely low: the hopes raised by decolonisation were shattered against the inevitable limitations of state political entities hastily erected and lacking the social foundations from which traditional nation-states emerged after centuries of struggles and compromises. The tribal logics – fed by the colonial powers – finally ‘cauterised’ every impulse of local coalition: every group of interests, every clan, every ethnic group, every religious group was thus thereinafter in open competition when not at war with the others, and the war was suspended only when one of them was able to impose itself on others. Almost all post-colonial history reproduces this simple model with different local nuances.

What made the situation even more chaotic was the destruction of the fragile social balance in these countries caused by industrialisation and by their concomitant entrance into the demographic transition phase. The most immediate result was an extremely rapid and chaotic urbanisation with millions of peasants pouring into the cities lacking infrastructures and services, or in any case totally insufficient to accommodate the flows of such proportions. Almost everywhere, seeking a last-ditch defence against the effects of their brutal uprooting, urbanised peasants found refuge in their traditional ties of clan and religion. Small secularised cities dominated by a narrow ‘westernised’ elite were submerged by masses for whom tradition was the only lifeline. And they transformed dramatically.

Ali Allawi writes that in Iraq in the 1950s,

Islam was not a noticeable factor in daily life … Nobody taught us the rules of prayer or expected us to fast in Ramadan … The pilgrimage to Mecca was only for the old, more in the nature of an insurance than an act of piety … Women wore only western clothes … Cinemas and snack bars, cabaret and country clubs, freely flowing alcohol and mixed parties … And it was not much different … in Casablanca, Cairo, Damascus, Istanbul, Tehran, Karachi and Jakarta … Neither did Islam’s public position improve materially in the decade of the 1960s.

(Allawi, 2009: 9–10)
It was the same in Kabul: Mohammad Qayoumi writing in 2010 recalls that ‘a half-century ago, Afghan women pursued careers in medicine, men and women mingled casually at movie theatres and university campuses in Kabul’ (Qayoumi, 2010); ‘Afghan women’, writes Elisabeth Bumiller in the New York Times, ‘not only attended Kabul University, they did so in miniskirts’ (Bumiller, 2009). Since then, these cities have experienced a quantum leap that has become qualitative due to its size: Baghdad from about 600,000 inhabitants at the time passed to more than seven million in the early twenty-first century incorporating almost a quarter of the population of Iraq (against one-seventh in 1950). Turkey witnessed a real ‘Anatolisation’ of Istanbul: millions of deeply religious people have inundated a traditionally secular city, which as early as in 1994 elected as its mayor a prominent figure of the Islamist Party Refah, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In short, it is not Erdoğan who Islamised Turkey, but it is the Islamisation of Istanbul that ‘created’ Erdoğan.

The same phenomenon has occurred in almost the entire developing world, not only Muslim majority countries. In the 1950s, 1.7 million people lived in Delhi; they reached 19 million in 2017 (28 million if the metropolitan area is included). The Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, has been in power since 2014, having already ruled between 1998 and 2004, almost the same years when Refah was elected as the largest political party in Turkey for the first time under the premiership of Necmettin Erbakan (1997). Today in India, wrote Meera Nanda in 2010, ‘the worship of nation is becoming indistinct from the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses’ (Nanda, 2010: 8).

Developing countries offer the best example of the chain of actions and reactions that has set in motion the tendency for the reunification of the human and the divine in today’s world (even if, on the divine side, formalism seems to overwhelm and sometimes cancel spirituality). This tendency also seems now launched in the developed world. This chain can be simplified as follows: the return of religious relevance is ridden by a political class seeking new legitimacy, and the political use of religion in turn makes the latter once more an indispensable factor in public life. The case of Egypt in the 1970s is emblematic: in order to get rid of the old Nasserist guard, to proceed with painful economic reforms, to expel the Russian advisors, and to open to the Americans, the extremely weak Anwar el Sadat relied among others upon the clerics’ support and in particular on the Muslim Brotherhood, whose leaders were recalled from exile. But he was able to do so because, following the 1960s development, Egypt – or rather its capital – was already being re-Islamised: Michael C. Dunn, the editor-in-chief of the Middle East Journal, upon return to Cairo after a long absence was surprised to see that ‘people were wearing beards everywhere … The mosques were overflowing, with people spilling out into

![Figure 1.2 Growth in population size of Istanbul over time](source: The author)
the streets’ (Dreyfuss, 2006: 149). In a nutshell, urbanisation precedes and explains the people wearing beards, and they precede and explain Sadat’s policy. However, this is not a simple relationship of cause and effect, but rather a relationship with multiple and reciprocal influences in which the political exploitation of religion in turn acts as a multiplier of religious influence on society as a whole.

To conclude, it remains to be seen on what level the current relationship between religion and politics is situated at a time when religion increasingly neglects the spiritual realm and when politics in an increasingly evident way takes on the appearance of religious beliefs. While in the religious field formalism and/or political action become more important than the care of the soul, in the political field the faith in miraculous solutions becomes more important than the composed and rational calculation of the real forces at stake and their mutual interests. Politics does not take on the appearance of religion because it wants to replace it, like in the age of secularisation, but because the rapid and convulsive processes of great international disorder have made faith and miracles the privileged terrain for electoral competition and legitimacy of the ruling classes.

These same processes have accelerated and accentuated the phenomenon that Olivier Roy labels as ‘holy ignorance’, that is, the separation between religions and their cultural roots. Both the emigration of the faithful to lands of different religious cultures, as well as the exportation of standardised religious models foreign to the local culture contribute to it. Examples are the Sunni currents that call for a return to Islam of the seventh century identical for everyone everywhere making a clean sweep of successive cultural stratifications; Shiism that tends to reshape itself by following the Iranian example everywhere, from Yemen to Afghanistan; fundamentalist evangelicalism that employs the same messages, behaviours and rituals in countries as diverse as the United States, Brazil, Korea and Ghana, supplanting local cultures, religions and traditions; Hassidism that thrives in Sephardic communities, and so on. They are ersatz religions reduced to their (presumed) minimum common denominator, vestigial, aesthetic and moral recipes simple and equal for all, indifferent to the cultural (and religious) traditions of each.

As a general phenomenon, ‘holy ignorance’ has always existed: all religions, at one time or another, have migrated, breaking the umbilical cord with their place of origin and their cultures. Yet, in the past, these movements required centuries, giving rise to new specific local cultures. Braudel states that by crossing the Himalayas Buddhism got ‘lost in translation’ in order to adapt to the Taoist culture, thus acquiring its own physiognomy, radically different from the original Indian one (Braudel, 1997: 266–268). Today, however, this migration process is regulated by the pressing needs of the just-in-time capitalist circulation; it is, as writes Roy, a serial production, which circulates like capitals, goods and people, and, in order to be able to get anywhere, ‘the religious object must appear universal, disconnected from a specific culture that has to be understood in order for the message to be grasped’. After all, adds Roy, ‘religion does not require people to know, but to believe’ (Roy, 2013: 6).

Today, when politics too ‘does not require people to know, but to believe’, we witness a new reconciliation between the two camps. It is a soft return to the Middle Ages, in which both politics and religion lose their specific features and are drawn towards the flattening of an ignorance which, although it still preserves its formal pretence, has nothing ‘holy’ any more.

Notes

1 Such anomalous cases as Qatar, Luxembourg, Singapore, Brunei etc., all of which bear little statistical significance, have been excluded from this list.
The next Middle Ages

2 ‘Religiosity rate’ refers to the percentage of people who answered affirmatively to the question ‘Is religion an important part of your daily life?’ in a 2009 Gallup poll (Crabtree, 2010).

3 Hypothetical Nero’s persecution of the Christians at the time of the fire of Rome (64 CE) is now considered by most historians as myth. See Shaw (2015).

4 According to Charles Freeman, Stark’s figures should be taken cum grano salis, especially because at the time ‘there was no clear definition of what it was to be a Christian’ (Freeman, 2002: 371).

5 At the time, each of these communities was called ἀἵρεσις (haíresis), the term traditionally used to refer to philosophical schools; when the struggle between Christian groups became bitter, the term took on a negative meaning, and an opinion turned into ‘heresy’.

6 According to many historians, at the time of the Council of Nicaea Constantine was still pagan (Freeman, 2002: 167–171).

7 Erbakan was removed by a military coup a year after his election.

8 American undersecretary of State, Elliot L. Richardson, in Cairo for Nasser’s funeral, told President Nixon that the new president ‘wouldn’t survive in power for more than four or six weeks’ (Dreyfuss, 2006: 148).

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