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RELIGION AND POLITICAL PARTIES

The case of Italy

Alberta Giorgi

Italian secularism is characterised by the constitutional separation of religion and politics, on the one side, and, on the other side, policy collaboration, the public role of Catholic institutions and organisations, which is taken for granted, and a historically rooted Catholic culture, broader than religious affiliation per se, which permeates the political culture itself (Cipriani 2003; Garelli 2014; Ventura 2014). The absence of a unified channel and model for bringing religious claims into the political sphere, the increasing visibility of religions other than Catholicism, and current developments in political representation have profoundly transformed the relationships between political parties and religions and continue to do so (Giorgi 2018).

The scholarly literature on religion and political parties in Italy has focused mainly on three interrelated aspects: the effects of the religious cleavage (that is, religious affiliation and religiosity rates as predictors of party voting); the relationships between political parties and religious actors (the Pope, the Catholic Church, the Episcopal Conference, religious movements or religiously inspired associations); and the role of religion in party ideology and discourse. Since Italy is well known to be a Catholic-majority country, scholars’ attention has overwhelmingly focused on Catholicism, seldom touching upon non-religion and atheism. Other religions have remained virtually undiscussed, and this chapter takes a step towards filling this gap in the political science and political sociology literature. The next section is devoted to the first phase of Italian republican history, which was dominated by the DC. The second section discusses the current transformations involving the relationships between political parties and religions. The third section draws attention to the role that other religions are likely to play in Italy’s near political future.

The Christian Democratic Party

Italy’s first republic has been described as a ‘defective two-party system’ (Galli 1966). It was characterised by two powerful political parties – the Christian Democratic Party (DC) and the Communist Party (PCI) – one of which had, in reality, no chance of taking over the government. As a matter of fact, then, during the Republican period, known as the First Republic (1946-1992), Italian politics was dominated by the DC: a conservative, religiously oriented, centrist and moderate political party (Ozzano 2013; Warner 2012). It was not a confessional party, and its
agenda did not overlap with that of the Catholic Church. However, even if their relations were often filled with tension and deceptions on both sides, the DC was and remained the Catholic Church’s political point of reference until its collapse in the 1990s (Ceccarini and Diamanti 2007). The DC’s constituency was a microcosm of Italian society and included different groups, classes and ideologies, with the characteristics of a ‘catch-all party’ (Galli 1993). Even though Catholics’ electoral unity has been called a myth (Pace 1995), the DC was able to collect the majority of Catholic votes (Marafioti 2007). This was supported by the capillary infrastructure of local parishes and the support of the wide network of Catholic associations and organisations. Beyond electoral support, the network of Catholic associations and organisations acted as an instrument of political socialisation, often providing a springboard into politics. It also offered a space for collective action and participation (Giorgetti 2016; Marzano 1997). Catholic civil society assembled around the local churches, the heart of local communities. For a long time, voting for the DC was indeed an expression of social affiliation and locally rooted social and political identity. The DC vote was territorially concentrated in ‘white zones’ all over Italy (Ignazi and Wellhofer 2017). In the northern regions, Catholic civil society played the main role; in the south, where the Catholic associational network is more dispersed, parishes and the local clergy were the point of reference instead (Diotalevi 1999; Segatti 1999). In addition to its religious identity, because of its role as the principal opponent to the powerful Communist Party, the DC also had an anti-communist identity, making the party the reference point for a broad constituency that provided electoral support against the PCI. Furthermore, part of the electoral support for the DC was based on the party’s capacity to allocate resources to local actors and communities (a clientelist political system; see Ignazi and Wellhofer 2017). The relative weights of the different components of DC electoral support, as well as the party’s ideology and its relations with Catholic actors, changed over time.

According to Ceccarini and Diamanti (2007), the history of the DC can be divided into three different phases. During the first phase, which lasted until the 1960s, the DC was both quintessentially Catholic (Parisi 1979) and anti-communist, governing from a steadily centrist position. It was the leading party in Italy, with a voting percentage exceeding 40 percent. Notwithstanding internal differences within its constituency, survey data show that Catholic affiliation and especially practice were strongly and positively correlated with voting for the DC (Mannheimer and Sani 1987; Cappello and Diamanti 1995). It must be noted that not even during this first phase did the DC appeal to Catholic unity or to the support of the Catholic Church (Diotalevi 2016).

The second phase began in the 1960s and lasted until the early 1980s, during which time the DC became ‘a’, rather than ‘the’, Catholic party. Its voting percentage consolidated around 38 percent, but the composition of the constituency changed. Catholic practice was no longer a clear predictor of DC voting; moreover, electoral support diminished in the traditional ‘white zones’, signalling the decreasing role of Catholic political identity. At the same time, non-Catholic votes, which had traditionally been extremely low, increased in number. The growing dissatisfaction of practising Catholics with the DC was related to the impact of the processes of modernisation and secularisation but also to the internal transformations and pluralism of the Catholic world, which emerged with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Among Catholic associations, sharper political cleavages emerged, giving rise to different kinds of spiritual, social and political engagement (Faggioli 2008; Marzano 2013a, 2013b). Because of its internal differences, the Catholic world has indeed been described as an ‘archipelago’ (Colozzi and Martelli 1988). Highly politicised religious groups, more or less connected to the Marxist cultural milieu, sprang up and promoted a renewal of Christian practices and culture (Margotti 2016; Tosi and Vitale 2009). At the same time, informal communities and new confessional movements were started (Faggioli 2008), destined to play a political role in the future. In these
tumultuous times, the DC increasingly governed with the support of centre-left parties, and under its administrations were introduced the possibility of divorce and the legal termination of pregnancy. In this phase, electoral support for the DC was less an expression of identity and more the outcome of the absence of acceptable alternatives (Ceccarini and Diamanti 2007).

In the third phase (from the 1980s to the early 1990s), anti-communism lost its role due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. DC electoral support shifted its geographical centre from the northern to the southern regions of Italy (Biorcio 1999; Diamanti 2009), and the electoral percentages remained above 30 percent. However, the party culture and reputation were collapsing: in addition to the decline of local political cultures and the loss of support from many Catholic associations, the detachment of the Italian Episcopal Conference became increasingly apparent. In the years 1990-1992 a series of nationwide judicial investigation into political corruption, collectively known as ‘Mani pulite’ - *Clean Hands*, led to the indictment of the leadership of all the ruling parties, and, in 1994, the DC disintegrated.

The DC represented the model for channelling religion-related issues into politics: other political parties intervened on specific topics but without questioning the primacy of the DC in religious matters. Analysis of the parliamentary debate shows that religion-related issues were mainly ‘Catholic’ issues, apart from the many attempts at regulating, through a law on religious freedom, the role of non-Catholic religions (thus far without success). On the other hand, the main political goal of the other religions was the activation of the system of agreements (*intese*) which granted them political recognition. This occurred in 1984 with the revision of the Concordat between the Italian state and the Catholic Church (Margiotta Broglio 2014).

**From religious monopoly to the free market**

*Mani pulite* marked a watershed in Italian politics: besides the conviction of a large proportion of the leadership of the parties in power, it resulted in a major loss of citizens’ confidence in political actors and institutions. At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the international landscape, and led the Communist Party to rethink its political role. These processes triggered the transfiguration of the Italian political landscape, with new electoral rules and new political actors. The introduction of a quasi-majority system, in particular, changed the political opportunity structure, favouring bipolarism and large coalitions rather than centrist positions or specialised political representation. The conservative religious party model in Italy had flourished in a proportional electoral system by occupying the political centre, where the ability to reconcile the differences between Catholics in a single party was rewarded with political dominance. A bipolar system, on the contrary, led to political alternation between left and right and changed the role of the political centre (Giorgi 2013, p. 898). The political discontinuity was meant to be so profound that the period beginning in 1993 was welcomed as the ‘second republic’ of Italy. The Italian party system polarised into two large coalitions running for the national government: the centre-left, composed primarily of former communists and the leftist faction of the former DC, and the centre-right, composed mainly of Forza Italia, a brand-new party led by the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, Alleanza Nazionale, a post-fascist party that disappeared in 2009, and Lega Nord, which gradually dominated the coalition. In the 2013 elections, a third pole entered the arena: the Movimento 5 Stelle (*M5S; Five Star Movement*), led by the comedian Beppe Grillo, which rapidly gained electoral success by playing the role of the anti-system party (Biorcio and Natale 2013; Pasquino 2014). Its presence transformed the Italian electoral scene into a complex quasi-tri-polarism bounded by a fragmented bipolar electoral system. In 2018, the M5S formed a government with the Lega Nord, which changed its name to La Lega (The League), and undertook a process of internal reconfiguration from protest to ruling party.
According to many scholars, the impact of the economic crisis between 2011 and 2013 marked a new phase of Italian politics - if not a third republic, at least a second phase within the second republic (Bull and Pasquino 2018; Bailey and Driessen 2016). As a matter of fact, the relationships between Italian political parties and religions can be analysed as divided into two phases: a first phase, during which political parties chased the Catholic vote, and a second phase, marked by a renewed political role for civil-society Catholicism, the increasing political visibility of non-Catholic religions, and the rise of populism.

The political spectrum of the second republic also included religiously oriented parties. More specifically, at least five political parties stemmed from the DC and were renamed, merged or terminated over the years. The ‘new’ Christian parties’ political positions ranged from the centre-right, such as Centro Cristiano Democratico (CCD) and Cristiani Democratici Uniti (CDU), to the centre-left, such as the PPI and the Margherita - all claiming the DC legacy and including Christianity among their identity tenets (Ceccarini and Diamanti 2007; Ozzano and Giorgi 2016). Despite the many attempts to recreate a centrist party or coalition based on the DC model, these parties were unable to play a significant role in Italian politics and were inexorably split between the two main coalitions (Segatti 2006). This has been the case, for example, with the centre-left progressive Catholic party Margherita, which merged with the post-communists to form what today is the dominant centre-left party, the Partito Democratico (PD). Currently, there is only one explicitly religiously oriented political party, the Union of Christian and Centre Democrats (Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e Democratici di Centro, or UDC), which was founded in 2002 and inherited the DC symbol. Despite having low electoral support (around 5-6 percent), these parties’ political role has often been quite important, since they have frequently provided the opposing coalitions with the votes necessary to govern.

Among the other relevant political parties, the explicit religious reference disappeared - although the attention to the cultural aspects and values of Catholicism remained (Bailey and Driessen 2016). In fact, all the political parties in the second republic attempted to attract a supposedly ‘Catholic constituency’ by forging alliances with religious actors (such as movements and organisations), championing Catholic values and issues, and opposing legal initiatives disapproved of by the Catholic Church. Until the economic crisis, in the political and public agendas of the 2000s, religion-related issues featured prominently, with political discussions on topics such as the ethics of embryo stem cell research, the regulation of medically assisted procreation or the recognition of same-sex partnerships peaking between 2006 and 2008 (Ozzano and Giorgi 2016; see also Bolzonar 2016; Ignazi 2014).

Centre-right parties became the champions of Catholic values, upholding neo-confessional moral conservatism and promoting and defending ‘non-negotiable’ values (valori non negoziabili, Diotallevi 2016). Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, for example, partly attempted to revive the DC’s conservative party model by modernising it and reframing Catholic values within a political ideology that included both conservative values and pro-free trade economic stances (Giorgi 2013, p. 900). The politicisation of religion-related issues caused internal dissent within the centre-left coalition, in which the progressive Catholic component coexisted somewhat uneasily with factions that opposed any religious reference in policymaking. This caused complex political misalignment around religion-related issues (Giorgi 2013). On the other hand, Catholic social teaching and solidarity are among the central tenets of centre-left parties’ identities (Diotallevi 2016). The third way of appealing to Catholic values was the Lega Nord defence of Catholic identity as a ‘militant’ identity seeking to build a sense of community and establish distance from others - be they political parties or ethno-religious cultures. Especially from the mid-2000s, the Lega Nord began to frame the defence of Catholic values and Catholicism as a way of protecting Italian identity and culture from ‘invasion’ by immigrants, particularly
Muslims (Guolo 2000; Molle 2018). In this sense, Lega Nord promotes an ‘ethnicisation of religion’ (the overlap between country and religion) for both immigrants and natives. In his typology of religiously oriented parties, Ozzano convincingly argues that the Lega Nord exhibits many of the characteristics of nationalist religiously oriented parties, particularly the ‘subordination of religious orientation to strong nationalist sentiments’ and the display of ‘religious overtones’ against other communities, who are perceived as ‘alien’ and sometimes ‘threatening’ (Ozzano 2013, pp. 815-816). Several non-Catholic political parties are interested in the former DC’s supporters, even though no party seems ready to take on all of the Catholic policies. The M5S party instead expresses no clear positions on religion-related issues, being mainly secularist with an internally plural constituency (Palano 2016).

The transformation of the political sphere is critical to an understanding of the current political role of Catholicism and other religions in Italy. Voting modes shifted from electoral behaviour based mainly on long-term factors, such as party, religious or class identification, to more volatile votes, based inter alia on opinions and choices. Consequently, the ‘DC subculture’ declined in importance, losing its ability to shape electoral preferences, while short-term factors such as political campaigns became increasingly relevant (Giorgi 2013, p. 899; Bellucci and Segatti 2010). In describing contemporary politics in Italy, scholars underline the pivotal role of a media-centred public sphere, the personalisation of politics and the rise of cartel parties, and citizens’ distrust towards traditional political institutions (Kriesi 2008; Rosanvallon 2008; Ruzza 2006). In this context, the ‘long-term decline of traditional political cultures has resulted in their effective replacement with political “narratives” usually tied to the figure of a leader’ (Bull and Pasquino 2018, p. 4). The reference to Catholicism, then, forms part of political narratives rather than being the expression of political elaboration of a Catholic milieu. As Diotallevi puts it, ‘Catholicism’ is more present in the institutional political sphere than it was in the first republic, but political Catholicism has disappeared (Diotallevi 2016).

The Catholic Church, left without a privileged political position, on the one hand lost an intermediator but on the other became freer to convey different positions, seeking to appeal to the entire political continuum (Ceccarini 2009). In fact, as is widely recognised in the literature, the president of the Catholic Episcopal Conference, Camillo Ruini, who was elected in 1991, began what has been called the Cultural Project: the promotion of Catholic values and issues in the public and political spheres without any privileged political partner, adopting instead an ‘active neutrality’. The structure of the Catholic Church itself, as mentioned, is changing as a result of both internal (e.g. Second Vatican Council) and exogenous (secularisation process) factors. The Pope has a political role that transcends his position within the institution, and the Church structure has been defined as ‘sectarian’, composed of a heterogeneous galaxy of spiritual movements, both encouraged by the papacy and simultaneously autonomous (see Marzano 2013b).

Religious movements are politically relevant in contemporary Italy: some engage in street protest and ‘anti-gender’ politics (Avanza 2015; Prearo 2017); others have mobilised in favour of immigrants; and yet others have entered the ‘new’ political parties which, without clear social basis, have offered many an opportunity to be heard (Giorgi and Polizzi 2015). Catholic associations, too, have played a relevant political role in the second republic. Such associations are divided between those that favour neo-collateralism close to the political lobbies and those that opt for advocacy activities focusing on pragmatic relations with local politics (Ceccarini and Diamanti 2007; Giorgi 2016, 2012). Catholic civil society associations benefited from the delocalisation and subsidisation of public policies, and their role and importance grew substantially in the 2000s. In 2011, they organised a large meeting in Todi, approved of by the Catholic Church, to discuss politics and Catholic political engagement (Diotallevi 2016; Giorgi 2013). According to some scholars, this initiative marked a new phase in Catholic politics which clearly expressed the urgency of doing politics without political parties’ mediation (Bailey and Driessen 2016).
Indeed, the collapse of the DC entailed the demise of both the myth and the reality of Catholic political unity: the Catholic vote fragmented to support all the parties in the political spectrum, with no clear preference for any one political party or set of loyalties (Ceccarini and Diamanti 2007, p. 43; Ignazi and Wellhofer 2013). Rather than a constituency of loyal voters, the preferences expressed by practising Catholics in the second republic are volatile. Between 2006 and 2008, the analyses highlighted a leaning towards the centre-right, with the public agenda coagulating around religion-related issues (Ignazi 2014). This changed, however, with the economic crisis, which reoriented public priorities. Hence, even though there are value differences that can be politically activated, the system of values is not a clear predictor of political preference in the second republic (Segatti and Brunelli 2010); there is neither an ‘ethical cleavage’ (Ceccarini and Diamanti 2007) nor a ‘culture war’ (Ozzano and Giorgi 2016).

The Catholic world is now significantly smaller than it was in the first republic as a consequence of the decline in religious participation (Vezzoni and Biolcati-Rinaldi 2015). Moreover, survey data show a progressive autonomisation of Catholics from the authority of the Catholic Church as an institution - Davie’s (1994) ‘believing without belonging’ - which has also influenced the cohesion of the constituency. On the other hand, data on Italian religiosity also shed light on what has been called ‘believing without believing’ (Garelli 2014), namely the steady relevance of the Catholic Church as a public authority. Non-Catholics uphold Catholic values and defend the public role of the Catholic Church. From this perspective, Italian Catholicism can be defined as a low-intensity religion (Diotallevi 2016) that is acquiring the characteristics of a ‘vicarious religion’ - one actively practised by only a minority of the population but that nevertheless maintains its public role (Davie 2007). The Catholic minority has been defined as an ‘influential minority’ (Ceccarini and Diamanti 2007): regardless of the electoral fortunes of more or less explicitly religiously oriented parties, Catholicism still plays a relevant role in Italian politics in terms of policy, ideology and culture (Bolzonar 2016; Ozzano 2016; Marzano and Urbinati 2013). However, Catholic culture is increasingly detached from local communities, and it is more and more either an individualised spiritual journey or experienced through the mediation of participation in civil society Catholic groups and associations. In other words, ‘political Catholicism’ (intended as political culture elaborated by Catholics) still exists - albeit organised in associations and civil society groups rather than political parties - but with significantly less impact on the institutional political sphere (Diotallevi 2016).

Beyond Catholicism: the other religions

Largely unnoticed in the public sphere - with the significant exception of Islam - other religions are expanding in Italy (Pace 2013), as is their political relevance (Giorgi 2018).

Mainstream political parties have paid little attention to non-Catholic religions: with the exception of individual politicians and specialised niches, it is only in relation to the moral panic promoted by the Lega Nord against the ‘Muslim threat’ that other religions have properly entered the larger public and political debate. Issues related to minorities have mostly been framed as non-religion-related, as in the case of the role of Jews in post-war Italy. In terms of political discourse, Judaism has barely been addressed: the political sphere has primarily touched upon the topic of Israel as a state (with heated debates, particularly in the 1970s and the 1980s), anti-Semitism and the importance of the public memory of the Holocaust. Despite some differences, in the first republic, the dominant political parties expressed a pro-Palestinian approach. In the second republic, instead, the balance shifted towards support for Israel, particularly as a consequence of the efforts of the post-fascist party Alleanza Nazionale, which was attempting to present itself as a reputable right-wing party at the international level and needed the legitimization of the Italy’s Jewish
community (Marzano 2011). At the same time, centre-right support for the Israeli state stemmed from the anti-Muslim position of the Lega Nord. Apart from the first-republic DC with Catholicism, no political party displayed specific or privileged relations with religious actors (except for extreme-right parties and traditional paganism; Giorgi 2018).

During the first republic, religious minorities were principally interested in gaining religious citizenship: as the literature widely recognises, while secularist liberal Italy granted space and freedom, the rise of the ‘Catholic nation’ in the aftermath of the Second World War made it more difficult for religious minorities to fit in (Schwarz 2009), and some were banned (such as the Pentecostals, which were debarred until the mid-1950s; see Zanini 2017). Only in the late 1980s could non–Catholic religious communities begin the process of political recognition: the first groups of religions signing an agreement with the Italian state included the Jewish communities and some Protestant churches (including the Waldensians, Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, Assemblies of God and Adventists). In 2012, it was the turn of a second group of religions, including Buddhists, Hindus and other Protestant churches. Aside from the practical effects, such agreements granted religious minorities public visibility and legitimacy, in addition to enabling them to bring religious claims (Giorgi and Annicchino 2017).

Indeed, the political action of religious minorities in Italy primarily manifested itself in civil society and within the religious community. Over the years, some community leaders of the larger and more ancient religious communities in Italy – the Waldensians and Methodists and the Jews – were elected to parliament via the different parties. However, this was mainly the consequence of individual political commitment rather than community efforts aimed at gaining representation. Low numbers and the absence of privileged connections with political parties do not allow us to speak of ‘electoral constituencies’, although specialised scholars underline that, in the first republic, the larger religious minorities (Jews, Waldensians and Methodists) leaned towards the centre-left and were particularly active in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which also impacted on the internal organisation of these communities (Fubini 1998; Papini and Tourn 2005; Rigano 2009; Vinay 1980 - see also Spini 1956, 2002). In the second republic, the landscape and the political alignments have changed. The Protestant camp includes the Union of Waldensian and Methodist churches, which is characterised by high levels of political commitment and liberal public stances on topics such as the end of life and marriage equality, and the Pentecostal churches, whose positions are closer to those expressed by the Catholic Church. The candidates put forward by the Jewish communities range from the centre-right to the centre-left.

In the meantime, other communities have enlarged their presence, such as the many Muslim groups established all over Italy, which are showing significant growth in terms of numbers, visibility and integration. While in 2009 it was mainly an Islam of immigration, mostly interested in the politics of immigrants’ countries of origin (Allievi 2009), contemporary Italian Muslims are claiming full citizenship and variously engage in politics. In contrast to the situation in other European countries, Muslim migration in Italy is extremely plural and grew significantly faster in a context of restrictive immigration policies – and consequently often in irregular conditions. The territorial dispersion and low rate of ethno-cultural associations have contributed to the role of mosques and religious centres in shaping and organising the different immigrant communities (Allievi 2009). Umbrella religious organisations have been created since the mid-1990s to articulate the intrinsically plural organisation of Islam and negotiate with the Italian state the official recognition of Islam in the religion-state regime, an attempt that has thus far remained unsuccessful (Allievi 2009; Giorgi 2018; Guolo 2005). As a consequence, on the one hand, religious groups often adopt the practice of camouflage (Giorgi and Annicchino 2017), while on the other the recognition of Islam has remained an unresolved political issue in Muslim communities all over Italy.
The absence of religious recognition also bears a symbolic weight in times in which hostility towards immigrants and towards Islam is on the rise (Giorgi and Vitale 2017). For this reason, the option of constructing a Muslim political party in Italy, which had emerged as a possibility among some communities, has been set aside for the moment in order to avoid fuelling political polarisation and conflict. At the same time, some consider their engagement in religious groups to constitute political activism (Guolo 2005). Many Italian Muslims have engaged in extant political parties over the last few years, making for a growing Muslim presence in politics, especially in local councils. As Stefano Allievi noted a decade ago, Italian Islam is locally integrated - a silent process that has either gone largely unnoticed or been actively ignored by politics and the mass media (Allievi 2009; Belluati 2007; Pace 2013). Muslim candidates have been particularly common in centre-left parties, sparking various debates. On the one hand, political parties are accused of ‘tokenising’ a religious minority, while on the other Muslims engaged in political parties are accused of having a secret religious agenda (as happens in many other countries; see Peace 2015). In addition, on some occasions, the political legitimacy of choosing Muslim women wearing the headscarf to represent leftists has also been questioned (Giorgi 2017, 2018). While some Muslim communities exhibit their interest in political activism, others - and other religions - are more cautious, with some even expressing discomfort at adopting political language (see Giorgi 2018 for a discussion). How these different positions will develop in the near future is open to question. So far, the political saliency of non-Catholic religions in Italy has been mainly an effect of political parties’ positioning on other topics, such as Catholicism or immigration. However, the political role of religious minorities is slowly increasing in the second republic. In fact, it is likely that they will play a significant role in the near future, not only as the objects of political discourse but also as politically engaged communities. Euroscepticism is a case in point: many studies show how Euroscepticism is negatively correlated with religion: religious individuals, especially if affiliated to Catholicism, or to immigrant minorities, are generally more pro-European than average (for a review, see Boomgaard and Freire 2009). It will be interesting to see whether this creates political opportunities for strategic political alliances.

Conclusion

The DC model for representing Catholic values in the political sphere no longer holds. Three main factors have intervened: the changes in the Italian political sphere, the transformation of Catholicism in Italy, and the increasing political role of other religions. In recent years, Italy has discovered both religious diversity and political distrust towards institutional politics: how this will play out in the near future remains to be seen.

References

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Religion and political parties in Italy


