

Nationalism and Separation of Church and State: Protestant Contributions in Catholic Italy

Ottavio Palombaro



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INTRODUCTION

Risorgimento and Reformation

In recent times there has been a resurrection of debates rotating around the nature of nationalism, seeking in some cases to discuss what should the relation between Christianity and nationalism be. At the same time there has been also a resurrection of socialism, coupled with a preoccupying trend in totalitarian tendencies. The challenge is either to over-react by proposing authoritarian solutions to repress or cave-in to neo-revolutionary tendencies. This has led to the need of formulating some moderate and yet decisive alternatives. Many are seeking to understand how does the concepts of nation, nationalism and separation between church and state fit together. If one wants to find consistent solutions to such question it is imperative to go back to the origin of the debates that took place during the birth of nations and the post-revolutionary era. Italy offers a case in point for this: being located in post-revolutionary Europe as the headquarter of Roman Catholicism, Italy sought to deal with the revolutionary wave of the era while at the same time being located at the center of the thousand-years old project of Christendom. The relation between church and state in this nationalistic project was therefore a case in point. The following book seeks to draw insights to such debate on the proper relation between church and state¹ by studying the contributions of the Italian Protestants, particularly the Reformed Waldensians, at the very inception of modern Italian nationalism.

It might come as a surprise to see any connection between the movement for the national Italian independence (Risorgimento) and the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. Like many political movements for the establishment of modern nation states, the Risorgimento came to be known as a largely secular movement. This implied that, like in the case of the French Revolution, Italian nationalism in time became identified with secularism, mainly the ideal to transform society from religious values and institutions toward non-religious values and institutions. Furthermore, three

¹ The following book will consider separatism from the nineteenth century perspective of Alexandre Vinet (see section 2.4.3) rather than from the secularist understanding of separatism, which in the steps of the French Revolution tends to conceive of separatism in terms of strict segregation between religious and political spheres. See: Hugh McLeod, "Christianity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-century Europe." *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 15, no. 1 (2015): 7.

hundred years separate these two very different contexts. Yet, the case of Italy, even in the hands of its secularizing figures,² presented itself immediately with a religious question: how should this project to create an Italian nation deal with the question of Rome, where the head of the Catholic Church resided? The debate over the proper relation between governmental authorities and ecclesiastical authorities in fact had been an issue in Italic history for quite so long. After the first centuries with the persecution of Christians under the Roman Empire, the history of the Italian peninsula became open to being interpreted by modern onlookers as having faced a progressive intertwining between church and government, between the spheres of religious authorities and the sphere of governmental authorities. From the third century well into the Middle Ages Christianity had moved from being tolerated to becoming the official religion. Governments had authority over the church and vice versa. This state of things continued to influence the governmental landscape all the way into the nineteenth century with the official end of the Sacred Roman Empire through Napoleon on the one side and on the other side with the rise of nation secular states throughout the European continent. It is during the rise of nation states that in several cases, including the Italian Risorgimento, a radical solution was proposed: remove religion from the place it held in the public sphere through revolutionary means. While concepts such as the one of a nation state church continued to exist throughout Europe long after the revolutionary era, the dynamic between church and state from that time on was radically changed.

Even within the more radical political narratives, religion still held a distinct role. The hope of church leaders and intellectual figures for a resurrection of freedom of religion and reforms within the church became central aspects of the political fights of the era. The understanding within this political narrative shared for example by Giuseppe Mazzini was that freedom, even religious freedom, had been buried ever since the time of the Ancient Roman Republics and needed to be resurrected. National resurrection and freedom of religion during the Risorgimento needed to go hand in hand. It is within this framework that Protestantism and the ideals of the Italian Risorgimento came into some loose form of connection. Many

² By secular forces or anti-clericalism I understand here the post-revolutionary opposition within Italian nationalism to the Catholic clergy's alleged authoritarian entangling in political affairs. Anti-clericalism at the time contrasted the privileges and proprieties of the Catholic Church. See: "Anti-clericalism" in: Alexander Motyl, ed. *Encyclopedia of Nationalism* (Amsterdam, NL: Elsevier Academic Press, 2000), 445.

political and religious voices at the time of the Italian unification looked back with expectation at famous and extremely critical Italian reforming figures such as Fra' Dolcino, Arnaldo da Brescia or Girolamo Savonarola seeking to make them their allies in their radical political project. Even some of the more dissident views of Dante Alighieri, such as his Ghibelline remarks on the pope, or his thoughts on the proper relation between church and public government in *De Monarchia* were utilized during the Risorgimento, creating a portrait of him as a forerunner of the Reformation.³ The case of Savonarola who during the sixteenth century had once called for a spiritual Reformation in Italy without much success, became during the nineteenth century an idealized symbol of the battle for religious freedom and the reformation of the church:

*Poor land Italy, poor land this land where only vices are blessed, where the thief is respected, the bandit is feared, the prostitute is acclaimed, the ugly is applauded, the laughter is better than sound discourse, evil actions are always worth doing for the one who does them, the charlatans are heard with respect, the serious people are stoned, and all go to church without believing anything, while those priests who truly preach, are burned as heretics.*⁴

Cases during the Risorgimento such as Don Miraglia or the Italian Protestant Journal called after him *L'Eco di Savonarola*, witness to this connection. According to their narrative, the Protestant Reformation that was missed during the sixteenth century needed to be brought to Italy in the nineteenth century. It was almost ironic that the Italian Risorgimento found itself at the time in favor of Protestantism. This was largely due to the fact that many Protestants believed in separation between church and state. Many religious figures of the past that sought to bring Reformation, and even at

³ Ida De Michelis, "Dante nel Risorgimento Italiano: Letture Riformate." In: Marina Beer, Anna Foa, eds., *Ebrei, Minoranze, Risorgimento* (Rome, IT: Viella, 2013), 109.

⁴ Significant for the purpose of this research is the edition of this quote contained in the volume that was published during the Risorgimento: *Sermoni e Prediche di F. Girolamo Savonarola* (Prato, IT: Ranieri Guasti, 1846 [1496]), 250. See on this use of Savonarola both the establishment of the newspaper *L'Eco di Savonarola* during the Risorgimento or, the same quote introducing this recollection of Italian events dating back at the time of the Risorgimento: J. L. Boissonnas, *L'Italie et L'Évangile. Une page de L'Histoire Religieuse Contemporaine* (Genève, HC: Émile Deroud, 1882), 3.

times Martin Luther himself (such as with Alessandro Gavazzi, Raffaello Lambruschini or Luigi De Sanctis), were reinterpreted in the nineteenth century in a moralistic, romantic and nationalist way. In many of those cases the use of these figures and their writings remained nothing more than an anachronistic portrait, detached from the pre-modern and pre-bourgeoisie roots that had given birth to such figures and ideas. What fueled these efforts nevertheless was a desire to solve the issue of religion. Given the presence of the pope in the Italian soil, many eschatological expectations also flourished during the Risorgimento, both in Italy and abroad, as many parallels between the end of the temporal power of the pope and the fall of Babylon in the book of Revelation were drawn. While concepts such as freedom and conscience began to be idealized and utilized even in the hands of secular figures at this time, such as Giuseppe Mazzini's positivistic model of a political religion, the spiritual component in these depictions is still significant. Italian "neo-Reformers", like Alessandro Gavazzi, who during the Risorgimento exalted the historical dimensions of the Reformation did not necessarily understand the theology of the Reformation with any significant depth. Nevertheless, this was the image within which many Italian patriots as well as international Protestant nations such as Great Britain identified themselves at the time and justified their own political stand with. It becomes therefore somehow significant to reflect also on how the idea of religious Reformation in various ways came to be a concept of paramount importance within the common narrative of the Italian unification. The dream was of a modern Italy in which religion could become a factor of renewal and not, as it was perceived then, of bondage.

Since the unification of Italy was perceived as a struggle for freedom, then to introduce the Protestant confession in the Italian Roman Catholic peninsula became the symbol of gaining freedom of religion in Italy. The goal was to demonstrate to the Italian public opinion that to be Protestant did not necessarily mean being part of a church body foreign to the national character and culture of Italy.⁵ Religious reform began to be considered as an essential aspect of the national movement by many Italian political figures during this period. Spiritual and political resurrection, as the word Risorgimento suggests, were to go hand in hand. A lasting political change was not to be separated from a religious renewal. This surprising rediscovery

⁵ Simone Maghenzani, "La Riforma Protestante del Cinquecento nel XIX Secolo. Il Contributo di Piero Guicciardini." In: *Le Cinquecentine del Fondo Piero Guicciardini nella Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze* (Torre Pellice, IT: Centro Culturale Valdese, 2017), 43.

of the Reformation during the Risorgimento however was largely only instrumental to political revolutionary goals. The Protestant Reformation itself was reinvented in the building of a national romantic narrative and problems that were current at the time were only instrumentally connected to the failure of the Italian Reformation during the sixteenth century. During the Risorgimento, three hundred years later, the call for Reformation became therefore an identity-factor regardless of one's confessional allegiance. Mainly, the absence of the Reformation in Italy and of everything that Protestant religions had taught other countries in terms of rectitude, severity, community, became the driving force for a desire of Reformation among many Italian patriots.⁶

The Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic era and the restoration of the *Ancien Régime*, had all contributed in their own way to a desire for change in the Italian context. The events of the Risorgimento between 1848 and 1870 were intended, like in the case of many other European nations born at this time, to bring about national independence and freedom from a past that was felt as dark and totalitarian. The Risorgimento took place from the Spring of Nations of 1848, the Roman Republic, the years of political exile, the three Wars of Independence, all the way to the siege of Porta Pia in Rome on September 20, 1870.

As head of the Roman Catholic Church the pope did not share the prevailing optimistic view of the Risorgimento. As the events unfolded, being afraid of a revolutionary spirit, the pope gradually took a reactionary position toward the entire political enterprise. The Risorgimento in fact was seen by the pope not as a liberation but as a movement of military violence and oppression. While Catholicism included many alternative voices proposing some form of compromise, due to the lack of any real dialogue between the parties, the Risorgimento in the end took an entirely secular path.⁷ Such a secular path, as for many other European nations, was already in play, yet, due to the resilient position of the Holy See toward the Risorgimento, it proceeded from then on uncontested.

The question on the proper relationship between church and state remained unresolved. In a struggle to introduce separatism through a more

⁶ Danilo Raponi, *Religion and Politics in the Risorgimento. Britain and the New Italy, 1861-1875* (London, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 1.

⁷ While some fringes of Catholic intellectuals were willing to embrace the project of the Risorgimento pope Pius IX as head of the Catholic Church with the *Non Expedit* closed the door for any faithful Catholic to be involved in the project of the Risorgimento. Chapter 2 will deal with the position of the Roman Catholic Church toward the Risorgimento more in details.

moderate and less revolutionary approach, Cavour sought to introduce instances of modern libertarianism in a context that had been under the prolonged influence of the *Ancien Régime*. If rooted historically, his political libertarianism found its origin also in Swiss Calvinistic influences.⁸ As a Reformed church with Calvinistic influences and in tune with Cavour's political views, the Italian Waldensians had also some degree of influence for this issue of relations between church and state because, unlike other more radical Italian Protestants, they sought to promote the idea of Reformation over and against the idea of revolution.

The research here presented intends to investigate what role the nineteenth century Calvinistic understanding of the relations between church and state did play through the political involvement of the Waldensians during the movement for Italian independence known as Risorgimento, especially within the libertarian fringes of this movement. The book intends to make a case for inserting Waldensian separatist thought within the broader context of nineteenth century Calvinism which in other parts of post-revolutionary Europe was facing similar questions on church and state relationships. How did the Waldensian's Calvinistic view affect the relation between church and state in Italy? How did their view impact their own involvement in the project of the Italian Risorgimento? To what extent did this view become part of the political and constitutional framework of the young Italian nation?

To be more precise, the following book is intended to explore how the Calvinistic view of civil government, especially as formulated in the

⁸ Calvinism, beyond the theology originally advanced by John Calvin and his followers during the sixteenth century, will also be understood throughout the book within its nineteenth century framework, focused upon the reflection in political theology concerning the proper relation of church and state in a post-revolutionary era. I will therefore refer throughout this book to 'Calvinism' in its nineteenth century context as a term to be understood in a broader sense than the term 'Reformed', which refers to the doctrinal formulations as well as the ecclesiological system tracing back to John Calvin in sixteenth century's Geneva. Calvinism in the nineteenth century had gradually been understood as pointing to a worldview, intending to reform the whole culture: science, arts, and by extension every sphere of life. What Calvin was doing in Geneva during the sixteenth century was seen during the Calvinism of the nineteenth century as an exemplary model. Yet the goal of nineteenth century Calvinism was not just to imitate every aspect of Reformed churches during the sixteenth century but to transplant and follow its general principles in other contexts in order to show how Calvinism can impact every area of life, including politics. See: Mihai Androne, "Calvinism as Political Ideology." *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 63 (2012): 177-183. See also: "Calvinism and modernity" in: Bruce Gordon, and Carl R. Trueman, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Calvin and Calvinism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 134.

nineteenth century by the Swiss Reformed theologian Alexandre Vinet, was a determinant factor in the political stand that the Waldensian Church took during the Risorgimento.⁹ This will be traced through the influence of writings and political undertakings of Waldensian pastors such as Paolo Geymonat, Amedeo Bert, Giovanni Pietro Meille, Luigi De Sanctis or the Waldensian businessman and politician Giuseppe Malan. Their ideas were also reflected beyond the Waldensians in the thought of the first Italian prime minister Camillo Benso count of Cavour in his famous formula for a: “free church in a free state”, a concept based on a hidden Calvinistic influence. Calvinism in the example of the Italian Waldensians became a channel for promoting freedom of religion, while doing so with a moderate approach, operating within the boundaries of legitimate civil undertakings.¹⁰ Beyond Calvinism, the book will also take into consideration the impact of other Italian Protestant denominations active during the Risorgimento.

The Religious Ferments during the Risorgimento

The Waldensians were part of a broader European Reformed ecclesiastical movement that during the nineteenth century was undergoing spiritual as well as political changes. The separatist and anti-revolutionary views of the Waldensians were in part paralleled, despite their institutional and religious peculiarities, to those found with Alexandre Vinet in the Swiss canton of Vaud (Waadtland), the Huguenot churches of Southern France under Napoleon III, Fredrich Schleiermacher and his relations with the Prussian king, Thomas Chalmers and the Free Church of Scotland and lastly Abraham Kuyper in the Netherlands. While the aim of this book will not be to treat in details those international cases themselves, which would be the object of other works, the aim here is point out how the separatist stand of the Waldensians displayed some parallels with nineteenth century European Protestantism. All these were intellectual figures with Reformed leanings that sought to deal with similar ecclesiastical and political issues. There was a general felt need to reconsider the place of the church toward the state in a pluralistic environment as it was emerging after the Spring of Nations. 1848 was also the year when the Communist Manifesto had been published and

⁹ For a general statement of the Calvinistic view of civil government from an Italian standpoint see for example: Mario Turchetti, “Il Contributo di Calvino e del Calvinismo alla Nascita della Democrazia Moderna.” *Protestantesimo* 69, (2014): 107.

¹⁰ Hans Dieter Betz, Don. S. Browning, Bernd Janowski, Eberhard Jüngel, eds., “Waldenses.” in: *Religion Past & Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion* (Vol. XIII, Leiden, NL: Brill, 2013), 403.

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The recent rise of debates concerning Christianity, nationalism and separation of church and state require going back to the roots of such concepts. The advent of modern nationalism meant either the embracement of a positive form of separatism according to the American Revolution, or of a drastic form of separation according to the French Revolution. While the modern state of Italy dealt with the tension between church and state largely through drastic separation, there were some exceptions. Here I intend to investigate what role the Calvinistic understanding of relations between church and state did play through the political involvement of the Waldensians during the movement for Italian independence called Risorgimento (1848-1870). The Calvinistic view of civil government, as stated during that era by the Reformed Pastor Alexandre Vinet, was a determinant factor in the political stand that Waldensian Church took during these times for example through pastors such as Giuseppe Malan or Paolo Geymonat. Their ideas were also reflected beyond the Waldensians in the thought of the first Italian prime minister Camillo Benso conte di Cavour in his formula *free church in a free state*.



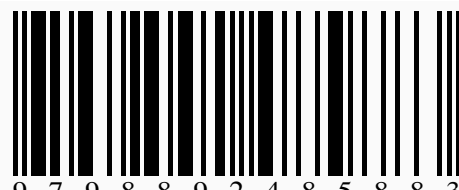
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