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Experimental Politics:

The Middle Ages, Counterrevolutionary Catholics, and the Politics of History, 1780s-1820s

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Abstract: This article traces the engagement of Catholic authors of the Counter-Enlightenment and the Counterrevolution with historical writing. While disagreeing with Enlightenment interpretations of European history, which tended to be critical of the Catholic church, these authors embraced the Enlightenment view that history offered a window into the fundamental characteristics of human nature and a powerful toolkit to analyze and solve current predicaments. Faced with the reforming policies of enlightened monarchs, revolutionary dechristianization, and the persistence of the Revolution’s legacy in the Restoration era, Catholic writers looked to the Middle Ages to find alternative models of society. Considering the cultural and social role of religion in medieval society, they realized that appeals for the restoration of the alliance of church and state were not enough; Catholicism itself needed to be transformed into a force that could vie for social and cultural hegemony in the modern world—a modern political ideology.

Key words: Enlightenment, Counterrevolution, Catholic church, Medievalism, Restoration

Parole chiave: Illuminismo, Controrivoluzione, Chiesa cattolica, medievalismo, Restaurazione

Joseph de Maistre ended his *Considérations sur la France* (1797) with a «fragment from a history of the French Revolution by David Hume». After leafing through one of the most damning indictments of the Revolution, portrayed as an event of a «satanic quality», Maistre's reader was presented with a story, told in Hume's own words, of people «fanaticized [...] with notions of perfect equality», politicians calling for religious disestablishment and the banning of Catholicism, and an imprisoned king awaiting his execution, deprived of «all the exterior symbols of sovereignty» and left with the sole consolation of his religion¹. The account is gripping. But for obvious reasons, Hume, who died in 1776, more than a decade before the storming of the Bastille, never wrote a history of the French Revolution. What Maistre assembled were excerpts from Hume's retelling of the English Civil War in his *History of England*, and the reader was not to be fooled—it is made immediately clear that the king awaiting his fate in prison is Charles I, not Louis XVI, and the leader of the revolutionaries, Cromwell, not Robespierre. Overall, though, the similarities between the events of the 1640s and those of the 1790s were apparent; Hume's treatment of political turmoil in seventeenth-century Britain could be used effectively to narrate France's recent history. While Maistre may have been among the first to propose, in his own idiosyncratic way, a comparative analysis of revolutions, his purpose was a different one—to make the case that history, if used properly, possesses a predictive capacity. What interested Maistre the most was not how the French Revolution had followed a similar path as the English Civil War, but what Hume's account of the latter suggested about how the former was to end—with the restoration of the monarchy. Maistre invited his readers to look to history in order to interpret contemporary events and anticipate their outcomes.

Maistre's captivating style and felicitous turns of phrase may have been unparalleled, but his view of history was not unique. To an extent, the belief that the study of the past can teach lessons for the future has been central to the writing of history since the classical antiquity. Over the eighteenth century, however, an increasing number of authors who drew on the early modern tradition of political historiography began to emphasize that in addition to providing a useful repertoire of moral *exempla*, history could also reveal the social and cultural structures that shaped civilizations, as perhaps best exemplified by Montesquieu's investigations into the «spirit» of laws². In the hands

¹ J. de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, ed. by R.A. Lebrun, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 41, 107-108, 111. On French readings of Hume's *History* in the 1790s, see L.L. Bongie, *David Hume: Prophet of the Counter-Revolution*, 2nd ed., Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2000 (1965), esp. 187-189 on Maistre.

² On the seventeenth-century origins of this shift, see A.M. Matytsin, *Enlightenment and Erudition: Writing Cultural History at the Académie des inscriptions*, in «Modern Intellectual History», XIX, 2022, 2, pp. 323-348.

of Enlightenment historians, this kind of sociologically inclined historical analysis became a key component of narratives of «philosophical» history, stadial theories of progress, and even attempts at «conjectural» history that best exemplified the belief in the predictive capacity of historical knowledge³. To those who were willing to consider it seriously, history provided evidence of the general laws that regulate human behavior.

But the *philosophes* were not the only ones to practice history this way. This article summarily traces the engagement of Catholic authors of the Counter-Enlightenment and the Counterrevolution with this kind of historical writing. It shows that after the decline of an older tradition of «sacred» history, which reached its apex in the writings of seventeenth-century French bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, these writers were drawn to historical writing by the need to combat the critical views of the Catholic church displayed in the works of authors such as Voltaire, William Robertson, and Edward Gibbon. However, while Catholic writers disagreed with Enlightenment interpretations of European history, they embraced the view that history offered a powerful toolkit to analyze current predicaments and devise solutions supposedly based on an understanding of human nature. According to Maistre, for example, Hume's account of the English Civil War revealed that revolutionary fervor would eventually subside and give way to the natural inclination of human beings toward peace and order—a prerequisite for the successful restoration of the monarchy. But it was especially in their evocations of the medieval past that counterrevolutionary Catholics found the truth they understood as the most vital to an effective organization of social life—the alliance of church and state. They denounced the erosion of this alliance in the years before the Revolution, warning against what they saw as its dismissal at the hands of reforming sovereigns; and they advocated its renewal as a condition for the return of peace in post-revolutionary Europe.

Scholars have frequently (and correctly) remarked upon the historical inaccuracies of Catholic evocations of the Middle Ages, and have often dismissed them as anachronistic appeals to a world long gone. But counterrevolutionary Catholics were not just praisers of times past—although they were that too, to be sure. Their medievalist fascination originated from their understanding of history, in Maistre's words, as «experimental politics»—a specific mode of knowledge that became even more appealing in the revolutionary era because it provided empirical foundations for a science of politics alternative to revolutionary rationalism, and afforded unique insight into

³ For a presentation of these trends, see K. O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

human nature⁴. From this perspective, Catholic medievalism was just another version of the sociological history inaugurated by Montesquieu. It rejected teleological views of progress that, according to their critics, lacked sufficient empirical foundations—as for example the Marquis de Condorcet’s *Esquisse d’un tableau historique*, one of Maistre’s preferred targets. The testing ground of human wisdom, history, for counterrevolutionary Catholics, represented an epistemological principle opposed to the «chimerical system of deliberation and political construction by abstract reasoning» that, according to Maistre, had originated the French Revolution⁵. As an empirical form of knowledge, history was perhaps unable to provide absolute truths, but it revealed the regularities of human behaviors, and allowed its practitioner to make sensible analyses of the present and informed predictions about the future. Chief among these was the belief that the collaboration of political and religious authorities explained Europe’s purported flourishing in the Middle Ages, and its breakdown had determined Europe’s descent into the abyss of revolutionary violence; its restoration might heal a continent rife with chaos and division. But this restoration was more than just a return to the past. It implied, as we shall see, a rethinking of the role of religion in society.

1. *The Discovery of the Christian Middle Ages*. At the beginning of November 1781, a few days after Emperor Joseph II had issued an edict of toleration that granted new rights to the Protestants of the Habsburg lands, Giuseppe Garampi, the papal nuncio in Vienna, wrote to the pope’s secretary of state, Cardinal Lazzaro Opizio Pallavicini, that the events unfolding before his eyes reminded him of the Protestant Reformation⁶. A ruler defiant of Roman authority and interested in consolidating his hold over the church of his domains collaborated with a group of churchmen that openly criticized papal primacy and orthodox Catholic doctrine on a wide range of matters, from ecclesiology to liturgy and the sacraments; Joseph II and the Jansenist clerics who provided theological justifications for the emperor’s decrees appeared as the modern iterations of Frederick the Wise, the elector of Saxony, and Martin Luther and his fellow reformers.

⁴ Maistre, *Considerations*, cit., p. 104. The best account of Maistre’s philosophy of history is C. Armenteros, *The French Idea of History: Joseph de Maistre and His Heirs, 1794-1854*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011.

⁵ Maistre, *Considerations*, cit., p. 60.

⁶ Archivio Apostolico Vaticano (hereafter AAV), *Segreteria di Stato, Germania*, 405, fol. 77v, Garampi to Pallavicini, November 4, 1781. On Garampi, see D. Vanysacker, *Cardinal Giuseppe Garampi (1725-1792): An Enlightened Ultramontane*, Brussels, Institut historique belge de Rome, 1995. On Joseph II’s reforms, D. Beales, *Joseph II: Against the World, 1780-1790*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, esp. pp. 271-332.

Regardless of its merits, the comparison was popular, especially among Catholic apologists who believed that the origins of the predicaments of the eighteenth-century church lay in the Reformation. The idea relied on a tradition of anti-Protestant polemics that dated back to the Counterreformation, but it acquired a life of its own in the late eighteenth century. While reform-inclined Catholics, usually critical of papal power, supported reforming sovereigns across Europe, ultramontane writers looked in horror at the erosion of church privileges and the increasing autonomy of national churches from Rome. What Dale Van Kley has termed the “Reform Catholic International” consolidated the power of governments over a range of areas that had been traditionally controlled by religious authorities, including censorship, education, and poor relief, challenged the authority of the Holy See, and achieved perhaps its most significant success with the suppression of the Society of Jesus⁷. Critics of reforms interpreted any intervention of the state in religious affairs, and any attack on papal power, as part of an onslaught on Catholicism as a whole. At times, they framed their rebuttals in the language of conspiracy, denouncing their foes as members of a cabal of philosophers, Jansenists, and freemasons who had set out to eradicate religion altogether⁸. But while the plant of irreligion was blossoming in the eighteenth century, its seeds had been planted at the time of the Reformation.

Apologists began with increasing frequency to draw connections between the events of the sixteenth century and the reforming decrees of enlightened sovereigns⁹. For one, the Greek-born Dominican Tommaso Maria Mamachi, the secretary of the Congregation of the Index, claimed that contemporary arguments for the secularization of church property replicated a call first made by Luther¹⁰. Others explicitly described what they perceived as the Enlightenment’s onslaught on the Catholic religion as the last link in a chain of errors that ran uninterrupted from the Reformation to the eighteenth

⁷ On the Reform Catholic International, see D.K. Van Kley, *Reform Catholicism and the International Suppression of the Jesuits in Enlightenment Europe*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2018, pp. 14-19, 46-57.

⁸ A. Hofman, *The Origins of the Theory of the Philosophe Conspiracy*, in «French History», II, 1988, 2, pp. 152-172.

⁹ G. Miccoli, «L’avarizia e l’orgoglio di un frate laido...»: problemi e aspetti dell’interpretazione cattolica di Lutero, in *Lutero in Italia: Studi storici nel V centenario della nascita*, a cura di L. Perrone, Casale Monferrato, Marietti, 1983, pp. VII-XXXIII; D.M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 43-46.

¹⁰ T.M. Mamachi, *Del diritto libero della chiesa di acquistare e di possedere beni temporali sì mobili che stabili libri III*, 5 vols., Rome, n.p., 1769-70, vol. III/I, pp. 409-10.

century¹¹. For example, according to the founder of the Redemptorist order, Alphonsus Liguori, modern deism and atheism originated from the «impious autonomy» of the individual and the «lethal freedom of thought» that Luther had first disseminated¹². The Swiss ex-Jesuit Nikolaus Joseph Albert von Diessbach, a convert from Calvinism and the organizer of a Catholic secret society, the Amicizia cristiana, specifically singled out Zwingli, Calvin, and the Sozzinis as links in the chain that tied Luther to the eighteenth century¹³. The apologist Antonino Valsecchi added the freethinkers and John Locke to the list, and Luigi Cuccagni, the founder and editor of the ultramontane «Giornale ecclesiastico di Roma», also included the Jansenist theologians who supported reforming sovereigns across Europe¹⁴.

If the early modern era was a period of religious decline, a slippery slope toward irreligion and atheism, it is no surprise that ultramontane historians looked at the centuries that preceded the Reformation with particular interest. Throughout the eighteenth century, medieval historiography had been the frontline of an intellectual confrontation between Catholics of different stripes, Gallican historians on one side and their ultramontane foes on the other. The tradition of Gallican historiography initiated by Claude Fleury's *Histoire ecclésiastique* (1691-1720) and later continued by Jansenists across Europe described the growth of papal power in the Middle Ages as a process of corruption¹⁵. But «philosophical» histories went even further. Voltaire dismissed the history of Christianity as a history of intolerance, d'Holbach denounced Christianity and progress as incompatible, and Edward Gibbon weaved the rise of Christianity and the fall

¹¹ On the idea of the chain of errors, see A. Foa, *Gli intransigenti, la Riforma e la Rivoluzione francese: un dibattito nella pubblicistica italiana dell'età della Restaurazione*, L'Aquila, Japadre, 1984, pp. 15-45.

¹² A. Liguori, *Verità della fede*, 2 vols., Bassano, Remondini, 1767, vol. II, p. 64. See G. Lissa, *Alfonso e l'Illuminismo*, in *Alfonso M. de Liguori e la civiltà letteraria del Settecento*, a cura di P. Giannantonio, Florence, Olschki, 1999, pp. 233-267.

¹³ N.J.A. von Diessbach, *Le chrétien catholique inviolablement attaché à sa religion: par la considération de quelques unes des preuves qui en établissent la certitude* (1771), in *Démonstrations évangéliques*, Paris, Migne, 1865, p. 182; Id., *Il zelo meditativo di un pio solitario cristiano e cattolico, espresso in una serie di riflessioni e di affetti*, Turin, Fontana, 1774, pp. 29-31.

¹⁴ A. Valsecchi, *La verità della chiesa cattolica romana*, Padua, Bettinelli, 1787, p. 3; L. Cuccagni, *Dell'incredulità e dell'irreligione a cui conducono le dottrine dei moderni appellanti*, Rome, Zempel, 1790, pp. 4-5.

¹⁵ A. Prandi, *La «storia della chiesa» tra Sei-Settecento: apologetica ed erudizione*, in *Problemi di storia della Chiesa nei secoli XVII-XVIII*, Naples, Edizioni dehoniane, 1982, pp. 13-38; R. Favre, *Critiques chrétiennes des croisades et de l'intolérance*, in «Dix-huitième siècle», XXXIV, 2002, pp. 131-136; D.K. Van Kley, *Civic Humanism in Clerical Garb: Gallican Memories of the Early Church and the Project of Primitivist Reform, 1719-1791*, in «Past & Present», 2008, 200, pp. 77-120; M. Rosa, *Il giansenismo nell'Italia del Settecento: dalla riforma della Chiesa alla democrazia rivoluzionaria*, Rome, Carocci, 2015, pp. 163-166.

of the Roman Empire so close together that his work was easily, if mistakenly, interpreted as altogether anti-Christian¹⁶. Beginning with Claude-Adrien Nonnotte's best-selling *Les erreurs de Voltaire* (1762), Catholic apologists did not miss a chance to point out the historical inaccuracies in the works of their foes. Giovanni Marchetti, for example, spent almost a decade writing against Fleury, while a then little-known theologian, Nicola Spedalieri, took on Gibbon to reassert the civilizing role of Christianity, and Cardinal Hyacinthe-Sigismond Gerdil released his *Considérations sur Julien* to refute recent laudatory reassessments of Emperor Julian the Apostate¹⁷.

But the interest of ultramontane apologists was not limited to pointing out what their adversaries might have gotten wrong. As they reinterpreted the medieval church, and especially the papacy, as engines of progress, their main concern was to identify the reasons that had made it possible for the church to benefit society—or as they saw it, the structural causes that explained Europe's flourishing in the Middle Ages and its being adrift in the eighteenth century.¹⁸ They found the answer they were looking for in church-state relations—the collaboration of spiritual and political power, with the latter at best as an equal partner, if not subordinated to the church's mission. The apologists' reading of medieval history was highly selective, and often based on questionable information, but it also provided a convincing prism to understand the present. The economist-priest Giammaria Ortes pointed to the era of Pope Sylvester I and Constantine the Great, Leo II and Charlemagne, and Gregory VII as a golden age of concord between church and state¹⁹. In his biography of Constantine, the Catalan ex-Jesuit exile Francisco Gustá depicted the emperor as a «respectful child» of the church who, unlike «modern-day

¹⁶ J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 6 vols., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999-2015, esp. vols. 5-6; F.-E. Boucher, *Philosophes, Anticlericalism, Reactionaries and Progress in French Enlightenment Historiography*, in *A Companion to Enlightenment Historiography*, ed. by S. Bourgault, R. Sparling, Leiden, Brill, 2013, pp. 373-400.

¹⁷ G. Marchetti, *Saggio critico sopra la Storia ecclesiastica del signor abate Claudio Fleury e del suo continuatore*, Rome, Perego Salvioni, 1780; Id., *Critica della Storia ecclesiastica e de' Discorsi del sig. abate Claudio Fleury*, 2 vols., Bologna, Sassi, 1782-83; Id., *Le Raciniane, ovvero Lettere di un cattolico ad un partigiano della Storia ecclesiastica di Bonaventura Racine*, n.p., n.p., 1787; N. Spedalieri, *Confutazione dell'esame del cristianesimo fatto dal signor Eduardo Gibbon nella sua Storia della decadenza dell'impero romano*, 2 vols., Rome, Perego Salvioni, 1784; H.-S. Gerdil, *Considérations sur Julien*, in *Delle opere dell'eminentissimo sig. cardinale Giacinto Sigismondo Gerdil della Congregazione de' chierici regolari di S. Paolo: nuova edizione*, Bologna, Istituto delle Scienze, 1784-1791. On this literature and its context, see M. Rosa, *Le contraddizioni della modernità: apologetica cattolica e Lumi nel Settecento*, in «Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa», XLIV, 2008, 1, pp. 73-114.

¹⁸ See D. Menozzi, *La chiesa cattolica e la secolarizzazione*, Turin, Einaudi, 1993, pp. 17, 20-21.

¹⁹ G. Ortes, *Della religione e del governo dei popoli per rapporto agli spiriti bizzarri e increduli de' tempi presenti libri tre*, Florence, n.p., 1780, pp. 183-184.

innovators», had «recognized that the interests of church and state were inseparable», but also «established proper boundaries between them», refraining from interfering in ecclesiastical affairs; readers must not have struggled to identify Gustá's unspoken target as Joseph II, who thought that the interests of the pope and those of the emperor at times conflicted, and when that was the case, the latter should take priority²⁰. A few years later, Gustá's fellow ex-Jesuit Alfonso Muzzarelli used the figure of Pope Gregory VII to make a resolute defense of the popes' *potestas indirecta* (indirect power) over political rulers²¹.

Regardless of their scholarly merits—which were limited—these early forays into medieval history solidified the image of the Middle Ages as a golden age for Western Europe made possible by the alliance of church and state. Ultramontane apologists challenged philosophical narratives of progress, not by calling into question the possibility of progress itself, but by characterizing the Middle Ages, instead of the secular eighteenth century, as a time of progress. This rereading of medieval history also enabled readers to make predictions about the future. In the sixteenth century, the medieval concord of church and state had given way to the Reformation; the widening rift between the papacy and reforming sovereigns in the eighteenth century foreshadowed a comparable cataclysmic event. Over the course of the 1780s, an increasing number of alarmed ultramontane polemicists joined the choir of such prophets of doom²². When the French Revolution began in 1789, they recognized it almost immediately as the catastrophe they had forecast.

2. Entr'acte: The French Revolution and the Alliance of Church and State. While the Revolution spread frustration among Catholic apologists, aggrieved that their warnings had gone unheeded, it also appeared to confirm that their reading of current events was correct, and that by reference to history, one could indeed diagnose social diseases before even the full manifestation of their symptoms. From this perspective, the French Revolution was neither unique nor inexplicable²³. It was the inevitable outcome of the growing hostility between church and state; it continued, albeit on a grander scale, the assault on religious authority initiated by reforming sovereigns; and it renewed the

²⁰ F. Gustá, *Vita di Costantino il Grande, primo imperador cristiano: con l'aggiunta di un esame critico sopra diversi punti più principali di questa parte di storia e di una vera idea della chiesa in quell'epoca*, 2 vols., Foligno, Tomassini, 1786, vol. I, p. 2, vol. II, p. 225.

²¹ A. Muzzarelli, *Gregorio VII*, Foligno, Tomassini, 1789, pp. 70, 109.

²² McMahon, *Enemies*, cit., pp. 46-47.

²³ I disagree here with L. Guerci, *Uno spettacolo non mai più veduto nel mondo: la Rivoluzione francese come unicità e rovesciamento negli scrittori controrivoluzionari italiani, 1789-1799*, Turin, Utet, 2008, who claimed that counterrevolutionary authors stressed the uniqueness of the French Revolution rather than its being the culmination of a longer process.

challenge first launched by that archetypal revolt against the power of the church, the Reformation. But history was not just a diagnostic tool. It also prescribed a cure—the renewal of the alliance of church and state.

In the words of one of its most prominent critics, Edmund Burke, the Revolution was the work of «metaphysical and alchemistical legislators» who presumed they could remake the world on the basis of reason alone, disregarding the lessons of history²⁴. Catholic writers looked at this argument with sympathy, because it aligned with the view of history they had developed in the prerevolutionary years; as evidence of this agreement, Pope Pius VI went as far as to honor Burke with a congratulatory brief²⁵. At the heart of the counterrevolutionary position was not just a sense of respect for tradition, but a deeper distrust of the rationalist epistemology underlying the Revolution. The very notion of a sudden, radical transformation of politics and society that could replace centuries-old institutions with a regime proclaimed to be new left little room for history as a tool to discover what was and what was not possible for human beings. By contrast, according to Maistre, «every question about human nature must be solved by history»²⁶. Change could only happen gradually, and most importantly, as a product of knowledge and consideration of the past, which provided a window into the immutable characteristics of human life. When it came to the form of government, for example, monarchy had much to commend it, as was demonstrated by the fact that it was the institutional arrangement most frequently encountered throughout human history. However, by far the most important truth revealed by history was that «every imaginable institution» had to be «founded on a religious concept», lest it be «only a passing phenomenon»²⁷.

Ultramontane historians had already elucidated this point before the Revolution; counterrevolutionaries turned it into a call for action. After France's so-called Constitutional schism, Pius VI's condemnation of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in

²⁴ E. Burke, *Revolutionary Writings: Reflections on the Revolution in France and the First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, ed. by I. Hampsher-Monk, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 188.

²⁵ AAV, *Epistolae ad Principes*, 188, f. 92v. On Burke's reception among Catholics, see R. Zapperi, *Edmund Burke in Italia*, in «Cahiers Vilfredo Pareto», III, 1965, pp. 5-62; Nigel Aston, *Burke and the Conspiratorial Origins of the French Revolution: Some Anglo-French Resemblances*, in *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe: From the Waldensians to the French Revolution*, ed. by B. Coward and J. Swann, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 213-233; and *The Reception of Edmund Burke in Europe*, ed. by M. Fitzpatrick and P. Jones, London, Bloomsbury, 2017.

²⁶ J. de Maistre, *Étude sur la souveraineté* (1794), in *Oeuvres complètes de J. de Maistre*, Lyon, Vitte et Perrussel, 1884-1887, vol. I, p. 316.

²⁷ Id., *Considerations*, cit., p. 42.

the spring of 1791, and the beginning of the War of the First Coalition the following year, counterrevolutionaries turned militant, and clerics played a significant part in war mobilization. Depictions of the war against the revolutionary armies as a war of religion drew extensively on the model of religious wars from the medieval past, such as the Spanish Reconquista and the crusades²⁸. The clerics who invited soldiers to fight in defense of religion were not just exploiting a rhetorical device of proved effectiveness, but also making the case for a return to the alliance of spiritual and temporal powers that had characterized the Middle Ages. Francisco Gustá, whose historical interests had developed in the decade before the Revolution, described the crusades as the result of a «remarkable agreement of religion and politics», and called for a modern crusade in an attempt to mobilize the masses of the Catholic faithful against the *levée en masse* of the revolutionaries²⁹. But his call presupposed the restoration of the alliance of church and state, which had been, in his description, the precondition of medieval crusades. Giovanni Marchetti, who commented positively on Gustá's work, echoed the belief that a modern counterrevolutionary crusade would first of all involve «reuniting the cause of the state with that of religion»³⁰.

The French Revolution appeared to confirm the beliefs that Catholic polemicists had come to profess even before 1789. The hostility between popes and rulers—a condition that defied history's lessons about the alliance of throne and altar—was the source of the current political turmoil; its overcoming and the restoration of peace between church and state would mark the return to normalcy. Catholic medievalism was no longer just an intellectual position; it was also a political agenda.

3. *Disappointment and Hope: Catholic Medievalism after the Revolution.* From the perspective of Catholic apologists, the Restoration fell way short of expectations. Much of the revolutionary legislation, which the Napoleonic empire had consolidated and exported across Europe, stayed in place; the church did not get back the privileges that reforming sovereigns first, and then revolutionary assemblies, had eroded; the reordering of European international relations planned at the Congress of Vienna paid lip service to

²⁸ G. Schettini, *Eighteenth-Century Crusaders: The War Against France and the Catholic Counterrevolution, 1789-99*, in *Cosmopolitan Conservatism: Countering Revolution in Transnational Networks, Ideas, and Movements, c.1700-1930*, ed. by M.M. Lok, F. Pestel, and J. Reboul, Leiden, Brill, 2021, pp. 152-171.

²⁹ F. Gustá, *Saggio critico sulle crociate: se sia giusta la idea invalsa comunemente e se sieno adattabili alle circostanze presenti, fattovi qualche cambiamento*, Ferrara, Rinaldi, 1794, p. 33.

³⁰ G. Marchetti, *Che importa ai preti, ovvero l'interesse della religione cristiana nei grandi avvenimenti di questo tempo: riflessioni politico-morali di un amico di tutti dirette a un amico solo*, 2nd ed., Rome, n.p., 1797, p. 178.

the role of religion, but failed to stifle the spread of liberalism, which Catholic polemicists viewed as an immediate threat to Catholicism³¹. Papal diplomacy, under the careful stewardship of Pius VII's Secretary of State, Cardinal Ercole Consalvi, opted to enter a series of concordats that sanctioned the impossibility of a return to the past. Expressing the disappointment of many of his fellows, Father Gioacchino Ventura famously quipped that it was hard to tell what «the so-called Restoration» had «actually restored»³².

The dissatisfaction with the Restoration settlement did not lead counterrevolutionary Catholics to question their commitment to medievalist ideals, but the realization that sovereigns were unwilling or unable to turn the page on the legacies of the Revolution pushed them to think more deeply about the role of religion in medieval Europe. The alliance of church and state remained their main goal, but they came now to emphasize that such an alliance had not been created by fiat by a few Christian monarchs; it had resulted almost naturally from the cultural and social centrality of religion. Medieval Europe was not Christian just because its kings were; governments were Christian because so were society and culture. Popes assumed a particular significance in these accounts as both political and cultural symbols.

In the intellectual atmosphere of emerging Romanticism, the appeal of such a vision crossed confessional boundaries, because it purported to provide a solution to what many observers, regardless of their religious beliefs, perceived as the lack of a moral center in post-revolutionary Europe. Indeed, among the first extollers of medieval Christian culture and papal leadership was the German poet Novalis, a nonconforming Protestant whose *Die Christenheit oder Europa*, written in 1799, celebrated the «beautiful, magnificent times, when Europe was a Christian land», and the pope its moral and political leader³³. The most authoritative and influential celebration of medieval Christianity, however, was René de Chateaubriand's *Génie du christianisme*, which appeared in 1802 and offered a protracted celebration of Christianity as the spirit, to use Montesquieu's term, of medieval Europe. Christianity had brought together Latin and Germanic populations and channeled their energies toward the loftiest heights of art and literature; without it, «society would have been entirely wrecked»³⁴. Popes deserved most

³¹ See D. Laven and L. Riall, eds., *Napoleon's Legacy: Problems of Government in Restoration Europe*, Oxford, Berg, 2000; B. Vick, *The Congress of Vienna: Power and Politics after Napoleon*, Cambridge (Ma.), Harvard University Press, 2014, pp. 233-258.

³² G. Ventura, *La società e la politica*, in «Giornale ecclesiastico di Roma», 1825, 3, p. 67.

³³ Novalis, *Christianity or Europe: A Fragment*, in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, ed. by F.C. Beiser, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 61.

³⁴ R. de Chateaubriand, *Génie du christianisme, ou Beautés de la religion chrétienne*, 4 vols., Paris, Migneret, 1803, vol. IV, p. 439.

of the credit, because they had given Europe, according to Chateaubriand, «its civilization, a portion of its best laws, almost all of its sciences, and all of its arts», while also serving as a kind of international court of arbitration that helped the continent maintain its political stability³⁵.

In the Restoration era, such paeans to the Christian Middle Ages provided the basis for updated versions of the call for a renewal of the alliance of throne and altar that had first emerged before the Revolution. Louis de Bonald, for example, emphasized that only the reinstatement of Christianity to the center of European civilization, and the recognition of the pope as the «arbiter and moderator of Christendom», could tighten the «mysterious connection that binds together» all members of society³⁶. Maistre himself took up this project in his *Du pape* (1819), which envisioned Europe as a «universal republic» under the pope's «supreme spiritual power»³⁷. Popes, in fact, proved at first only lukewarm, but the ideas of Bonald and Maistre made inroads among Catholic intellectuals. It was Félicité de Lamennais, along with his followers, who most fully developed such ideas, making the case that in order to regain its centrality, Catholicism had to change, and become first of all a «social theory», or a body of doctrines that could provide new cultural foundations for post-revolutionary society³⁸. In the search for a thoroughly Christian society, the Middle Ages served as a model, although one that could not be simply replicated but required, according to Lamennais's Belgian disciples, Henri de Merode and Ernest de Beaufort, «new applications, adapted to the needs of these times»³⁹. History taught that the alliance of throne and altar that had characterized medieval Europe resulted from a society that was integrally Catholic; and the construction of such a society in the modern era required a revitalized Catholicism, able to innervate society as it had done in the Middle Ages.

4. *Conclusion.* From the decades that preceded the French Revolution to the first half of the nineteenth century, Catholic intellectuals struggling with a world in rapid transformation turned to the past for orientation. They certainly felt a sense of nostalgia for a time when religion, they believed, was unchallenged. But their historical musings did not merely spring from a desire to turn back the clock—something that at least the

³⁵ Ivi, vol. IV, pp. 369, 407.

³⁶ L. de Bonald, *Réflexions sur l'intérêt general de l'Europe* (1815), in Id., *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by J.-P. Migne, Paris, Migne, 1859, vol. II, pp. 520, 536.

³⁷ J. de Maistre, *Du pape*, Paris, Charpentier, 1851, p. 207.

³⁸ The phrase appeared in an article published in Lamennais's newspaper, *La théorie sociale de l'évangile: paroles de paix aux gallicans et aux ultramontains par un ministre protestant*, in «Mémorial catholique», 1829, 11-12.

³⁹ E. de Beaufort, *Lettres de deux ultramontains*, Paris, Potey, 1826, p. 81.

most astute of them considered impossible. As early as 1793, Maistre, for one, remarked that «the project of bottling Lake Geneva [was] way less insane than that of restoring things exactly the way they were before the Revolution»⁴⁰. But the past, while inevitably gone, contained important indications. As the collective wisdom of humankind gathered over time, history revealed how human affairs tended to unfold, and it provided the ground for a political agenda that shunned revolutionary utopianism and an overreliance on reason alone. To appeal to history was to reject the assumption that human societies were entirely malleable, and that reason could remake them from scratch; some things never completely changed.

The Middle Ages caught the attention of counterrevolutionaries who viewed it as the golden age of Western Christendom. To the observer, medieval history offered an example of a Christian society in which spiritual and political power coexisted harmoniously—a stark contrast to a present populated with reforming sovereigns and revolutionary assemblies. But the comparison with the Middle Ages also clarified that the erosion of the church’s power was only the epiphenomenon of a deeper transformation—the departure of European societies from Christian values that had been subjected to a barrage of denunciations by Enlightenment critics of revealed religion and, at least according to counterrevolutionary Catholics, undermined by the long-lasting legacies of the Reformation. Scholars would later name this process of cultural transformation secularization.

Considering the role of religion in medieval society, counterrevolutionary Catholics realized that appeals to sovereigns—even those willing to listen—were not enough. Catholicism itself needed to be transformed into a force up to the challenges of the modern era, one that could vie for social and cultural hegemony with emerging political ideologies. Renovated in such a way—transformed into a modern ideology—Catholicism could perhaps return to play the role it had played in the Middle Ages. Through the lens of medievalism, Catholics understood that they had to join the fray of modern politics; by looking back at the past, they found a way to belong to the modern world.

⁴⁰ Maistre to Vignet, December 12, 1793, in Maistre, *Oeuvres complètes*, cit., vol. IX, p. 58.