

**“HISTORICISM” IN THE ITALIAN STUDY OF RELIGION.  
(I) ITALIAN IDEALISM AND ADOLFO OMODEO**

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**“Historicism” in the Italian Study of Religion. (I) Italian Idealism and Adolfo Omodeo  
(Abstract)**

In this article, the first of a series, I will look at the sources of the Italian historicist tradition in the study of religion. Before looking at its first important representative, Adolfo Omodeo, I will look at the roots of Italian historicism. Historicism, in its typical Italian form, has nothing to do with writing history. Rather, it is a product of philosophical idealism. This idealism, which we find under its purest form in Giovanni Gentile, became an important competitor of Catholic modernism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. When modernism was condemned by the Vatican in 1907, the idealists substituted the modernists as the leading intellectual fashion in Italy. Monopolising the history of religion as an academic discipline after 1907, and amalgamating it with their own philosophy, the idealists laid the basis of the Italian historicist study of religion.

**Key words:** historicism, idealism, modernism, catholic, Croce, Pettazzoni, Gentile, Omodeo

On 17 January 1924 Raffaele PETTAZZONI inaugurated his new chair in the history of religion at the Sapienza State University in Rome with a lecture on the *Development and Nature of the History of Religions*. Pettazzoni's chair was the first of its kind in Italy. Many Italians shared with PETTAZZONI a sense that they had finally caught up with the rest of Europe. In France, Loisy had been teaching *histoire des religions* as a full-fledged subject at the Collège de France since 1909.<sup>1</sup> In Holland and Germany, the discipline had spontaneously grown as a spin-off of the so-called *Historische Theologische* school in theology. Only Italy seemed to lag behind the rest of the world. In Italy Roman Catholicism was such a dominant factor that history of religion was unthinkable unless it first made *tabula rasa* with theology.

The establishment of PETTAZZONI's chair fitted in a long process reaching beyond the beginnings of the Italian state, with 1857 – the declaration of independence of Piemonte – being a pivotal year. One of the first measures of this new State was the integration of all existing chairs of theology into the university. It was hoped that new faculties of theology would massively attract priests and help propagate patriotic feelings in clerical circles. In 1861 the Piedmontese law was extended over the newly founded Italian Kingdom. But no massive intake of priests ensued. Then, with the Unification of the Italian peninsula, the faculties of theology were abolished. The unification of the Italian peninsula had put the Italian State and the Vatican in a position of direct competition, which made itself particularly felt at the

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<sup>1</sup> See Alfred LOISY, *De la méthode en histoire des religions* in: *Revue d'Histoire et de Littérature Religieuses*, 8 (1922) nr. 1 (Janv.) pp. 13-37.

theological faculties. Some suggested that it was in the best interest of the young Italian State to preserve these faculties but tighten its control over them if it wanted to prevent the Vatican from looking for other, more surreptitious ways of interfering in the new State. Others believed that the same interests were best served by simply abolishing the faculties.<sup>2</sup> On 10 April 1870, the Minister of Education presented the first bill to abolish the theology faculties.<sup>3</sup> Both positions were fiercely debated, although they shared the same aim, to keep Catholicism out. In 1872 the supporters of the bill prevailed and all faculties of theology at the Italian universities were abolished.

The abolition of the theological faculties did not mean that the expertise of its staff was lost. Former members of the theology faculties had to be re-employed by other faculties within the university, in particular the faculties closest to their original field of study. Previously theological disciplines were given a new name. “Biblical criticism”, “History of Religions”, “Philosophy of Religion”, “History of Christianity”, took the place of “exegesis” and “dogmatic theology”. Old research methods had to be abandoned and new ones adopted. New staff were no longer recruited exclusively among the clergy.<sup>4</sup>

Once the formerly theological disciplines were relocated to new faculties everything was, theoretically, in place for an autonomous history of religion to take shape. In reality, it proved a lot harder than expected to accommodate the newcomers within the already existing frameworks.<sup>5</sup> It lasted more than a decade for the first formal lectures in the history of religions to take place. In 1886, Baldassare LABANCA (1829-1913), professor of Moral Philosophy in Pisa, was invited to Rome to teach a course in the history of religions. Two years later, he proposed to the Minister the establishment of two additional chairs, one in “Christian literature”, and another one in the “History of Judaism”. All three professors then had to join efforts to train “historians of religions”. A, yet to be founded, scientific journal would, finally, help disseminate the results of their work.<sup>6</sup> But political preoccupations discredited the course from the outset. Anxious to avoid suspicion from the Vatican, the Minister of Education advertized LABANCA’s course without mentioning Christianity in its name. LABANCA objected to the Minister’s diplomatic caution, and, in 1888, he succeeded in having his course renamed to reflect its contents, “history of Christianity”.<sup>7</sup> Until 1904, LABANCA (in Rome) and the Church historian Raffaele MARIANO were all the Italian universities had to offer as far as the academic study of religion was concerned. In 1904 Mariano retired from his position. LABANCA carried on teaching in Rome until his death in 1913, at the age of eighty-five. During the last years of his life, he defended the history of religion against Vatican condemnations,<sup>8</sup> but this did not raise his prestige among young intellectuals.

<sup>2</sup> Raffaele PETTAZZONI, *Gli studi storico-religiosi in Italia*, in: *Civiltà Fascista*, 5 (1938) pp. 194-197, esp. p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> *Rendiconto del Parlamento Italiano*, 10 Apr. 1870 (p. 968).

<sup>4</sup> Louis Henry JORDAN, *The Study of Religion in the Italian Universities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909, pp. 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Ernesto BUONAIUTI, *Gli studi religiosi nella cultura superiore*, in: *Nuova Antologia*, 54 (1919) fasc. 1144 (16 Nov.) pp. 163-171, esp. p. 168.

<sup>6</sup> Baldassare LABANCA, *Gli studi religiosi nell’Università di Roma* (1888), summarized in Luigi SALVATORELLI (1913) p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> On Baldassare LABANCA: Luigi SALVATORELLI, *Gli studi religiosi in Italia e l’opera di Baldassare Labanca*, in: *La Cultura Contemporanea*, 5 (1913) fasc. 62-63 (Febr.-March), pp. 65-104.

<sup>8</sup> For example in his preface to L. H. JORDAN’s book (see higher).

All this is not to say that the discipline which in 1924 gained its long-awaited academic recognition fell in an intellectual vacuum. During the past quarter of a century, Italian intellectual life had gone through a period of renewal. It had done away with the last remnants of the nineteenth century — positivism, evolutionism, materialism, sociologism — and it had rejuvenated itself by absorbing new ways of thinking. North of Rome, in Firenze, intellectuals tended to turn to the Anglo-American world for inspiration. On 4 January 1903 the first issue of Giovanni PAPINI'S *Leonardo* came out, which became the channel through which William JAMES' pragmatism and Henri Bergson entered Italy. Firenze's antepode was Naples, where the cultural orientation was rather towards Germany. In Germany, the excess of late nineteenth century materialism had provoked an idealist reaction and a plea to return to the fathers of idealism, Hegel, Fichte, Kant and Schelling. Other countries followed the German example, creating a pan-European neo-idealist vogue, with Italy joining in around 1903. Italian neo-idealism was, however, more than a passing philosophical trend. While the pragmatists in Italy soon lost *Leonardo* as their most important platform (in 1907), neo-idealism became an important cultural factor in Italy and remained this throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Idealism breathed new life into academe and became the dominant paradigm in several branches of learning. It owed this success to its two first, and major, proponents, Benedetto CROCE and Giovanni GENTILE. Both scholars not only gave idealism or *idealismo* its typically Italian flavour, they also exerted an overwhelming intellectual (but also moral and political) influence on the first two generations of the twentieth century.

### 1. Italian «idealism»

Italian idealism received its first philosophical articulation in Croce's "Philosophy of the Spirit". Like all idealists, Croce assumed that the only reality significant to human beings was that in which they could see a product of their own creative mind, their *Spirito*. The Spirit, Croce believed, incarnated itself in a specific number of activities. Croce distinguished between theoretical activities and practical activities of the Spirit, on the one hand, and those which were intuitive as opposed to those which were logical, on the other hand. Intuitive activities focused on the particular and the concrete; logical activities on the universal and the abstract. Combining these parameters resulted in four different activities. The first, and for Croce crucial, way in which the Spirit could manifest itself was art, a theoretical and intuitive form of the Spirit. Other theoretical activities, which were universal rather than intuitive, were those of the abstract sciences, such as logics. In 1902, Croce published his *Aesthetics*, devoted to art as a form of the Spirit, followed by a *Logic* in 1909. Croce's ultimate aim was to force the entire realm of knowledge and human behaviour into his "Philosophy of the Spirit". Art and science were not the only way through which man's creativity found a way out. Human beings were also human in so far as they organized their livelihood and society. Under this "practical" form, the Spirit could, again, manifest itself in two ways. As universal, it manifested itself as ethics, concerned with the "common good". On the level of the particular, Croce grouped all activities that related to the direct needs of human beings. This included economy, but as the fourth and final category it absorbed in itself also all remaining forms of the Spirit. Croce subsumed all these activities under the common denominator, "the vital". The book in which Croce expounded these ideas, *Philosophy of Practice* (1908), was the third and final part of his Philosophy of the Spirit. Croce conceded that there was room for elaboration and refining of his system, but at the same time he was convinced that he had set up a framework which was immune to criticism and which no one would be able to refute.

The four forms of the Spirit (“art”, “logic” [or science], “ethics” and “economy”) were, in Croce’s eyes, the four stages through which the Spirit necessarily passed in articulating itself. While some periods in history showed a predominance of one of the forms of the Spirit over the three others (the “logical” creativity of the Spirit during the enlightenment, “aesthetic” creativity in nineteenth century Romanticism, the “economical” in the twentieth century,...), none of the four forms could really substitute the three others. The relationship between the forms of the Spirit was one of perfect circularity, which meant that there was no room for a distinct, fifth form of the Spirit (for example for religion). Croce described his system as that of the “absolutely immanent Spirit”, and he refused to see in the Spirit a process which, through a succession of theses and antitheses, eventually led to a higher synthesis. The manifestations of the Spirit “art”, “logic”, “ethics” and “economy” bore their aim in themselves rather than being the way toward a higher Absolute goal (such as God).

In the last pages of the *Philosophy of Practice* Croce entrusted his trilogy as a “working-instrument” to “all those of good disposition”, reiterating that in it they would find a philosophy to which nothing needed to be added.<sup>9</sup> What the Italian intellectuals actually found was a system which made it nearly impossible to speculate on issues which did not already have their place in the system. Croce’s philosophy provided such an overwhelmingly new map of the working of the Spirit that there seemed no more room for new, yet unexplored areas of knowledge.

The second face of Italian idealism was that of Giovanni GENTILE, Croce’s friend and ally with whom he founded in 1903 the important review *La Critica*. In its first issue, *La Critica* announced itself as a modest attempt to surpass the fragmentation of knowledge by keeping the Italians abreast of the latest books across the disciplines. But the new review far surpassed its programme. Compiled almost exclusively by its founders and published bimonthly for more than four decades, it was an important factor in the institutionalization of idealism in Italy. Also in 1903, Gentile formally announced the rebirth of idealism. In the first of a series of lectures on “theoretical philosophy” at the University of Naples, Gentile proclaimed the definitive death of all philosophies that separated the realm of our ideas from the world out there. Gentile believed that the relationship between the Spirit and the world was one of perfect mutual penetration. The Spirit, Gentile argued, was involved in a process of reproducing itself in certain objects outside itself with these objects continuously being absorbed into the Spirit from which they had come forth. In its natural state, the world was one grand abstraction which – Gentile believed – continuously moved towards the only true point of gravity in reality, namely human “thinking” or *pensiero*. Gentile’s thesis was that only the *pensiero* was real or actual (hence “actualism” or *idealismo attuale*). *Pensiero* was the basis of everything. No science or philosophy were possible without at least a minimal “belief of the *pensiero* in it itself” and the conviction that it was thinking the truth. *Pensiero* was even more universal than all our so-called universal “concepts”. Concepts such as that of the “man” or of the “triangle” – Gentile emphasized – existed neither in heaven nor on earth. Only the *pensiero* that thought them was real.

Gentile’s “actual idealism” was much more radical than Croce’s idealism. Gentile rejected Croce’s subtle distinction between the four different moments of the Spirit along with the architectonically well-balanced construction in which Croce had cast it, and he reduced the Spirit to the individual’s private *pensiero*. With this actuality of the *pensiero* as his axiom, he then showed how anything else outside or beyond was necessarily “inactual” as long as it did not find its way back to its original source.

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<sup>9</sup> ed. 1923, pp. 387-390.

Gentile held, for example, that a *pensiero* other than one's own was by definition inactual. Even to oppose a second *pensiero* to one's own was a form of abstraction. The only way to undo this process was by assuming that there was *only one* single *pensiero* – one's own. Spatial categories abolished *pensiero*.

Equally untenable in Gentile's eyes were temporal differences between instances of *pensiero* – between *pensiero* now and *pensiero* in the past, for example in historical figures. A historical figure's *pensiero* was, in fact, no more than our own *pensiero* failing to recognize the *pensiero* of which the historical figure's *pensiero* a projection. More than any other branch of learning, history provided the test for the truth of actualism. Gentile distinguished between *fatti* and *atti*. *Fatti* – facts or, literally, “what was made” – were end-products. Facts only existed in the minds of positive scientist or of nineteenth century historians. Gentile highlighted the miraculous ability of the human mind to bring these so-called facts back to life in one single act. Writing history was not merely rethinking facts. In thinking them one also “remade” them. Historians who claimed that they were reconstructing the struggle between the patricians and the plebeians during the Roman period were, in fact, doing much more than what they claimed to be doing. Rather than the historian approaching another world, it was the entire world of the Romans moving into the mind of the historian.

In an address to the Philosophical Library in Palermo on 16 December 1912, Gentile summed up all the entities that threatened the purity of the act of thinking: “God, nature, logical or moral laws, historical realities which were no more than the sum-total of a number of facts, all sorts of mental and psychological categories,...” The role of the thinker was to weed all these away, keeping only the pure act of thinking or *pensiero*: an act which was neither preceded nor succeeded by anything else and which neither “awaited to be executed”, nor was “being executed” or “already executed”, but which was simply always there. The result was, understandably, a way of thinking even less refutable than that of Croce. Actualism was not just another view of reality; it pretended to be reality itself. In its most extreme form, actualism led to the conclusion that reality could do as well without any form of human intervention. Since reality was the exclusive product of our *pensiero*, one might as well say – so Gentile believed – that the entire reality was an eternal process of self-generation (*autoctisi*).

Gentile's equivalent to Croce's four moments of the Spirito was a threefold structure, based on the three different ways in which Gentile believed the Spirito could manifest itself: as Subject, as Object or as the Synthesis of both. The Spirito could either be my individual thinking taken in itself; it could be the process of my thinking incarnating itself in some object; or it could, finally, be the process which integrated both moments. With each of these moments Gentile identified one specific activity: in its Subjective pole the Spirito took the form of *art*, in its Objective pole that of *religion* (being the belief in an Absolute object), and in the synthesis of both that of *philosophy*. What distinguished Gentile's system from Croce's was the much stronger mutual integration of its components: a Subject without Object was «empty», an Object without Subject «blind», the Synthesis of both merely «formal» without the Object and the Subject united in this synthesis. In fact, the three did not need to be integrated, because they integrated each other spontaneously. An Object without someone thinking it was inconceivable, hence the Subject was always given in the Object. Similarly, the Object was always already present in the Subject because, for an actualist, there were no other objective realities conceivable outside the one produced by our own individual *pensiero*. Once one realized this mutual absorption one attained to the Synthesis, ceased being an

«artist» (= *art*) or a «Saint» (= *religion*) and became a «philosopher» (= the third pole).<sup>10</sup> The implications of this kind of idealism for Gentile's understanding of art, religion and philosophy were clear. First, since all three moments integrated were present in each other, there existed no strict distinction between the «artist», the «Saint» and the «philosopher». All three dealt with what Gentile called the same «artístico-religio-philosophical Spirit»<sup>11</sup>. Secondly, the three different types of «artefacts» were largely interchangeable. Art, religion and philosophy were three moments of the same Spirit.<sup>12</sup> Gentile, clearly, was on a completely different track than Croce. Whereas Croce understood the Spirit in function of its manifestations, Gentile seemed to hardly allow them any weight. Art, religion and philosophy were «emanations» rather than real «incarnations» of the Spirit. Gentile's actualist idealism reduced everything systematically to the individual's *pensiero*; «immanentism», according to Gentile, was its «guiding principle» and its «method».

Toward the end of 1913, the first cracks appeared in Italian idealism. Gentile's actualism possessed a fascination which Croce's philosophy, with its sense of distinction, lacked. Intellectuals attracted to idealism found in actualism a form of idealism in which they could submerge themselves wholly. Croce worried about the dulling effects of this cryptomystical way of thinking, pointing out that what Gentile called *pensiero* did not differ fundamentally from what other (non-idealist) thinkers called "Life", "Feeling" or "Will". Actualism often degenerated into a mixture of "young irrationalism" and "blind voluntarism". A special form of Italian idealism which fitted in this intellectual climate was Julius EVOLA's so-called "Magical Idealism", described by Ugo Spirito as "(...) mania di originalità a qualunque costo, gusto un po' vano di nuove costruzioni, malcelata insofferenza, soprattutto, della severa disciplina morale che è proprio di un idealismo bene inteso."<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Idealism and Religion

Italian idealism was, by definition, non-confessional and often even anti-clerical. Croce and Gentile were non-believers and they had both gone through a struggle with the Catholic faith. Croce's first crisis took place during his *collegio* years, where he found himself unable to foster an image of a God which his teachers taught him to love rather than to fear. Decisive for Croce's intellectual biography was the influence of the philosopher Bertrando Spaventa. Croce owed to Spaventa his aversion to all transcendentalist philosophies, such as the orthodox Hegelianism which Spaventa propagated himself. But Spaventa was also a man of the Church. In this quality, he had imprinted in the young Croce the image of Catholicism and Hegelianism being two sides of the same coin. Once he had overcome the religious fears of his adolescence, Croce turned to the study of arts, moral, law, and discovered to his great relief that he was no longer interested in any world other than the one in which he was living. Croce had found peace in what he called an "unconscious immanentism"<sup>14</sup>.

Around the age of thirty Croce went through a second religious crisis as a result of his contact with Marxism. After a brief period of fascination with Marxism, Croce recognized

<sup>10</sup> "Le forme assolute dello Spirito" (originally 1909), Repr. in *Opere* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1962) vol. 35, for this section esp. p. 260 (§ 6).

<sup>11</sup> *ibidem* p. 264 § 9.

<sup>12</sup> pp. 266-267 § 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ugo SPIRITO, *L'idealismo italiano e i suoi critici* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1930) p. 192.

<sup>14</sup> Benedetto CROCE, *Contributo alla critica di me stesso. Nuova edizione con un'appendice inedita*, Bari: Giuseppe Laterza e figli, 1945, p. 41.

in the egalitarian ideals of Marx the same transcendence which he had struggled with as a child, yet under a more “earthly” and more “lay” guise. As a consequence, he decided to abandon for good all utopian beliefs.<sup>15</sup> Croce’s Philosophy of the Spirit was structurally determined by his aversion to anything even remotely referring to the sort of religion which he had grown up under. Even in determining the number of moments of the Spirit – four rather than three – Croce made sure to preclude any potential similarity with the three persons of the Holy Trinity.

Gentile’s experiences with faith were similar to those of Croce. In 1909, *La Voce* published an article on the “Hegelian Church” in Italy. Gentile’s attention was drawn to the article because of the way in which it had identified him with a specific «Church». Later the editors admitted that they had printed *chiesa* (= Church) where they meant *schiera* (= crowd), but Gentile had already sent his reaction. In his article he emphasized the important role Hegelian philosophy had played as a substitute for his increasing indifference to what he had seen in the church as a child:

La Chiesa (quella cattolica) la frequentavo, e volontieri, che ero fanciullo assai, d’anni e di spirito; e vi trovavo tanta forza, tanto conforto di raccogliamento e di fede nella sicura testimonianza di mia madre, di mio padre e d’un mio maestro, che era prete e fu anche il mio direttore spirituale. Ma potei poi giudicare da me, o credetti, le stesse basi di quella testimonianza; e la chiesa mi parve quasi d’un tratto svanire nella preistoria della mia anima. Ho avuto più tardi altri testimoni di verità (...) nella scuola (...) e nei libri: sommo, Hegel. Ma nessuno di essi riedificò più la mia chiesa distrutta: perché la loro testimonianza mi valse sempre (...) come testimonianza del pensiero stesso, di quell’unico pensiero che è stato per me, volta a volta, tale, ossia del mio proprio pensiero.<sup>16</sup>

Croce’s and Gentile’s rejection of all forms of transcendence and Revelation did not mean that they made no attempt at all to come to terms with the phenomenon of religion. Croce’s interpretation of religion was ambiguous. His philosophy did not need the phenomenon of religion to be complete, yet as a Philosophy of the *Spirit* it had no other choice than to cover the entire field of human knowledge and behaviour. Croce saw in religion an “imperfect” and “inferior” form of knowledge. While for primitive peoples religion represented the whole body of knowledge, the expansion of knowledge had made it possible for modern man to reverse the order: henceforth, knowledge was his “religion”.<sup>17</sup> Later, in the *Logica*, religion moved to the interface between Croce’s first and second manifestation of the Spirit, between art (and poetry, in particular) and science. Croce explained religion as a derived form of myth. In contrast to the allegorists, for whom myths were no more than random and disposable image for abstract truths, Croce emphasized that one could not separate the contents and the form of a myth. Myths were artistic expressions but at the same time they also contained a logical element: “Need an explanation for the creation of heaven and earth, seas and rivers, plants and animals, humankind and language? Here are the stories of the marriage of Uranos and Gaia, of the birth of Chronos and the other

<sup>15</sup> pp. 83-84.

<sup>16</sup> Giovanni GENTILE, “La Chiesa Hegeliana” (dated Palermo 6 Febr. 1909), in: *La Voce*, 1909, nr. 10 (18 Febr.) p. 38. Repr. in *Opere complete*, 51-52 (1994) esp. pp. 25-26.

<sup>17</sup> *Estetica come scienza dell’espressione e linguistica generale*, ed. 1923, p. 70.

Titans, of God who brings forth all things out of Chaos (...).”<sup>18</sup> This reluctance of Croce to give myth and religion a proper place in his system strongly contrasted with his genuine respect for faith and religiosity. From time to time, philosophers had to be able to hold to their truths as “ferme e inconcusse”. Such faith *fede* was beneficial if interiorized and transformed into a form of *religiosità*<sup>19</sup>.

### 3. Benedetto Croce: from idealism to «historicism» (*storicismo*)

Croce understood that philosophy alone did not suffice to satisfy desires and aspirations that traditionally used to find comfort in God or the Revelation. Once the transcendent gone, the immanently working Spirit would not automatically take over its function. Croce responded to the spiritual needs of Italian intellectuals by an increasing emphasis – even «sacralization» – of the realm where he believed the Spirit to unfold its activity – the realm of «History». Like Gentile’s idealism was «actualist», Croce’s idealism was profoundly «historicist». Croce’s historicism had its roots in the debates of the late nineteenth century on the scientific status of history. In *History subsumed under the General Category of Art* (of 1893) Croce argued that historians distinguished themselves from the natural scientists in that they were interested in the «individual» and «descriptive» rather than in the «general» and the abstract laws of nature as were the scientists. Croce’s central thesis was the «contemporaneity» of history. All history was by definition «contemporaneous», even the history of the remotest past. But writing history was no longer just one way in which the Spirit could be seen *in actu*, as it was for Gentile; for Croce it became the prototype and criterion for all forms of knowledge.

In 1917, Croce added to his Trilogy on the Spirit a volume on the Theory of Historiography. This appendix to his – otherwise already closed – philosophy, marked the beginning of the gradual transformation of Croce’s philosophy into a radically historicist version of Italian idealism. Croce saw an enormous cleavage between nature and the human mind, which he turned into an unbridgeable abyss. The aim of Croce’s historicism was the «historicization» of everything. «Nature» was no more than «congealed history», its only characteristic being that it had not yet been transformed into a piece of history. Another essential component of Croce’s historicism was the absolute identity of philosophy and history. History needed the logical element of philosophy, while philosophy was impossible without the intuitive element provided by history. Both were literally «coexistent»: rather than one arising as the consequence of the other, both always originated in the same moment.<sup>20</sup> One consequence of the identity of philosophy and history was the “death of philosophy of history”.<sup>21</sup> Philosophies which saw history as the theatre for the unfolding of some grand idea were crypto-theological constructions, born from people’s incapacity to grasp the “intrinsic and objective development of history”.<sup>22</sup> Yet another element of Croce’s historicism was its profound optimism. So-called «evil» facts in the past or «decadent» periods were entities that

<sup>18</sup> *Logica*, fourth ed. 1920, p. 283.

<sup>19</sup> Benedetto CROCE, “Religiosità”, in: *Frammenti di Etica*, Bari: Gius. Laterza e figli, 1922, pp. 181-184.

<sup>20</sup> *Logica come concetto del concetto puro* (4th ed. of 1920) esp. pp. 199-211 (= “identità di filosofia e storia”).

<sup>21</sup> *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (1917) p. 68.

<sup>22</sup> See Croce’s address to the Italian Senate against the establishment of a chair of Philosophy of History at the University of Rome *Contro una cattedra di filosofia di storia*, in: *La Voce*, 5 (1913) nr. 25 (19 June) pp. 1101-1102.

had not yet been historicized and that, for the time being, were under the sway of our “sensibility” and our imagination.<sup>23</sup> The greater our distance to the past, the more our value judgments in terms of good vs. evil seemed to lose their meaning. For a historicist, writing or reading history was a way to cultivate equanimity.<sup>24</sup> All these characteristics set Croce’s historicism apart from the various «historicisms» that flourished elsewhere in Europe, especially after WW I.<sup>25</sup> These historicisms tended to be either a form of relativism or pessimism; Croce’s historicism was neither.

An important factor in the branching off of a «historicism» strand within Italian idealism, was the ascent of Fascism and Gentile’s conversion to it in 1922. Croce felt that by its glorification of the past Fascism betrayed the original, humanitarianist inspiration of idealism. He pointed out that the human mind could only remain part of the Spirito in so far as one left it the freedom to produce ever new history for future generations. Idealism and Fascism did not go together in this respect. History had its own intrinsic laws free from manipulation by ideology; whereas totalitarianism subdued, history emancipated.

Croce’s most eloquent plea for historicism was the speech *Anti-historicism* which he delivered on 3 September 1930 at the Seventh International Congress of Philosophy in Oxford.<sup>26</sup> Speaking at a safe distance from Italy, Croce denounced what he believed to be two greatest cultural evils in his homeland: «futurism» and «classicism». While they seemed to have different goals, futurists and classicists were in fact very similar. Both rejected the idea of history, the first by destroying the past, the latter by restoring the past and rejecting the present as a locus for new history. Croce’s antidote to this attitude was historicism. Historicism was the opposite of the blunt denial by the anti-historicist of the idea of historicity – which for Croce was synonymous with «civilization» and «culture» and, eventually, with the idea of Liberty.

By undermining the idea of Liberty the anti-historicists also deprived modern man of what Croce believed to be humankind’s last remaining religion. In 1932, Croce published a *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, which explained the intertwining of history and Liberty in explicitly religious terms. Croce’s History began in the period shortly after Napoleon, a golden age in his eyes. This was the time when emancipatory movements arose throughout the European continent and when the idea of Liberty established itself in the minds of the people. There was not the slightest doubt that this Liberty was a religion: it had its own cult, its own apostles, devotees and martyrs, and had to compete with “hostile” religions which denied the idea of liberty, such as Catholicism. Croce refused as a matter of principle to tie this idea to one specific class or interest, even when the political struggle in Italy intensified and some accused Croce of holding a merely “formal” idea of Liberty. Liberty was

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<sup>23</sup> *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (1917) p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> *Saggio sullo Hegel* (1913) p. 413.

<sup>25</sup> The Italian term for this type of «historicism» was *i-storicismo* (as opposed to *storicismo*, Croce’s own use of the terminology is, however, not very consistent). A good example of this non-storicist historicism was Spengler’s philosophy, a philosophy which identified history with the “fatal and blind flux of change” (Guido DE RUGGIERO, *Note sulla più recente filosofia europea e americana*. XVI. *Storicismo e pseudo-storicismo nella filosofia tedesca contemporanea*, in: *La Critica*, 32 (1934) pp. 36-50, esp. pp. 46 ff.)

<sup>26</sup> Benedetto CROCE, *Antistoricismo*, in: *La Critica*, 28 (1930) pp. 401-409. Repr. in *Ultimi saggi*, (Saggi filosofici, 7) (1948) pp. 246-258. Transl. in German in 1931 by Karl VOSSLER, *Antihistorismus* (München: Oldenbourg).

its own contents. It did not distinguish between «individual» and «collective» or between «political» and «civil» liberties, it was Liberty “without adjectives”. The real problem, according to Croce, was that his contemporaries had lost the capacity to enthuse themselves for ideas, as previous generations used to do for the idea of Redemption (if they were Christians) or Reason (under the Enlightenment).<sup>27</sup> But, in spite of this crisis Liberalism still had an important role to play, Croce believed. Its task was to “transplant” religions to an “environment of Liberty”, where they would either live on or, otherwise, wither away if they proved unable to become more rational and less mythological.

A Crocian historicist was someone with a strong awareness of being an actor in history in solidarity with similar actors in the past; with a sense of being taken up in a process ruled by Liberty; and with a mission to make new history, either by bringing the deeds of his predecessors back to life or by his own accomplishments in the present. The most concise expression of this philosophy was “pensiero e azione”, the motto of the nineteenth century figure Giuseppe Mazzini and the title of Croce’s most outspokenly historicist book *History as Thought and Action* (published in 1938). Historicism was humanism for the modern age.<sup>28</sup> Like Cicero in Antiquity or the Italian humanists some centuries before, the historicists turned to the past for guidance in the present. In a sense, they were even more humanistic than the humanists. For them the past was much more than a model to imitate or a matter of pure philology (as it was for the German Hellenizing humanists Winckelmann and Wolf). Each time the past informed his present actions, the historicist felt he was repeating within himself the history of humankind as a whole. Whereas the traditional humanists selected one specific people or one specific era which they thought worth imitating, the historicist felt solidarity with people across all barriers. Historicism saw history as something which transcended all categories of time and space, and hence claimed to be the only true form of humanism.

An important index to the increasing absolutizing of Croce’s historicism was his changing attitude to the so-called “history of religion”. Strictly speaking, “history of religion” was a self-defeating notion because it referred to the historical study of a phenomenon which itself defied history. Croce was forced to reflect on this problem because of certain Catholic scholars who around the turn of the century had discovered the historical study of religion as a means to emancipate themselves from ecclesiastical tutelage (the so-called «modernists»). Croce strongly rejected this attempt to separate the historical from the living phenomenon of religion. Isolating a realm of past religious phenomena from that of the present ones reduced these phenomena to their natural state. The only legitimate way to study past religious beliefs and practices was by making them “contemporaneous” with ourselves and to study them like one would study any other phenomenon of the past. “History of religion” had no autonomous status with regard to traditional historiography: its place was right within historiography. This integration (or rather «absorption») in secular history was a gain rather than a loss for the history of religion. Once part of the political-ethical or moral historiography of humankind, it would help us detect (and judge!) religious movements that used to be beyond its range of view or that were thought to be of no concern to it, such as the crypto-religious phenomenon called «Fascism». <sup>29</sup> Furthermore, it would enable us to make sense of the central ideas of the religions without having to become an adept or a theologian. Ideas such as «Providence» or the «Kingdom of God» in Christianity would appear as what they really were: myths. What

<sup>27</sup> *Contributo alla critica di me stesso* (1945) pp. 59-82 (“note autobiografiche”) esp. p. 74.

<sup>28</sup> “Storicismo e umanismo”, in Benedetto CROCE, *La Storia come pensiero e come azione* (Saggi Filosofici, 9), 2nd ed.: Bari: Laterza, 1938, pp. 288-294.

<sup>29</sup> *La storia delle religioni*, in: *La Critica*, 23 (1925) pp. 319-320.

made such myths significant, Croce believed, was not their logical value (which was, as we have seen, non-existent) but that they were the product of their users' desire to "bring about new history" (utopianist myths being a fine example).<sup>30</sup>

Croce's historicism reached its most absolute form (as *storicismo assoluto*) once it began absorbing Christianity, the world-view traditionally identified with the Absolute. "Why we can't say we are no Christians", Croce rhetorically titled one of his articles in *La Critica*.<sup>31</sup> Christianity was the greatest revolution ever, unsurpassed by any past or future revolution in science, poetry, art,... But it was not a «miracle», somehow artificially inserted into human history. Christianity had not descended from heaven, as something which came to disrupt the natural course of history. Also wrong, Croce added, was Hegel's explanation of Christianity. Hegel had eliminated «intervention» from above, but – by seeing in Christianity the ultimate destination of history – kept it somehow outside history. For Croce Christianity was something which had originated within history, more specifically as the spontaneous revival of man's moral consciousness. Croce's famous saying that "after Christ all men had become Christians" expressed this profound historicization of Christianity. Under this form Croce's historicism became an important rival of Italian Catholicism, while Croce himself became a sort of «lay pope». Catholic scholars gradually realized that Croce's significance surpassed by far that of a scholar, and that they had to deal with no less than an authentic religious reformer.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. Giovanni Gentile: "actualist" idealism and idealism as a new religion

Croce's claim that his historicism put man back with both feet in the empirical historical reality seemed to contradict his equally bold claim that his historicization of everything was an absolutely valid claim. Gentile's impression of storicismo was that it was an "armchair" philosophy, manufactured by someone who was himself an onlooker of history rather than an active participant in it.<sup>33</sup> But Gentile's perception reflected above anything else the incompatibility of his own personality with that of Croce. Croce was the Goethean scholar and the incarnation of the philosopher's virtue of serenity. Croce represented the «apollinic» moment of Italian idealism, while Gentile stood for the «dionysian» moment. Both scholars had their own favourite discipline. Croce was the specialist of art and literature and aesthetics the science which most profited from his work. Gentile's preferred area was pedagogy, a science which turned out to be a much more powerful vehicle to propagate idealism than aesthetics.

The class-room was the actualist's natural habitat and the laboratory where the theory and the practice of actualism joined. Nowhere seemed the actualist premisses better applicable than in education. In 1912, Gentile published the first volume of his *Outline of Pedagogy as Philosophical Science*, a classic in its field in Italy but also a through and through actualist work. Teaching, according to Gentile, was based on an intimate spiritual communion between two individuals. This entailed both diversification and unification. On the one hand, the

<sup>30</sup> *Filosofia della pratica* (1909) ed. 1923, pp. 174-175 ("le azioni e i miti").

<sup>31</sup> Benedetto CROCE, *Perché non possiamo non dirci «cristiani»*, in: *La Critica*, 40 (1942) pp. 289-297.

<sup>32</sup> Antonio GRAMSCI, *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*, Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1948, quoted from 2nd ed. of 1979, pp. 179-183, esp. pp. 182-183/ pp. 246-253, esp. p. 250.

<sup>33</sup> Giovanni GENTILE, *Storicismo e storicismo*, in: *Annali della R. Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, Serie II, Volume XI (1942) pp. 1-7, esp. p. 4.

teacher had to adapt the contents of his teaching to each individual pupil. With every new pupil, the teacher's teaching had to be a different act. But, on the other hand, teaching was more than a one-way initiative of a teacher tailoring a body of knowledge to the needs of his pupil. True knowledge was knowledge which had "generated itself" in and through the fusion of the pupil's mind and that of the teacher; the role of the teacher was to assist the pupil in this process. One of the implications of actualist pedagogy was that it abhorred all forms of ready-made programmes. «Didactics» was no more than the applied form of pedagogy, never its compartmentalizing in different sub-didactics corresponding with the different subjects taught at school. Each of the three great disciplines in which the school had to initiate its pupil (art, religion, philosophy) had its most adequate way of being taught, but in the end they were all no more than three moments of the same spiritual act.<sup>34</sup>

Gentile's ideas were popularized by his pupil Giuseppe LOMBARDO-RADICE. Lombardo-Radice had first-hand experience in the field and was as convinced as Gentile of the revolutionary potential of idealism. Idealism was a "new religion" which, Lombardo-Radice believed, would renew the minds of the Italians just as Christianity had done once. Similarly, in the same way as Paganism co-existed for a while with Christianity after the birth of the new religion, it was only a matter of time before Christianity would die and idealism take over its role in the modern world. All pointed out that a new religion was in the making: idealism had its own Churches, its own rituals, its own priests, its own devotees. The gateway to this new religion was the school, on the condition that it was «laical». Such «laicity» would not only set it apart from the so-called «confessional» (Catholic, Protestant or Jewish) school. It would also distinguish the actualist school from what Gentile and his followers believed to be its greatest adversary, the «neutral» school. Neutrality in education was an illusion. The only reason why some felt attracted to it was their failure to properly understand the [full purport] of the idea of laicity. Laicity was anything but the exclusively negative conception it seemed. For the actualist laicity meant, in the first place, the radical rejection of anything which imposed itself from the outside on the pensiero of the individual. Laical education was education which gradually eliminated the child's dependency on a God or creeds which transcended his own thinking and in this way helped him grow toward becoming an autonomous spiritual being.

The established (so-called «positive») religions still played an important role in this new religion. At the earliest stage, in the elementary school, children had to be initiated in the confession in which they were born. Various materials could be used for this. Recommended readings included "religious poems", such as certain Gospel sections or Manzoni's hymns – as long as one kept away from the traditional catechisms.<sup>35</sup> The most appropriate teachers of religion were not necessarily their official representatives (the Catholic priest, the Protestant minister, the Jewish rabbi or the Freemason). Actualist teaching was «one» and «undivided» and so had the teacher to be. Specialism in matters of religion was incompatible with actualism.<sup>36</sup> Gentile's ideal was that of the teacher teaching a religion in which he did not believe himself. Only in this way, Gentile argued, could one tell if the teacher had understood that religious instruction – as all other subjects – had to become part of a higher form of spirituality.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *Opere* (1962) vol. 2., pp. 127/ 141.

<sup>35</sup> Giuseppe LOMBARDO-RADICE, *Parole d'un uomo moderno. Il concetto della vita e l'insegnamento religioso*, in: *La Voce*, 5 (1913) nr. 18 (1 May) pp. 1067-1068, esp. p. 1068.

<sup>36</sup> *Parole d'un uomo moderno* (1913) p. 1068.

<sup>37</sup> [*Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica* (Vol. II: Didattica)], repr. in *Opere* (1962) vol. 2, p.

Only in the second stage, that of secondary school, the teaching of religion began to play its specifically actualist role. Religions, for the actualists, were no more than auxiliary constructions and utterly false if they were believed to help the individual bridge an abyss between himself and the Absolute. Actualism had definitively superseded this conception of religion and put itself in its place as a new religion. The best way to prove this was – rather than to ignore the established religions – to treat them as what they were: moments in history when human beings had turned the Spirit into an unchangeable «object», thus arresting its natural movement forward. One needed religion in a first stage so as to be able to abandon it in a second stage. Rather than contemporary religions, Lombardo-Radice believed, it were its “historical” forms that mattered. Throughout its evolution, religion had passed through a number of successive stages which were strikingly similar to the ones the child went through in its own growth towards maturity (“The child is closer to the religion of the past than to that of the present. The child is Catholic, and always somewhat pagan and somewhat fetishist as well.”)<sup>38</sup> The actualists were among the first in Italy to advocate “history of religions” (*storia delle religioni*) as a separate subject in secondary schools. In 1907/1908, Gentile called for the integration of “history of religions” in the academic curriculum.<sup>39</sup> These departments would prepare the lecturers for the *scuole normale*, which would then transmit what they had learnt to the teachers in the field. But, Italy was not yet ripe for Gentile’s proposals. In 1907/1908 the political agenda was set by the debate for and against the introduction of Catholic religious instruction. As long as this debate was not settled all plans to establish history of religion as a new discipline had to wait.

##### 5. Idealism’s intellectual sparring partner’: Catholic modernism

Gentile’s real rivals were not the the «neutral» or indifferent minds, but the so-called «modernists». Many of these modernists had been formed under Pope Leo XIII and were deeply impressed by the pact which he had decreed between faith and science. Leo XIII’s rehabilitation of scholastic philosophy («neo-Thomism») as a counterweight to late nineteenth century scientism and positivism and his attempt to open the Church to the spirit of free historical research stimulated Catholic intellectuals. But while Leo XIII’s dialogue with modernity intended to strengthen the position of the Church over and against the secular realm, modernists held that modernity could help them challenge the Church’s claims of absoluteness, restoring in this way the individual’s intellectual, moral and spiritual autonomy.

Modernism was a label which was applied to a wide variety of thinkers and engaged Catholics. Some among the modernists believed that history was the key to the renewal of the Church. Alfred LOISY, a Biblical scholar and the French icon of the modernist movement, called for a complete separation between history and faith. In his seminal *L’Évangile et l’Histoire* Loisy challenged Harnack’s view of Christian history as a process of degeneration. Harnack regarded the Christian dogmas as «accretions» to an original kernel which one had to prune away if one wanted to reach the original message of Jesus. Loisy rejected this a-

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<sup>38</sup> Giuseppe LOMBARDO-RADICE, *Teoria e storia dell’educazione. II. Lezioni di didattica e ricordi di esperienza magistrale*, Milano/Palermo/Napoli: Sandron, 1913, p. 475.

<sup>39</sup> Giovanni GENTILE, *Dopo il Congresso*, in *Scuola e filosofia* (1908) repr. in *Opere* (1988) vol. 39, pp. 121-132, esp. p. 128.

historical understanding of Christianity, emphasizing the autonomy of Christian history.

Other variants of modernism aimed at rehabilitating the autonomy of the individual's religious, moral and spiritual experience. Two of the most influential proponents of this kind of modernism were the Frenchmen Maurice BLONDEL and Lucien LABERTHONNIÈRE. Blondel earned his reputation to his *L'Action*, of 1893, a book which sought to replace the intellectualist understanding of Christianity by a Christianity rooted in the concreteness of human action. In his book Blondel minutely analysed the ways in which human actions could have something self-transcending, demonstrating how human action could function as a locus for the Divine. Lucien LABERTHONNIÈRE offered a similar kind of «immanentist» Christianity. His philosophy was an attempt to reconcile the Christian idea of love with the autonomy of the human being. Christian love required absolute surrender from the individual, but this in turn seemed to annihilate the individual in what made him a free individual. Laberthonnière's writings were an attempt to explain that there was no contradiction at all. To surrender oneself to the object of one's love, he argued, one needed volition, but to be an individual endowed with volition, meant that one already possessed oneself. In other words, the autonomy of the human being was a condition rather than an obstacle for a Christian seeking to love God.

Modernism and idealism remained parallel movements because they addressed themselves to two completely different kinds of public. The prototype of the modernist was the lower cleric; that of the idealist the university student or academic. The interest in history and the "immanentist method" which both shared did little to bring modernists and idealists together. For Gentile these similarities were in fact no more than an invitation to show how true principles could be violated if they ended up in the wrong hands. Catholic Modernism was the ideal «sparring-partner» of Italian idealism. Both were of a comparable size; they had an equally great renewing potential and spoke the same language. Gentile took the lead in this dispute with modernism. His co-founding *La Critica* and his solemn proclamation of the rebirth of idealism, both in 1903, coincided with a third notable event in the same year, the death of pope Leo XIII and beginning of Pius X's pontificate. With Pius X a new era of conservatism had broken in the Church.

Gentile opened his anti-modernist campaign with an attack on *Dogma, Hierarchy and Cult in the Primitive Church* (1902) by the Barnabite Father Giovanni SEMERIA.<sup>40</sup> Gentile severely denounced Semeria's half-hearted attitude with regard to history. The problem with modernist historians such as Semeria was that they seemed unable to abandon their apologetical inclinations. Semeria's interest in the apologetical value of history, was a contradiction in terms. If one looked at history through the eyes of an apologist, one had already an implicit idea of what one would find and thus deprived history of its *raison d'être*. Gentile confronted the modernists with the two clear-cut alternatives between which he forced them to choose: either one practiced «history» or one held to «dogma». Either one was an historian and had knowledge, or one was a believer and had faith. Gentile's strategy in dealing with modernism consisted in laying bare the awkwardness of their logic. While Semeria had no problem contending that the "Spirit was one and indivisible", he seemed unaware of the repercussions which this had on himself as a "Catholic historian". If the Spirit was one, how then, Gentile asked Semeria, could it at the same time know, through history, and not know, through faith?

The modernists wanted to build a new form of Christianity yet at the same time

<sup>40</sup> Rev. of Giovanni SEMERIA, *Dogma, gerarchia e culto nella Chiesa primitiva* (Roma: F. Pustet, 1902), in: *La Critica*, 1 (1903) fasc. 3 (20 May) pp. 206-213. Repr. as *Cattolicesimo e storia nei libri del Semeria*, in: Giovanni GENTILE, *Il modernismo e i rapporti fra religione e filosofia* (1962) pp. 1-13.

wanted to remain within the existing Church. Their religiosity was as immanent as that of Gentile, Croce and the idealists, yet they were not prepared to sacrifice the transcendent dimension of Christianity. For the idealists such compromises were a sign of intellectual dishonesty. Shortly after the Vatican condemnation of LABERTHONNIÈRE's *Essais de Philosophie Religieuse* and *Réalisme Chrétien et Idéalisme Grec* (on 5 April 1906), Gentile denounced the ease with which Laberthonnière and all the adherents of the *philosophie de l'action* extrapolated the transcendent from the immanent. What was true for the French *philosophie de l'Action* was also true of its equivalent beyond the Atlantic, American pragmatism, Gentile believed. When, in 1904, William JAMES's *Varieties of Religious Experience* came out in an Italian translation, Gentile immediately responded with a devastating review in *La Critica*. Explaining religion in terms of a «sentiment» was a form of circular reasoning, Gentile explained, because it left the problem of the origin of this sentiment itself open (“the result of a *pep potion* perhaps?”, Gentile rhetorically asked). James' thinking was as ambiguous as Laberthonnière's. It resulted in a “purely arbitrary and mystical supernaturalism” which was, in fact, no more than James' private psychology.<sup>41</sup> But Gentile not only criticized the modernists. He also pointed out to the Italian fans of Laberthonnière that they were on the same track as the idealists and that it was only their loyalty to the Church which maintained the abyss with people like himself: “Laberthonnière and the young clergy fight (...) scholastics in the name of life, of the truth which is life, which does not impose itself, but which one spontaneously conquers, and which makes itself from moment to moment. But, sooner or later, they will realize that beyond it is, not Catholicism, but modern idealism.”<sup>42</sup>

On 8 September 1907 Pius X promulgated his famous encyclical against the modernists, *Tending the Lord's Flock* (= *Pascendi*). While acknowledging the multifariousness of the modernist phenomenon, *Pascendi* believed that it possessed some distinguishing features. First, all modernists had in common that they confined religion to the realm of the visible world. Modernists rejected the the Catholic Church's claim that it was somehow possible for human beings to understand the Divine with the light of reason. Human beings had no access whatsoever to the realm of the supernatural. The only meaningful form of religion for the modernists was their private, innermost religious feelings. *Agnosticism* was the basis of modernism. Modernism's second feature was the negative expression of this agnosticism. For *Pascendi* it was beyond any doubt that agnosticism resulted in *atheism*. Where the modernists were agnostics by ignorance, they were atheists knowingly and willingly. The expression of this atheism was their historiography, which they no longer saw as the illustration of a Divine plan unfolding itself in history. If the modernists rejected Revelation, they needed something else as a philosophical foundation. «need» (or «compulsion», *bisogno*) and «feeling» (*sentimento*) were the two new axioms of all supernaturalists. From here it was a short way to *Pascendi*'s description of modernism as a form of blind faith or *fideism*. In the assumption that God was unknowable, the modernists deified their religious «feelings», believed that this realm of the so-called *subconsciousness* united them with God and deluded themselves into holding that this was true faith. The label which *Pascendi* attached to all this was *immanentism*.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> in: *La Critica*, 2 (1904) fasc. 6 (20 Nov.) pp. 471-482, esp. p. 482. Repr. as *Religione e Prammatismo nel James*, in: *Il Modernismo e i Rapporti fra Religione e Filosofia* (1962) pp. 171-190.

<sup>42</sup> in: *La Critica*, 4 (1906) nr. 5 (20 Sept.) pp. 431-445. Esp. p. 442 for the quotation. Repr. as *La filosofia dell'azione del Laberthonnière* in *Il modernismo e i rapporti fra religione e filosofia* (1962) pp. 15-40.

<sup>43</sup> I consulted the Italian text in the appendix to Ernesto BUONAIUTI's pamphlet *Il Programma dei*

*Pascendi* brought the many different strands of the modernist movement together and, out of these heterogeneous materials, it constructed its own image of the modernist adversary. In the Spring of 1908, Gentile responded with a long article in *La Critica*, in which he fully endorsed the Papal encyclical and praised it for its «accurate» picture of modernism.<sup>44</sup> Gentile declared Catholicism the “most perfect religion”, just as European philosophy was humankind’s “most perfect” philosophy. In the Catholic Church Gentile found a precious ally against the modernists. One could say, that over the past few years he had prepared the terrain for the papal condemnation. His virulent articles against the latest modernist works which he published at regular intervals in *La Critica* had helped the Catholics identify the archetypical modernist. According to Croce, Gentile’s articles provided *Pascendi* with the logical arguments which they needed to condemn modernism.<sup>45</sup> One of Croce’s pupils, Giuseppe PREZZOLINI even argued that, at some points, *Pascendi* simply repeated Gentile.<sup>46</sup> The modernist Salvatore MINOCCHI, who was at the University of Pisa, like Gentile, recalled in his *Memoirs* Gentile boasting to be its “first and true” author.<sup>47</sup>

*Pascendi* administered the modernist movement the fatal blow. In fact, the disintegration of modernism had already set in. In February 1906, the Jesuit Society expelled the English Jesuit George TYRRELL on account of his modernism. Tyrrell was the author of an anonymous letter of spiritual counsel to a friend about to lose his Catholic faith, in which he called faith a “force” present in all one’s acts and Trinity, Creation, Fall, Incarnation, Atonement, Heaven and Hell “pieces of one mosaic” and “determinations of one and the same presentness of the Eternal Goodness”.<sup>48</sup> On 1 January 1906, the Milanese *Corriere della Sera* published extracts in Italian, which led to Tyrrell’s expulsion and the revocation of his ideas in a new book (*Nova et Vetera*).

The numerous journals for the «scientific» study of religion which were modernism’s preferred channel of communication in Italy did not fare any better. End 1907, *Studi Religiosi*, founded by the priest and Bible scholar Salvatore MINOCCHI in the wake of the Congress of Catholic Scholars in Fribourg and the Congress for the History of Religions in Paris (the latter in 1900), announced it would cease publication.<sup>49</sup> *Pascendi* made it impossible to continue in the same spirit.<sup>50</sup> In 1908, Minocchi was suspended *a divinis* after a lecture in which he demonstrated the purely symbolical nature of the story of the Fall. On 22 October of the same year, Minocchi left the priesthood. In December 1908, the last issue of Ernesto BUONAIUTI’s fortnightly *Nova et Vetera* came out. *Nova et Vetera* had opened less than a year before on an emphatic profession of its belief in the human psyche as the only valid access to the religious fact. Articles included *Buddhist Pragmatism* or translations of TYRRELL’S *The Spiritual Primacy of Rome* and the preface to Nathan SÖDERBLOM’S *The Religions of the World*. Its success among priests compromised *Nova et Vetera* in the eyes of the Church, which forced

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*Modernisti. Risposta al Enciclica di Pio X Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, Roma: Società Internazionale Scientifico-Religiosa Editrice, Nov. 1907/ 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.: Torino: Bocca, 1911., pp. 173-232.

<sup>44</sup> *Il Modernismo e l’Enciclica*, in: *La Critica*, 6 (1908) fasc. 3 (20 May) pp. 208-229. Repr. in: *Il Modernismo e i Rapporti fra Religione e Filosofia* (1962) pp. 41-75, esp. p. 50.

<sup>45</sup> *Una Prefazione di B. Croce sulla Traduzione Inglese della «Riforma della Educazione»* in: *Il Giornale d’Italia*, 22 (1922) nr. 165 (13 July) p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Giuseppe PREZZOLINI, *La Cultura Italiana*, Milano: Corbaccio, 1930, p. 121.

<sup>47</sup> Salvatore MINOCCHI (ed. Attilio AGNOLETTO/ introduzione Michel RANCHETTI), *Memorie di un Modernista* (Saggi Vallecchi, 13), Firenze: Vallecchi, 1974, p. 214.

<sup>48</sup> *A Much-abused Letter*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906, esp. pp. 68-71/p. 78.

<sup>49</sup> vol. 7 (1907) p. 715.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *Il Rinascimento*, 1 (1907) vol. 2, pp. 618-621 (*La fine degli «Studi Religiosi»*).

the editors to put an end to their fortnightly.<sup>51</sup>

Exile, forced or «voluntary», contributed to the process of disintegration of modernism. In 1911, Father GENOCCHI, accused of modernism, left Italy to become a missionary in Putamayo; in 1912, father SEMERIA was sent to Brussels to work among Italian immigrant workers.

In literature, the influence of modernism remained limited to Antonio FOGAZZARO's (1842-1911) famous novel *The Saint* (1905). *The Saint* was the first novel in Italy which articulated authentically religious feelings and also the last one. On 4 April 1906 the novel was put on the *Index*. Fogazzaro immediately complied with the Church's decision.

The social dimension of modernism was represented by Romolo MURRI (1870-1944). The engaged modernists believed social work and politics to possess an intrinsically sacred dimension. This belief that the Christian message could embody itself in society, combined with the belief in a Transcendent God, Gentile pointed out, made the social modernists once again strand in unsurmountable contradictions.<sup>52</sup> What remained of these social concerns after the condemnation of modernism was subtly appropriated by the Catholic Church and turned into the Christian-Democratic Party, the *Partito Popolare*.<sup>53</sup>

The elimination of modernism strengtened the position of the idealists in the educational system. Gentile's «pact» with the Catholic enemies of modernism seemed part of a long-term strategy since it already anticipated on a future concordate with the Vatican. The concordate, signed more than a quarter of century after the birth of idealism (in 1929), normalized the relationships between the Church and the Italian State, lay down the privileges of the ecclesiastical authorities in education and, above all, settled the position of the Catholics in the Italian state schools and universities. Until then the academic landscape remained virgin territory, open to anyone wishing to lay claim to it. Gentile understood that he too would have to entrench himself and his ideas in the academic and intellectual world. Once a concordate was signed, it would be too late. Such a concordate would consolidate the *status quo* of the moment and would make it impossible for the idealists to conquer more territory in the university and schools. Giovanni PAPINI, who belonged to the modernist camp, made the interesting observation that the religious philosophy of the idealists was a means to provoke as little irritation as possible from the ecclesiastical and secular authorities, with the hidden purpose to eventually replace Catholicism as the official State Religion.<sup>54</sup>

One of the more efficacious ways to ostracize the modernists was by identifying them with the «Protestants». Croce argued that the religious crisis through which the modernists were going was a crisis which humankind had already gone through and successfully overcome. This crisis began with Luther's discovery of the innermost world of man's religious feelings and, in Croce's view, it had come to an end with Idealist philosophy.<sup>55</sup> Croce took over F.J. SCHMIDT's theory that German Idealist philosophy, rather than the antiquated Protestant Church, was the inheritor of Luther's original Protestant inspiration. SCHMIDT saw a substantial line of continuity between Goethe's *Griechentum* and

<sup>51</sup> *Nova et Vetera*, 1 (1908) nr. 19 (Oct.-Dec.) pp. 232-237, esp. p. 233

<sup>52</sup> Maria Luisa BARBERA VERACINI, *Gentile e Croce di Fronte al Modernismo*, in: *Giornale Critico della Filosofia Italiana*, 48 (1969) fasc. 4 (Oct.-Dec.) pp. 528-547, esp. p. 535.

<sup>53</sup> Giuseppe PREZZOLINI, *La Cultura Italiana*, Milano: Corbaccio, 1930, pp. 139-140.

<sup>54</sup> Giovanni PAPINI, *La Religione sta da sè*, in: *Il Rinnovo*, 2 (1908) fasc. 4, pp. 45-74, esp. p. 70.

<sup>55</sup> Benedetto CROCE, *Inchiesta sulla Questione Religiosa in Italia*, in: *Rivista di Roma*, 11 (1907) fasc. 10 (25 May) p. 291 (= repr. in: *Nuove Pagine Sparse* (1960) pp. 383-387).

what he called the “immanent conception of life, inaugurated by Luther”.<sup>56</sup> In Italy the «end» meant something completely different. For Germans religious culture and philosophical culture were in a natural way intertwined, which was not the case in Latin cultures. In Italy idealism, hence, meant the absolute substitution of one for another.

It was clear that the intellectual potential of modernism was exhausted. Symptomatic of the identity crisis of many modernists – and of the recuperation of modernism by the idealists – was the radical shift in the intellectual orientations of Salvatore MINOCCHI. In the weeks after the promulgation of *Pascendi* Minocchi took up the public defence of the modernist cause against Croce’s depicting the modernists as *retardari*.<sup>57</sup> Later, he argued that Christianity was philosophically «deficient» because of its belief in a personal God. Christianity had shattered the age-old harmony between the «Spirit» and «Nature». Blending fascination with Buddhism with Gentilian “actual idealism”, Minocchi described the Absolute as something concealed, which could be penetrated only by “the dynamics of the present (*attuale*) life”, which he defined as the “expression and manifestation of the Absolute in the Immanent”. Religion was the “vital act of man, in his ascent (*divenire ascensionale*) from matter to Spirit”.<sup>58</sup> Finally, by 1923, Minocchi had turned to Hegel and the eighteenth century father of Italian idealism, Giambattista VICO.<sup>59</sup> Minocchi equated “science of religion” with “history of religion”, which he then reduced to “history of philosophy”. These were purely Crocian ideas, which deserved an honourable mention in *La Critica*.<sup>60</sup> Minocchi carried out what the idealist PREZZOLINI wanted to happen to modernism after its condemnation: its most valuable elements had to be absorbed by idealism.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Benedetto CROCE, *Per la Rinascita dell’Idealismo*, in: *La Cultura*, 27 (1908) nr. 1 (1 Jan.) pp. 4-7, esp. p. 7 (= Rev. of Ferdinand Jakob SCHMIDT, *Zur Wiedergeburt des Idealismus. Philosophische Studien*, Leipzig: Dürr’sche Buchhandlung, 1908).

<sup>57</sup> Salvatore MINOCCHI, *La Verità sul Modernismo*, in: *Il Giornale d’Italia*, 7 (1907) nr. 283 (11 Oct) pp. 1-2. Benedetto CROCE, *Insegnamenti di uno non Cattolico. Benedetto Croce a Salvatore Minocchi*, in: *Il Giornale d’Italia*, 7 (1907) nr. 285 (13 Oct) p. 3. (= Repr. in: *Nuove Pagine Sparse* (1960) pp. 383-387).

<sup>58</sup> Salvatore MINOCCHI, *Religione e Filosofia*, in: *Rivista di Filosofia*, 2 (1910) fasc. 4 (Aug.-Oct.) pp. 450-459, esp. p. 455 ff.

<sup>59</sup> Salvatore MINOCCHI, *La Religione come Scienza Storica* (extract from *Progresso Religioso*), Firenze, 1923.

<sup>60</sup> Benedetto CROCE, Review of Salvatore MINOCCHI, *La Religione come Scienza Storica*, in: *La Critica*, 22 (1924) pp. 312-313.

<sup>61</sup> B. Croce e il Modernismo, in: *Nova et Vetera*, 1 (1908) pp. 382-391 (= between G. PREZZOLINI en P. VINCI [i.e. Ernesto BUONAIUTI, P.V.]), esp. p. 387. (Continued from *Cristianesimo o Idealismo?*, *ibidem*, nr. 11-12 (10-25 June) pp. 349-357.)

## I. ADOLFO OMODEO (1889-1946)

Gentile's form of idealism fascinated young intellectuals because it resonated so well with the sense, typical of young people, of being one body with shared ideals. Writing to his girl-friend on the meaning of «friendship», one of Gentile's young admirers showed how strongly the idealism of the philosopher attached itself to this "spontaneous", juvenile idealism: "... the relationship between two friends is a mystery in the same way as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit [in the individual] is for the believer. It is our universal self-affirmation, the realization that we are present in all others, that what pulsates in my spirit is the same as what pulsates in you and in every other human being."<sup>62</sup> The author of these lines was the then twenty-two year old Adolfo Omodeo.

Adolfo OMODEO belonged to the early circle around Giovanni Gentile in Palermo. In 1909 he had left the Scuola Normale in Pisa, dissatisfied with its sterile academism, for the University of Palermo, where he enrolled at the Faculty of Letters in the autumn of the same year.<sup>63</sup> In Pisa Omodeo had been an avid reader of PREZZOLINI's newly established non-conformist review *La Voce*. Attempts to channel the new cultural trends which *La Voce* had aroused into a new movement had had little effect. Omodeo's transfer to Palermo changed little to his negative perception of the academic establishment. Omodeo would have simply undergone his university training in Palermo, had it not been for the his master Giovanni GENTILE, through whom he got involved in the legendary Philosophical Library. The Philosophical Library had begun in 1890 as a literary circle organized at the residence of Giuseppe Amato POJERO.<sup>64</sup> POJERO's circle subsisted until 1910, when the *Associazione* was founded that would finally put the library on the Italian intellectual map. The heart of the newly founded association remained the eight-thousand books of POJERO's library. A graded system of membership was introduced, lectures were held, and every year an annual was published. GENTILE wanted the Philosophical Library to liberate philosophy from the ivory tower in which it was held captured at the universities. Libraries such as the Philosophical Library, GENTILE inaugurated the series of lectures beginning on 26 November 1911, were places where the living worked together with the dead, who were living on in their books. Gentile was convinced of the religious nature of his endeavour. In the Philosophical Library GENTILE saw "the spirit of the individual [uniting] itself with the god of all religions". This god had been absorbed with all its attributes into the Spirit of the idealists; church worship had been replaced by the Library members' participating in one truth. At places such as the Philosophical Library one worshipped

"... that god which never ages, the eternal human spirit, [these libraries] have no set dogmas nor privileged priests. Rather, these are churches where human beings make, or want to make, themselves of one single spirit, out of a shared, sincere love of truth, and where they want to draw from the universality of the spirit; from the concordance

<sup>62</sup> Adolfo Omodeo to Eva Zona (dated, Catania 12 April 1911). Repr. in Adolfo OMODEO, *Lettere 1910-1946*, Torino : Giulio Einaudi, 1963, p. 10.

<sup>63</sup> On the early period of Omodeo's intellectual career: Roberto PERTICI, *Preistoria di Adolfo Omodeo*, in: *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* (Classe di Lettere e Filosofia), Seria iii, vol. 22, nr. 2, 1992, pp. 513-615.

<sup>64</sup> Francesco BRANCATO, "La Biblioteca Filosofica di Palermo nella storia della cultura italiana", in: *Storiografia e politica nella Sicilia dell'Ottocento*, Palermo: S.F. Flaccovio, 1973, pp. 233-266 (= "appendice").

(*simpatia*) of minds; from a faith, which is no longer the obscure and intolerant opinion of the individual, but the serene, open conviction of many, the vigour, the triumphant energy which levels mountains and opens up the road of life.”<sup>65</sup>

Omodeo owed his calling as a historian to Gentile; his subject-matter, religion, to his professor of ancient history, Gaetano Maria COLUMBA (1861- 1947), who showed him the way to the Greco-Roman world of which Christianity was a product. Although the Philosophical Library counted him among its active members, COLUMBA seems to have absorbed nothing of GENTILE’S idealism. Both did agree on point, however: namely, in their aversion to modernism. COLUMBA rejected LOISY’S attempt to reconcile faith and history. Catholic exegesis was, by definition, based on deduction; historical criticism, to be genuinely autonomous, proceeded inductively. Modernists seemed unable to understand that one necessarily excluded the other.<sup>66</sup> While some members of the Library, such as Paolo CELESIA, felt outright aversion to modernism (“a philosophical hodgepodge and dilettantism carried into religion”),<sup>67</sup> OMODEO’S view was more poised. Like his two masters, GENTILE and COLUMBA, he denounced the inconsistencies in the modernist position. November 1911, he embarked on SEMERIA’S *Twenty-five Years of Beginning Christianity’s History* (1900), but felt disappointed as he realized that the book was actually an *apologia pro domo* for modernism in the guise of a history book. Omodeo rejected Semeria’s naive vision of the reconciliation of faith and science. Christian faith was submission to the Cross (Saint Paul’s famous *foolishness of the Cross*), not the conquering force which the modernists wanted it to be.<sup>68</sup> Omodeo was critical of modernism, but too young to be affected by the controversy preceding its condemnation. Omodeo had no scores to settle with the modernists. From his earliest years as a student, he found in Loisy a distant mentor.<sup>69</sup> Omodeo particularly appreciated in the French modernist his, what he later called, “historical realism” in the sense that he had made Christianity a true component of civilization. This set him apart from his fellow-modernists VON HÜGEL or BUONAIUTI, who still believed that, through the study of history, it was possible to catch a glimpse of something transcending history. Omodeo described Loisy’s method of writing history as “empirical-positivist” yet not “naturalist”. Loisy made religion an exclusively human product and history a perfectly “immanent” process.<sup>70</sup> Closer at home, modernism embodied itself in the young priest, future lecturer in the History of Christianity and friend of Maurice BLONDEL, Onofrio TRIPPODO. In him OMODEO found a man with a remarkable “openness of mind to all currents of life” and an intimate friend.<sup>71</sup>

### 1. THE TRILOGY ON THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY

In 1913 OMODEO published his first book, *Jesus and the Origins of Christianity*. This book was the first to explicitly apply the canons of idealism to the history of religion, which

<sup>65</sup> *Annuario della Biblioteca Filosofica*, 1 (1912) pp. 7-12 (esp. p. 11). Repr. in *Opere complete*, 51-52 (1994) pp. 28-32.

<sup>66</sup> *Critica storica e fede cristiana*, in: *Annuario della Biblioteca Filosofica*, 1 (1912) pp. 145-184.

<sup>67</sup> Francesco BRANCATO (1973) p. 253.

<sup>68</sup> *Lettere, 1910-1946* (1963) p. 14 (= 16 Nov. 1911).

<sup>69</sup> Adolfo OMODEO, *Alfredo Loisy, storico delle religioni*, Bari: Laterza, 1936, preface.

<sup>70</sup> Rev. of LOISY’S *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire religieuse de notre temps*, in: *La Critica*, 31 (1933) pp. 285-296. Repr. in *Alfredo Loisy, storico delle religioni* (1936) pp. 11-31, esp. pp. 27-28.

<sup>71</sup> *Lettere, 1910-1946* (1963) p. 12 (= 27 Oct. 1911).

made it a classic in the field. OMODEO unconditionally endorsed idealism, but modernism remained an important component of this thinking. Where he referred explicitly to modernism in his book, he denounced its real or putative exponents, Baldassare LABANCA, Raffaele MARIANO, and CHIAPPELLI. OMODEO's term for these «modernists» – «twaddlers» (*vaniloqui*) – reflected the language of GENTILE. In this respect, the modernists were little more than the card-board characters which they had been reduced to by Gentile or Croce. But the modernists were also more implicitly present in the book. OMODEO's interest in modernism was positively motivated by the struggle French modernism had carried with the German view of history and religion. OMODEO denounced the Italians who imported the German methods into Italy, because these were made for a Protestant milieu, not for Italy.<sup>72</sup>

OMODEO's opponents in his Jesus book belonged to two great camps. The first camp was that of the *Historische Theologie*, with its icon VON HARNACK. VON HARNACK's ideas were known in Italy through an Italian translation of his *Essence of Christianity*, published in 1903, and had immediately been rejected by CROCE. For idealists who took history as seriously as did the Italian ones, there was something intrinsically contradictory in VON HARNACK's project. Against his own opponents, the theologians for whom Christianity was identical with the sum total of its dogmas, VON HARNACK claimed that one could arrive at its "essence" through following its history backwards. CROCE pointed out that this was a self-defeating enterprise, since Christianity was itself a "historical process".<sup>73</sup> VON HARNACK's view of present Christian religion as a product of degeneration was carried by a pessimism, which was fundamentally irreconcilable with any kind of idealism. Christianity's many incarnations in history were not a necessary evil. But, the strongest argument, thus OMODEO, was common sense. No one could deny that no religion would ever have conquered the world if its alleged inner potential was really all that mattered.<sup>74</sup>

In the second, and opposite camp were the German critics of *Historische Theologie*, in particular, the scholars who explained early Christianity entirely as a product of its historical context. This was the "radical" approach, which stretched back to REIMARUS in the late eighteenth century, and which connected the birth of Christianity with existing Jewish apocalypticism or Near Eastern mythology. OMODEO's objection to this approach was that it saw history as an endless series of causes and effects, and that it led to an *ad infinitum* regress into ever more remote causes.

Both approaches had one thing in common: they proved that the Protestants were still struggling with the ambivalent Christian view of history as something it affirmed and denied at the same time. This paradox persisted in the German approach under the form of some serious contradictions. While the Protestants based themselves on history to reconstruct the theology of Jesus and the Apostles, they were not interested in the genesis of the historical facts. And, while they acknowledged that there was a *Logos* working in history, they also believed that only God could know this *Logos*. The German approach claimed to base itself on historical investigation, but in fact, OMODEO complained, it «narrowed» and «suffocated»

<sup>72</sup> Letter to Gentile of 13 Feb. 1913 Repr. in GENTILE, *Opere Complete. Epistolaria*, IX, p. 48.

<sup>73</sup> Rev. of A. HARNACK, *L'essenza del Cristianesimo* (Torino: Bocca, 1903), in: *La Critica*, 1 (1903) fasc. 2 (20 March) pp. 149-151. Repr. as "L'Essenza del Cristianesimo" in *Conversazioni critiche. Serie prima* (1950) pp. 341-343.

<sup>74</sup> Adolfo OMODEO, *Adolf von Harnack e l'essenza del cristianesimo luterano*, in: *La Nuova Italia*, [9] (1930) 20 Nov., pp. 450 ff. Repr. in *Il senso della storia* (1955) pp. 265-278.

true historical investigation.<sup>75</sup>

OMODEO's strongest argument was that, in the Protestant approach, it was impossible to explain why Christianity had, as a matter of fact, become so much more than a simple footnote in history, being for its first protagonists, the only true religion. If one saw in these first protagonists just the effects of certain historical causes, one failed to see where early Christianity got the «energy» that eventually made it the religion which conquered the ancient world. Everything began with the «energy» within the first Christians. OMODEO was confident that one could reconstruct this «energy» and passion.

As Omodeo was working on his book, Croce's essay, *Histories, Chronicles, and False Histories* came out.<sup>76</sup> Croce's argument that "history" and "historiography" were identical fascinated Omodeo, and it encouraged him to think through some of its insights in an essay entitled *Res Gestae et Historia Rerum*.<sup>77</sup> Omodeo pushed Croce's idea of the «contemporaneity» to its extreme limits. A person's «history», he contended, was not the story of a period in that person's life, but merely his presence in the "actuality of the Spirit". All history of past persons was "posthumous history" and *testimonianzia* (p. 147). The true Jesus was not the Jesus of the Protestants, not the Jesus of the Catholics, not the Jesus of the rationalists, (...) but «our» Jesus. (pp. 156-157). Jesus existed only as an object of a concrete act of knowing, only to the extent some people made him an object of offence, others an object of adoration. Omodeo believed that there was no difference at all between the (re)construction of Jesus and the construction of a house or a bridge (p. 161). Where Croce distinguished "theoretical" from "practical" activities, and hesitated to simply fuse the past (*res gestae*) with our reconstruction of it (*historia rerum*), Omodeo saw no difference.

In his chapter on *The Eternal Christ* OMODEO's actualism reached its absolute climax. Omodeo showed how Jesus had brought God and the Spirit back to the here and now, reduced to their «immanence» (1<sup>st</sup> ed., p. 185), or to their «present action» (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 193). In Jesus, the human spirit for the first time became conscious of itself. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 186). The great Christian myths, such as the "Kingdom of God", were no more than the expressions of this self-consciousness of the human spirit. In the centuries that followed this self-consciousness would only increase, also outside Christianity. For OMODEO there was no difference whatsoever between the Christ which the Church worshipped, and the Spirit which the Italian idealists worshipped. Christ was the Spirit (1<sup>st</sup> ed., p. 185; dropped in 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Historical study of the figure of Jesus, triggered a process of endless substitution of the object for the subject; of Jesus' consciousness for the historian's own consciousness, and vice versa.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Letter of OMODEO to GENTILE (dated Catania March 1913), in: *Opere Complete. Epistolaria, IX*, pp. 56-60.

<sup>76</sup> Benedetto CROCE, *Storie, cronache e false storie*, in: *Atti dell'Accademia Pontaniana* (Napoli), vol. XLII, Ser. II, vol. XVII (1912)

<sup>77</sup> *Res gestae et historia rerum*, in: *Annuario della Biblioteca Filosofica*, 3 (1913) fasc. I-II (???) pp. 1-28. Repr. in: *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Napoli*, 18, n.s. 7 (1975-1976) pp. 147-166.

<sup>78</sup> In OMODEO's own words: "Lo spirito di Cristo: questo era il significato e il valore storico della persona di Gesù. Ma questo Spirito non può essere pietrificato fuori di se stesso in un libro, in una determinata massima, in questa determinata parabola o in quella pericope, da accettare di per sè come norma et contenuto della fede ma [1<sup>st</sup> ed., p. 182:] *si attua e si rivela solo in ogni coscienza vivente, in un divenire, in un autocreazione* [the wording in the 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. is less actualist, p. 191:] *ha un proteiforme sviluppo in ogni coscienza vivente.*"

OMODEO turned early Christianity into a perfectly immanent phenomenon. But he also made it clear that the idealist's job did not end with the elimination of the transcendent. While OMODEO wrote his book, fierce discussions were held in Italy on the place of religious instruction in the Italian schools. OMODEO's greatest fear was that his fellow idealists were intent on replacing the Catholic system of indoctrination by indoctrination with their own «truths». A plea for a rehabilitation of the immanent was not an invitation to idolize the immanent, as CROCE's loyal pupil PREZZOLINI seemed to believe. In the immanent the entire «drama of the Redemption» had to repeat itself. It was perfectly acceptable to teach children «blasphemy» (*bestemmia*) as a necessary moment in the self-affirmation of the Spirit, OMODEO believed, on the condition that the entire past «vibrated» in it: from the «madness of Job and Aeschylus' Prometheus, to the distress of the thousands of heretics, to the titanic endeavours of thousands of theologians,..." This was the only kind of blasphemy which pulled God down from heaven onto the earth. Only this blasphemy "[embodied both] the creative and destructive energy of the ancient God". Without «this inner renewal, without this inner experience of history, which has to be accomplished in education,» OMODEO warned his fellow idealist PREZZOLINI, «our immanentism, too, will become a dead catechism.»<sup>79</sup>

*Jesus and the Origins of Christianity* was the work of a passionate, twenty-four year old man. OMODEO later acknowledged that the book needed to be rewritten, but, except for some minor changes *Jesus* fundamentally remained the same in the second edition of the book, which came out in 1923. A few months after OMODEO graduated with the first version of it – and simultaneously with its preparation for publication – OMODEO conceived a book on the second most important protagonist in the early Christian Church, Paul. In 1921, Omodeo published a sequel to his *Jesus*, on the *Acts of the Apostles*, followed in 1922 by *Paul of Tarsus, Apostle of the Gentiles*. *Paul* was the apotheosis of Omodeo's inquiry into the beginnings of Christianity. In the course of the years, Omodeo had rounded off the sharp edges of his idealism. More importantly, he had actively participated in the first World War, which made him particularly open to Paul's belief in eternal life despite death or defeat.<sup>80</sup>

In *Paul* OMODEO rejected the commonplace view of early Christianity as the «healer» of a sick civilisation. In this view, ancient civilisation and early Christianity were believed to be absolute antagonists. It divided the ancient world into a profoundly morally and religiously corrupt aristocracy, and the new religion, which, assumedly, filled the moral and religious vacuum. OMODEO challenged this apologetical approach. He showed how the decline of political, economical, and scientific interests in the late Roman empire, went hand in hand with a religious evolution. Parallel with the old Roman religion's detaching itself from the old nation-related cults, new forms of religiosity came to the fore: magic, Eastern religions carrying universalist claims, neo-Platonism, neo-Pythagorism, cults of the *Sovrani* and the *Cesari*, and so on. The result was not a vacuum, but a rich religious substrate which made possible the birth of Christianity. Christianity did not «enter» humankind's civilization: it was our civilization, be it at a certain stage of its evolution. Historians who sought to explain the history of early Christianity by searching for the «influences» that had helped shape it all missed the point. Early Christianity was not a process of «aggregation», but an organism. This contrasted with the popular hypothesis of REITZENSTEIN and WENDLAND, who explained

<sup>79</sup> *Il problema dell'educazione religiosa*, in: *La Voce*, 6 (1914) nr. 14 (28 July) pp. 2-7. Repr. in *Libertà e storia* (1960) pp. 3-7/pp. 7-11 (= PREZZOLINI's reply).

<sup>80</sup> OMODEO dedicated his book to his former comrades-in-arms (p. 2, with a quotation from Paul).

Paul's entire thinking exclusively as a derivative from Hellenism.<sup>81</sup> Whereas both German scholars explained early Christianity in function of Hellenism, OMODEO reasoned the other way round. The historian of early Christianity had to show how Hellenism could be absorbed into Christianity (rather than the latter into the first).<sup>82</sup>

## 2. 1922-1923: THE APPOINTMENT TO THE CHAIR IN THE HISTORY OF CHURCH IN NAPLES

*Paul* closed OMODEO's trilogy on the origins of Christianity. No one seemed more convinced than OMODEO himself that something unique had been accomplished with his first non-confessional history of how Christianity had begun.<sup>83</sup> But for his ideas to have a real impact on the intellectual scene in Italy, OMODEO needed to become part of the Italian academic establishment. In 1922, the chair of History of the Church at the University of Naples finally became vacant. For OMODEO, this was the sign to start lobbying. Appointments at the Italian State universities were made in Rome. Both OMODEO's allies as well as his strongest enemies found each other here. OMODEO could use any help he could get. On 4 March 1922, OMODEO begged CROCE, then Senator, to take the necessary steps.<sup>84</sup> On 1 May, GENTILE offered to intervene directly with the Minister of Education, Antonini ANILE, proposing to appoint his pupil in Naples.<sup>85</sup> OMODEO realized that the decisions taken in Rome would be more than a formality. The news that a «sensitive» chair had become vacant aroused the attention of various people and groups who felt their own interests were at stake. The University of Bologna was quick to lay claim to the Napolitan chair in the History of Christianity.<sup>86</sup> This chair had been founded as a chair in the "History of Religion", Bologna pointed out, was then renamed for lack of a specialist in the history of religion, and now logically belonged to Bologna who had such a specialist in the person of Raffaele PETTAZZONI. But also the *Partito Popolare* (The "God-fearing", in OMODEO's own words) was a factor to be reckoned with and, on the other end of the ideological spectrum, the Freemasons. One more reason for concern was the fact that minister ANILE was a Catholic, the first one in this position in Italy since long. But, above all, there were the overt anti-idealists, with their spokesman BUONAIUTI being the greatest threat to OMODEO's ambitions.<sup>87</sup>

In the Autumn of 1922, GENTILE succeeded ANILE as Minister of Education. A few months later, in June 1923, news reached OMODEO that the King had signed the decree appointing him to the chair in Naples.<sup>88</sup> The semi-public character of the competition between the different candidates for the chair, in the months leading to the appointment of OMODEO, had once more laid bare the profound antagonisms between the Idealists, the Catholics, and the Modernists.

Minister ANILE's unconditional support for GENTILE's *protégé*,<sup>89</sup> including an

<sup>81</sup> For OMODEO's reservations on REITZENSTEIN en WENGLAND: see letter to Gentile, June 1920.

<sup>82</sup> Esp. chapter IX (= "La civiltà greco-romana e il cristianesimo", i.e. pp. 267-321)

<sup>83</sup> Letter of 14 Nov. 1921 to GENTILE (in: *Carteggio: Gentile-Omodeo* (1974) p. 229.).

<sup>84</sup> *Carteggio Croce-Omodeo* (1978) pp. 3-4. v

<sup>85</sup> GENTILE/ OMODEO, *Carteggio* (1975) p. 246-248.

<sup>86</sup> OMODEO to GENTILE, letter of 20 May 1922 (in: GENTILE/ OMODEO, *Carteggio* (1975) p. ???)

<sup>87</sup> GENTILE/ OMODEO, *Carteggio* (1975) p. 249.

<sup>88</sup> GENTILE to OMODEO, in: *Carteggio* (1975) p. 290 (letter of 15 June 1923)

<sup>89</sup> GENTILE to OMODEO, in: *Carteggio* (1975) p. 255 (letter of 26 May 1922).

(unsuccessful) attempt to by-pass the mandatory ratification procedure at the *Consiglio Superiore* of the Ministry,<sup>90</sup> had provoked a fierce reaction from “a priest” in the (Protestant!) Roman periodical *Coscienza*.<sup>91</sup> It was unheard of, *Coscienza* fulminated against ANILE, that a Minister known to be an “orthodox Catholic” had chosen for OMODEO, an «atheist» and author of a number of books in which the Christian religion was «surpassed» by, even «eliminated» by Idealist philosophy. This seemed all the more incomprehensible with Nicola TURCHI, the author of a recent manual of “Comparative Religion”, and FRACASSINI among the candidates for the same position. Both TURCHI and FRACASSINI were ex-priests with modernist leanings.

Among the members of the committee, it was BUONAIUTI who worried OMODEO most. BUONAIUTI had been provisionally (*a divinis*) suspended by the Church in 1921, but he still held his chair at the State University of Rome. In the Summer of 1922, OMODEO solicited GENTILE’s help in finding evidence proving that BUONAIUTI had not actually submitted himself to the Church after his suspension. This, OMODEO hoped, would show that BUONAIUTI was not “free in his judgment”, and undermine his position in the committee.<sup>92</sup> But there were attempts to compromise his opponents on the part of BUONAIUTI as well. When the procedure was in its final, crucial stage, BUONAIUTI published in the Roman daily *Il Mondo* a passionate refutation of Idealism. In it, he denounced the Idealists who advertized their philosophy as the “ultimate interpretation of Christianity”, and who claimed that Christianity was in fact no more than the preparative stage to their spiritual philosophy. For Catholics who believed that it was possible to reconcile Catholicism and Idealism, BUONAIUTI used the name which CROCE had used for modernists like himself, «Protestants». Luther explained God’s Almighty as the “inflowing t of the Divine Action” in all things. With their monistic view of the Spirit, the Idealists were taking up this same Lutheran intuition.<sup>93</sup> But BUONAIUTI’s attack was to no avail. On 1 December 1923, OMODEO gave his inaugural lecture on the “Human Value of the History of Christianity”. The historicist school of the study of religion in Italy had conquered its first full-fledged chair at an Italian university.

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<sup>90</sup> GENTILE to OMODEO, in: *Carteggio* (1975) (letter of 25 June 1922). See also Alberto PINCHERLE, *A proposito di un concorso*, in: *Il Mondo* (Roma), 2 (1923) nr. 140 (14 June) p. 3.

<sup>91</sup> *Coscienza*, 1 (1922) nr. 23 (24 June). Cf. Giovanni GENTILE, in: *Opere Complete*, 51-52 (1994) pp. 176 ff.

<sup>92</sup> [juni-juli 1922]

<sup>93</sup> Ernesto BUONAIUTI, *Confessioni. Perché sono anti-idealista*, in: *Il Mondo* (Roma), 2 (1923) nr. 132 (5 June) p. 3.