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Ozzano L., Giorgi A.

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# The Debate on the Crucifix in Public Spaces in Twenty-First Century Italy

Luca Ozzano e Alberta Giorgi

**Abstract:** Although the presence of the crucifix in public classrooms and other public offices is an ancient Italian tradition, it was never a political issue until recent times. In the early 2000s, some court cases and other events (first at the national and later also at the European level) turned the public display of the crucifix into a major issue in the national political debate. This article analyses the frames used by social and political actors in the different phases of this debate, in order to understand its evolution and its connection to the broader discussion on values in the public sphere developed in Italy in recent times.

## INTRODUCTION

The presence of the crucifix in public schools (not to mention private Catholic schools) is an ancient Italian tradition,<sup>1</sup> mentioned for the first time in a royal decree in 1860 and never formally abolished. Yet the subject was apparently never regarded as a legitimate issue in the public debate until the 2000s, when it suddenly became – at least in some political phases – one of the main bones of contention between some political and social actors. This contribution analyses the recent public discourse about the presence of the crucifix in public places (especially schools, but also tribunals, hospitals, polling stations, morgues, etc.) as developed in the last decade, in order to focus on the different frames and the various meanings of this symbol, as well as the factors and the processes making it a matter of public discussion. This case is particularly interesting – in the framework of the comparison between countries belonging to different cultural areas of the Mediterranean region carried out in this special issue – because, on the one hand, it shows that the separation between church and state (and religion and politics) is often partial even in supposedly secular or secularizing western European countries; and, on the other hand, that in those countries there are also active significant social and political forces trying to revitalize the public role of religion.

Moreover, the debate over the crucifix in public spaces addresses broader issues within Italian society, such as multiculturalism and religious pluralism (particularly in relation to the growing Muslim community), and the boundaries of Italian political secularism. Italy is characterized by the institutional separation of state and religion, yet at the same time Catholicism is well-rooted in Italian culture (Cipriani, 1986, 2003; Marzano, 2009; Nesti, 2006). Therefore, Italy can be defined as a secular state where the role of religion as a tradition maintains its importance (Garelli, 2006, 2011), and, in terms of religious pluralism, as a religious monopoly, even though internally diversified (Diotallevi, 2002). This situation has however recently been challenged by the growing importance of Islam, which poses difficult questions to the Italian state (whose relationships with religions are regulated by a Concordat – for Catholicism – and a series of agreements with representatives of religious institutions – for other religions), since there is no unified structure to interact with (Triandafyllidou, 1999).

Therefore, it can be affirmed that the debate over the visibility of the crucifix is at the crossroads of other questions: the special role of Catholicism in Italy, the definition of Italian political secularism (in a traditionally religious country) and the issues of pluralism, individual freedom and political secularism; as well as the issues of migration and multiculturalism, with migrants representing ‘the other’.

We analysed about 900 articles published in the most prominent Italian newspapers (independent publications, such as *Il Corriere della sera*, *La Stampa*, *La Repubblica*, and some politically aligned newspapers, *Liberio*, *Il Giornale*, *Il Secolo d'Italia* for the centre-right, and *L'Unità* and *Liberazione* for the centre-left) from the end of the 1990s to the end of 2011. We focus on the press as a public and despatialized sphere, which enlarges the public access but limits and selects the voices (see, for instance Grossi, 2004), thus building the discursive

opportunity structure of a public debate by selecting the legitimate actors, voices and frames (see Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson, 1992; Gamson & Meyer, 1996).

We selected articles that discuss the crucifix issue, and used a text-driven coding scheme in order to understand in each particular case the political and religious meanings attributed to the crucifix. Using this material, we then reconstructed the crucifix 'frames' in the Italian debate. In other words, the public issues involving the crucifix include what we call a 'meta-communication' regarding what kind of situation we are dealing with – whether a religious controversy or a political struggle, for instance (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974; Yanow & Van Hulst, 2009).<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we focus on (1) the meaning and frames related to the crucifix issue; (2) the relations between events and activation of frames – in terms of type of events, process of framing and counter-framing, differences in activation of frames, and the process of problematization of the crucifix issue in the public sphere (see Bacchi, 2012; Colebatch, 2006); and (3) the relationships between social actors and frames (Cefaï, 2007). The analysis of the crucifix debate in contemporary Italy allows specific insights on the role of religion(s) in a liberal democracy: whether or not the church is a legitimate actor in public debates, to what extent are religious arguments legitimate in the press arena, and what are the reciprocal attitudes and behaviours of church and state.

The next section presents a brief historical contextualization of the crucifix debate, followed by the results of empirical analysis, and a short discussion of the outcomes.

## **THE CRUCIFIX DEBATE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

In order to be properly understood, the debate about the crucifix must be framed in the peculiar history of the Italian state and its relations with the Catholic Church, which started with conflict. The new Italian kingdom enacted, in its early years, a series of laws revoking many church privileges and banning several religious orders (Verucci, 1999). The pope refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Italian state and considered himself a political prisoner while forbidding Catholics to participate in politics (Menozzi, 1997; Coppa, 1995). Despite the creation of a secular school system, the presence of the crucifix in classrooms was not regulated,<sup>3</sup> and the item was often included in the furniture of public schools' classrooms – at least after the laws Lanza (1857) and Casati (1859), which ordered the inclusion of religion in schools' curricula. It is also mentioned explicitly in the 1924 Royal Decree No. 965 (part of an agreement between the church and the new fascist regime, granting substantial concessions to the Vatican) that established the presence in every classroom of 'the image of the crucifix and the portrait of the King'. This article had been deemed necessary since more and more schools and their classrooms did not display crucifixes (Coppa, 1995). The crucifix was also made compulsory (for other public offices) by the *Ordinanza Ministeriale* No. 250 of 11 November 1923 and (for courtrooms) by the 1926 *Circolare* No. 1967 of the Ministry of Justice. The decrees and regulations were never repealed, since neither the *Concordato* of 1929 (*Patti Lateranensi*) nor the Law No. 641 of 1967 (dealing with the furniture of

classrooms) changed its dispositions. However, more recently authoritative jurists have put forward the opinion that such regulations had been implicitly repealed as a consequence of the new laws regarding the relation between church and state, especially after the revision of the Concordat (*Concordato*) in 1984 (Coppa, 1995). Although from time to time isolated cases of people asking to remove crucifixes from public offices arose, the situation did not change, and the opinions opposing the presence of the crucifix were apparently contradicted by the 1988 Advice No. 63 of the Council of State.<sup>4</sup>

Over time – despite the influence of the Christian Democracy (DC) party after World War II – Italian society became increasingly secularized, with a cumulative detachment of society from religious authority (Garelli et al., 2003; Ceccarini & Diamanti, 2007; Maraffi, 2007; Kalyva, 1996; Moos, 1945; Warner, 2000; Vree, 1975). The church also experienced a process of change, culminating in the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), while undergoing thorough internal pluralization (Favale, 1991; Tosi & Vitale, 2009). During this time, some tenets of the traditional society were put into question, yet the public display of the crucifix was never regarded as an issue.

In the 1990s, the political situation changed abruptly, with the break-up of Christian Democracy. The church no longer had a single political reference and was free to represent different positions (Magister, 2001). Catholic leaders started to urge politicians and worshippers to protect certain values that were presented not as *Catholic* but as *fundamental*, as shared even by non-religious people (Pace, 2003). In particular, the Italian Bishops' Conference developed the 'Progetto Culturale' ('Cultural Project') aiming to achieve Catholic hegemony in society (Ceccarini & Diamanti, 2007). Even then, the status quo regarding the crucifix did not change, although there were isolated voices demanding crucifixes to be withdrawn from public schools.

Things changed after 9/11, when the political debate reoriented towards the inclusion of ethical and 'civilizational' issues: a trend also promoted, as highlighted in the introduction to this special issue, by a worldwide process of deprivatization of religion (Haynes, 2011). New political entrepreneurs, both in the centre-right and the centre-left, thus started to exploit issues such as gay rights, abortion, euthanasia, and research on stem cells, to bolster their legitimacy and garner Catholic votes (Baccetti, 2007; Galli, 2004). As a consequence of this new situation, the framework for the politicization of the crucifix was finally set.<sup>5</sup>

## **ANALYSIS OF THE DEBATE**

This section will analyse Italian public debate about the crucifix issue from the early 2000s to the end of 2011. The discussion revolves around three different symbolic meanings of the crucifix: (1) a religious symbol, (2) a symbol of cultural heritage and national/western identity, and (3) a universal symbol of tolerance and freedom. On the basis of these meanings, different frames emerged about the crucifix display in public spaces.

- a. The crucifix as a symbol of religious pluralism: the issue is whether the crucifix display limits religious minorities' rights or enacts them and it more broadly connects with the wider multiculturalism discourse in Italy, Europe and the Mediterranean region.
- b. The crucifix as a symbol of religious tolerance: the ways and the places where it can be placed are related to the respect of religious rights (in terms of blasphemy, for instance). It differs from frame (a): while in that case the issue at stake is related to religious pluralism, frame (b) focuses on the respects of the rights of each and every religion.
- c. The crucifix debate as a matter of political secularism: it is related to Catholic Church–Italian state relations and, more broadly, to the relationships between the state and religions.
- d. The display of the crucifix as a matter related to the boundaries of government (Europe, State) interventions and, more broadly, to what can be considered as a matter of political or law regulations (an issue more broadly connected with the boundaries of the private/public spheres).
- e. The crucifix as a symbol of national and/or western identity, in opposition to the EU's political power or in an anti-immigrants perspective.

The following paragraphs will show how and when these frames were adopted by Italian political and social actors in the different phases of the debate about the crucifix.

### **Adel Smith and the First Wave of the Debate (2001–03)**

A significant debate about the issue of the crucifix started in late 2001, after the participation of a radical Muslim leader, Adel Smith,<sup>6</sup> in a leading political talk show (*Porta a Porta*): he stated that 'Christians adore a miniature corpse, hung on a piece of wood', a 'symbol of a suicide-deicide': therefore, it should not appear on the walls of public schools, since it could shock children. Such remarks, indeed, managed to shock most of the Italian Catholic population: a feeling well epitomized by the headline of the Catholic newspaper *L'Avvenire*: 'A Blow at the Foundations: The Crucifix Mocked' (Ga, 2001).

In the ensuing debate, Adel Smith had virtually no supporters, although the issue drew much more attention from the right wing of the political spectrum than from the left, whose newspapers and politicians mostly kept silent. Most voices said that they refused to accept

lessons from Smith, who, they claimed, had deliberately offended Christianity: thus, the issue was mostly framed in terms of respect for Catholicism. At first there seemed to be no anti-Muslim reaction, at least in the mainstream, while the Catholic Church itself deplored the media allowing a controversial person to speak to millions of people (Casadio, 2001).

This event turned the crucifix debate into a national issue: in the following weeks several other incidents were highlighted by the media: the elimination of the crucifix from the room where the Constitutional Court assembled (14 November 2001); statements against the presence of the cross in public offices made by the Union of Atheists, Agnostics and Rationalists (UAAR) (18 November); a motion approved in one of Rome's elected district assemblies asking all school deans to hang the crucifix in classrooms (24 December); some alleged cases of crucifixes burned during left-wing demonstrations in Genoa and Rome (28 December); and the issue of a Muslim nurse asking to remove crucifixes from the walls of a Milan hospital (28 December).

It was the Northern League that embraced the struggle more resolutely and radically, shifting the debate towards an identity and civilizational frame: the party issued, in May 2002, a proposal for a law (signed by MP Federico Bricolo) to make compulsory the presence of the crucifix not only in schools but in all public offices, as 'an essential part of the historical and cultural heritage of our country', since 'respecting minorities does not mean to give up, delegitimize or change the symbols and values that are an integral part of the history, culture and tradition of our country'. Pointing to the then ongoing debate about the inclusion of a reference to Christian roots in the draft of the European Constitution, Bricolo added that 'every people has its flag, but the crucifix is the symbol uniting all European countries, and not only them' (Zangrando, 2002). The Northern League's newspaper, *La Padania*, was even more outspoken, writing about 'an iconoclast frenzy, often promoted by Muslim immigrants, that found dedicated supporters among the followers of the multi-racial ideology', and remarking that 'Muslims will have to give up the attempt to eradicate roots deep in the history and values of the people hosting them, showing them a tolerance completely unknown in Muslim lands' (Ferrari, 2002).

After some months of silence, the controversies were revived in September 2002 by the minister of education, Letizia Moratti (close to Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*), a few days after an exhortation to defend the crucifix made by the pope (albeit without specific references to the Italian context). In Parliament, Moratti remarked that 'it is our duty to ensure that the crucifix is exposed in classrooms, as a mark of the deep Christian roots of our country and the whole of Europe', adding that she was planning to regulate the presence of the crucifix in schools (La Rocca, 2002a). Many representatives of the centre-right were not afraid to support the proposal, sometimes displaying anti-Islamic opinions: *Forza Italia's* Fabio Garagnani remarked that 'the crucifix will remind Muslim students that they are hosted in a country with a deeply-rooted culture'. However, although almost the whole of the political spectrum had been ready to defend the crucifix against Adel Smith's attacks, there was much more hesitation to support the imposition of the symbol. The political and cultural left, for example the Greens, framed the controversy in terms of state-church boundaries, denouncing the draft as 'an attack on state secularism, and the useless reopening of old conflicts', and



accused the proponents of the law of carrying out 'a crusade'; but many centre-left politicians, such as Anna Finocchiaro, also seemed wary of displaying strong pro-secular opinions, claiming not to be bothered by the sight of the crucifix (Capponi, 2002). Most statements were indeed not aimed against the crucifix as a symbol, but rather raised doubts about its imposition, and the motives behind it – not least, because the Northern League itself had displayed pagan and anti-Catholic attitudes until the 1990s (see Guolo, 2011; Bertezolo, 2011). Some Catholic politicians were also perplexed: not only 'liberal' ones, such as Romano Prodi and Alberto Monticone, but also some conservative leaders, such as Rocco Buttiglione and Carlo Giovanardi, who believed that the struggle in favour of the crucifix was right, but should not become a political/politicized issue. The campaign was also opposed by a few secular centre-right politicians, such as Giorgio La Malfa and Egidio Sterpa (La Rocca, 2002b). The church itself was not ready to support it: for example, Cardinal Ersilio Tonini pointed out that 'this issue should not be involved in the struggle between parties', and should be a matter of decision for families, not for the state (Arachi, 2002). This attitude was noticed and deplored by Bricolo himself, who wrote a letter to *L'Avvenire*, the Italian Bishops Conference's newspaper, demanding more attention for his campaign (Capponi, 2002; Sersale, 2002).

Thus, at least four different frames emerged. Some on the left (and also a few secular right-wing politicians) believed that the obligation to keep the crucifix in schools would be an attack against secularism. Most Catholics (but also some secular people) in both coalitions believed that the crucifix is part of the Italian culture – or, at least, a tradition to respect – but cannot be imposed by sheer force. On the centre-right the main frame regarded the crucifix as the symbol of Italian and European civilization (connecting the issue to the debate about the mention of Christian roots in the European constitution) that can rightfully be imposed by law. Finally, the Northern League and some other politicians in the wider centre-right saw it as a symbol to support in order to defend Italy and 'western civilization' from an alleged Muslim 'invasion'. This phase of the debate was without doubt the most intense of the decade, with dozens of newspaper articles and statements by virtually all major politicians. Indeed, the Ministry of Education enacted a directive and a note (n.2666 and n.2667, 3 October 2002) calling on the relevant schools' management to ensure that the crucifix was shown in the classrooms.

Ten months of quiescence followed, until September 2003 when the debate was again revived by Adel Smith, who demanded permission to display an Islamic religious symbol in his son's classroom, beside the crucifix. The official answer by minister Moratti was that no religious symbol other than the crucifix could be displayed in public schools. Bricolo, and other Northern League politicians, this time seemed to adopt more explicitly a dual approach (joining the civilizational and the church-state boundaries frames), deploring not only Muslim interference, but also a 'hyper-secular, anti-identitarian and relativist drift ... aiming at erasing from the culture of our youth every trace of our history' (*La Padania*, 2003). The debate became particularly strident in the following month, when a judge ordered the crucifix to be removed from the classroom of Smith's son. This caused rage in the centre-right, which promoted not one, but three law proposals (this time signed also by some centre-left

politicians) aiming at making compulsory the presence of the crucifix. The reactions were almost unanimously against the sentence: even in the centre-left, prominent politicians defined it as 'stretched' (Walter Veltroni), and 'without intelligence' (Pierluigi Castagnetti). Only the Radical Party and some parties of the left, such as Communist Refoundation, supported a sentence 'marked by tolerance' (Marco Pannella), deploring the general reaction as 'a fundamentalist and partly hysterical crusade' (Giovanni Russo Spina) (Amabile, 2003). However, even the president of the Republic, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi (a former member of the anti-fascist resistance, with a secular background), felt the urge to intervene on the opposite side, declaring that 'the crucifix in schools has always been regarded not only as the earmark of a specific religious creed, but also as a symbol of values that are at the foundation of our identity' (Dell'Orefice, 2003). The idea of the crucifix as a symbol rooted in Italian tradition seemed thus to be widely shared, not only by the centre-right, but also by many actors belonging to the secular left.

### **The Church Gets Actively Involved (2005–07)**

Events of 2005–07 mainly centred on two legal controversies, which however failed to attract as much attention as the events of the two previous waves. The first case involved a judge, Luigi Tosti, who demanded the crucifix be removed from his courtroom, then tried to add to it a Jewish menorah, then went on strike (and was consequently sentenced to seven months in prison). The other case involved Soile Lautsi, a young mother born in Finland and a UAAR member, who engaged in a long legal struggle in order to get the crucifix removed from the walls of her children's school in Abano Terme, near Padua (a traditionally Catholic region, in the heart of the Northern League's 'kingdom'). Her case became well known after a ruling by the Council of State, which in February 2006 upheld the presence of the crucifix in public schools, by declaring it the representation of significant civic values, 'founding and inspiring our constitutional order', 'a symbol that adequately expresses the religious origin of the values of tolerance, mutual respect, human development, rights achievement, respect for the autonomy of conscience towards authority, human solidarity, refusal of every discrimination that mark the Italian civilization'. This sentence paved the way for a new kind of framing for the crucifix issue, no longer focused mainly on its value as a symbol of Italian and western civilization, but also seeing it more explicitly as a religious symbol. A new attitude mirrored by the statements of some centre-right politicians, such as Maurizio Gasparri, while the centrist Rocco Buttiglione repeated the old mantra, according to which the crucifix is not only a religious symbol, but also a civic one. Some opponents of the sentence also framed it in religious terms, pointing to the discrimination it would engender for non-Christian students (Enrico Borselli) (Arachi, 2006; Re, 2006). The Right seemed to try to use this ruling to frame the crucifix as a symbol of moderation (in a frame involving religious tolerance), in opposition to the intolerance and the violence of its opponents, both 'religious fundamentalists' and secular hardliners. To put such remarks into context, we must mention that in July 2005 the Italian public debate had been monopolized by the discussion about the referenda on assisted

procreation and the use of stem cells for research. In the following years, the centre-left would espouse 'secular' issues, such as legalizing civil unions between homosexuals, while the centre-right would surge as the paladin of religious conservative causes.

This evolution in the public discourse was also evident in December 2006, when Pope Benedict XVI spoke explicitly of the presence of 'religion and its symbols' in the public sphere, in a world in which secularism 'has come to mean the exclusion of religious symbols from public places', claiming that religion, 'has to be recognized as a public presence of the community'. The pope's intervention was warmly welcomed not only by the centre-right, but also by the Catholic leader of the centre-left coalition, Romano Prodi (Accattoli, 2006).

In 2007, a few events were reported, mainly by the right-wing newspaper *Il Giornale*, owned by the brother of Silvio Berlusconi (then leader of the opposition), mostly framing the crucifix as the symbol of western and Christian tolerance, in opposition to an alleged secular and Muslim intolerance (see for example Ferrara, 2007).

### **The Debate about the Spanish Case (2008–09)**

In late 2008 the crucifix issue came to the fore again when newspapers reported that the new (socialist) Spanish government intended to remove the crucifix from schools. Openly critical reactions flourished, such as that of a Catholic right-wing opinion leader, Antonio Socci, who connected the Spanish proposal to the Nazi acts against the church (Socci, 2008). More broadly, the Italian right-wing press strongly criticized the Spanish court's decision, since 'attacking the crucifix means to assault our own historical memory, it risks re-activating rooted hatred' (*Il Foglio*, 2008). The decision was also connected to the issue of multiculturalism, with an idea of the crucifix as 'a valuable object, almost a talisman' against Islam (Maglie, 2008). The crucifix was, again, seen as a symbol of both identity and religion. Moreover, there was a stronger emphasis on its historical value: not only is the crucifix a symbol of identity and tradition, but it also includes the historical memory of the nation. In the words of Daniele Menozzi, a historian of Christianity, 'The crucifix issue is related to [the idea that] the Church has the task of providing the fundamental values underpinning civil society' (Bucci, 2008). The crucifix, thus, is a symbol of an old and well-rooted relationship between church and state – in other words, it is a symbol of a specific configuration of political secularism.

The case gained much attention in the mass media, especially because of the church's criticisms. *Osservatore Romano* (the Vatican's unofficial newspaper) stated that this court sentence turned political secularism into an anticlerical struggle, while the crucifix is a symbol that embodies the noblest values, adding that it was an example of 'laicism [fostering] a God-State, with absolute power over the souls' (*La Stampa*, 2008). *Avvenire* (the Italian Bishops Conference's newspaper) reported the words of a Spanish cardinal stating that the sentence was a form of 'christophobia [...] for the sake of a new project of society - that will kill the

mankind itself' (Coricelli, 2008). What emerges here is a counter-framing of the crucifix issue: far from being a clerical imposition, the classroom crucifix is perceived as a symbol of freedom. On the contrary, its removal is the action of an absolute power that does not admit other values than the secular ones.

Nevertheless, there were some differences within the church. *Avvenire* commented that the crucifix meaning depends on the context: while inside a church it is a religious symbol, outside it is culture, tradition, values (Coricelli, 2008; Dalla Torre, 2009): that is, the traditional interpretation of the previous years (see Boffo, 2008).

The Spanish case indeed reactivated the crucifix issue, and the media arena gave much room to the church's position. Apart from that, only a handful of other Italian cases were mentioned between November 2008 and July 2009, and the positions of social and political actors did not change. The church underlined the universal value of the crucifix, as a symbol of freedom and, at the same time, of religion, to be defended by both believers and secular citizens. The political right framed the symbolic value of the crucifix in terms of cultural identity, reframing the original Italian focus towards a broader 'western' identity. According to this perspective, the crucifix's presence in the public sphere can become a way of proudly affirming tolerance, freedom and western values against religious 'fundamentalism'. At the same time, there was a continuous swing between two frames: on the one hand, the crucifix as cultural identity and, on the other, the crucifix as religious symbol: for example, when it was used by artists it was its religious value that has to be defended against blasphemy and offence. Finally, the political left discussed the crucifix as a symbol of a specific configuration of political secularism, which (according to some) had to be changed.

### **The Lautsi Case in the European Courts (2009–11)**

In November 2009, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) made a unanimous decision on the case of Soile Lautsi. After the Italian courts had decided against her request, she had brought the case to Strasbourg – and the ECHR decided for the removal of the crucifix, stating that, as the crucifix is a religious symbol, its presence in public schools is not compatible with pluralism, and could be discriminatory. This decision added a new frame to the discussion, related to the boundaries between national and European government (with the EU seen as hegemonized by a secular point of view and willing to erase the identities of the nation-states) and triggered both a wide and strident debate and several initiatives. The centre-right government immediately announced that it was going to file an appeal to the court, and a month later the Popolo della Libertà (PDL or People of Freedom) presented to the Italian Parliament a law proposal to make compulsory the display of the crucifix in public spaces. The Northern League also gathered signatures for a referendum and proposed to add a cross to the Italian flag. Right-wing militants offered crucifixes to the European court's judges (while then prime minister Berlusconi gave some female European Parliament deputies a cross-shaped pendant). Several mayors bought and hung crucifixes, offered them to citizens, and

imposed sanctions against their removal from public spaces, while both organized and spontaneous groups of citizens promoted public actions in favour of displaying the crucifix.

The Italian minister of education, Mariastella Gelmini, declared that the crucifix in classrooms is a symbol of pluralism, and that 'the crucifix's removal means to remove our culture, and, therefore, ourselves'; the same position was expressed by Pierferdinando Casini, the leader of the (explicitly Catholic) Union of the Centre (Mannucci, 2009). Gianfranco Fini, the leader of the right-wing section of the PDL, stated that the court's ruling 'denies political secularism and the role of Christianity in Italian society' (De Ponti, 2009). Renato Schifani (PDL), maintained that 'it is a removal of values from Europe, and this is a mistake. However, it is not a court decision that can erase our identity' (Mannucci, 2009). Berlusconi himself, referring to Benedetto Croce's well-known statement, said that 'we cannot but call ourselves Christians' (La Rocca, 2009).

As usual, the Northern League stood out as the most vocal defender of the crucifix, with its usual civilizational stance, taking a hard position against 'the victory of absolute relativism', and 'Europe giving up its own defence' (Iezzi, 2009). The issue was obviously connected to the immigration issue, and *La Padania* pointed out that the 'Islamic communities in Padania<sup>7</sup> territories try to impose in our schools unacceptable behaviours, such as the crucifix's removal' (Girardin, 2009). There was even concern over the very possibility for non-believers to make decisions over religion (Morigi, 2009).

Some right-wing publications asserted the necessity to defend the public presence of the crucifix for its religious value: *Il Tempo* compared contemporary Catholics to historical martyrs (Rondoni, 2009); *Il Foglio* stated that 'framing the crucifix in a national identity perspective is quite risky' (Silva, 2009); and a few commentators even defined the European Court's vote as a vote 'for Barabbas' (Conte, 2009).

Many centre-left politicians disapproved, too. The PD's leader, Pierluigi Bersani, underlined that the crucifix is a harmless symbol of a well-rooted tradition (De Carolis, 2009), and Sergio Chiamparino, Turin's mayor, framed the crucifix as a symbol of identity and tradition. The newspaper *Il Riformista*, close to the PD, criticized the sentence as being an assault against national identity and an illicit interference in Italian domestic affairs (Ippolito, 2009). A few voices from leftist parties were favourable to the ruling: the leader of Communist Refoundation, Paolo Ferrero (who is Waldensian<sup>8</sup>), maintained it was a decision that upheld political secularism (Masci, 2009); while others tried to shift the focus to 'more important issues, such as unemployment' (Ravera, 2009) 'real Church power: private schools, public funding' (Mancuso, 2009). More broadly, leftist commentators were very focused on denouncing the politicization of the crucifix for electoral reasons 'like a cheque-book for buying power' (as suggested by the performer Moni Ovadia [2009]) and as a 'national flag' (Gentiloni, 2009). The defence of the crucifix was compared to several anti-immigrant actions and events, pointing out the political manipulation of religion, in a frame of tolerance towards 'the other'.

On its side, the church's reaction maintained its criticism towards the decision, remembering the historical role of Christianity, its being part of the Italian identity, and the symbolic meaning of the crucifix, related to tolerance, freedom, equality and human dignity. It affirmed that trying to separate the Italian identity from its roots was a mistake and that there was a huge risk in erasing values from the public sphere, turning Europe into an empty space governed by the market (Squillaci, 2009; Masci, 2009). Reacting to the accusation of diminishing the crucifix's value by framing it as an identity symbol, Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco (chairman of the Conference of the Italian bishops) affirmed that it is exactly its religious character that makes the crucifix so essential as an identity signifier (Mazza, 2009). The religious movement Communion and Liberation also framed the crucifix removal as a challenge against faith, calling for believers to react. In the following months, a few Catholic voices took a different position on the public presence of the crucifix, by affirming that it could also be seen as a symbol of power, while the church has the duty to stand up for the powerless (see for instance Gentiloni, 2010).

The appeal submitted by the Italian government was admitted by the European court in March 2010, took place in July, and a final decision was reached by the court in March 2011 (Annicchino, 2010). Church, mass media and Italian politics awaited the court's final decision with growing concern. *Avvenire* described it as a 'turning point decision. Europe has to decide whether it will guarantee the culture of all or none' (Salvi, 2010). However, the very admission of the appeal was welcomed by some Catholics as 'an Italian victory over secularism' (Fornari, 2010). In June 2010, several newspapers published and discussed the content of the appeal, highlighting as crucial elements the relationship between the European Union and European states and the meaning of the crucifix.

Since it was a European decision, attention shifted from national to international politics, focusing on which states and religious communities agreed with the Italian appeal: while European Jewish communities, the Orthodox Churches and most Eastern states stood with Italy, the Waldensians stated their opposition, and some traditionally Catholic states, like Portugal and Spain, remained mute (Silvestre, 2010).

A final decision over the Italian appeal was delivered on 18 March 2011, stating that the crucifix is not a discriminatory symbol. The political and religious reactions were different and, surprisingly, the debate drew little attention in the public arena. Some PDL politicians declared it 'a great victory for the defence of an essential symbol of the history and the cultural identity of our country' (Santambrogio, 2011), a 'victory over a secularist [*laicista*] Europe' (Offeddu, 2011), but also a reaffirmation of Europe's 'own values and identity' (Cavallieri, 2011), while the future leader of the party (then minister of justice) Angelino Alfano declared that the sentence had 'restored the dignity of our Christian roots' (Zatterin, 2011). The centrist Rocco Buttiglione remarked that the Christian symbols, such as the crucifix, in Europe are 'a-confessional', as part of a common culture (Fornari, 2011). Also on the left, both secular politicians such as Vannino Chiti and Christian ones such as Leoluca Orlando (who defined the crucifix as 'a synthesis of tolerance, respect and universal love') made positive remarks, as well as some voices within the 'progressive' Catholic world, such as the ACLI (Organization of the Christian Workers) leader Andrea Olivero. The Catholic Church,

through the organization of the Italian bishops, also triumphantly declared that 'order had been restored against nihilism' (Zatterin, 2011). Only the Waldensian and Jewish communities' leaders cast doubt on the recognition of the crucifix as a cultural symbol (Gillio, 2011; Zatterin, 2011), while a few left-wing intellectuals, such as Sergio Luzzatto<sup>9</sup> and Gian Enrico Rusconi, openly criticized the sentence. Interestingly, there were no recorded reactions from either the Northern League leaders or pro-secular forces such as the Radical party.

A few days before, the Corte di Cassazione had also reached the final decision about Judge Tosti's case, ruling against him, and this news was welcomed by the political right as well as by the church. The sentence stated that the crucifix was the only symbol admitted in courtrooms, and right-wing commentators argued that this was recognition of the importance of Christianity for the Italian national identity. The Right defined the sentence as a victory for the Christian identity of Italy and Europe, and the Northern League immediately proposed to hang the crucifix even in the Italian Parliament. On the other hand, the radical left commented that it was a disempowerment of the crucifix, transforming it into a lay symbol. The church welcomed the decision and while thanking the crucifix defenders it also criticized disrespectful uses of the symbol (Calabrò, 2011).

The analysis of the debate over the crucifix issue between 1998 and 2012 leads to some interesting results, the focus of the next section.

## **CONCLUSIONS: CRUCIFIX AND DEMOCRACY – A DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP**

In this concluding section we will discuss the outcomes of our research and comment on the analysis of the different meanings and frames that have been activated by the actors on the crucifix issue, the relations between actors and frames, and, more broadly, the relationship between religion and the state in contemporary Italy.

The crucifix debate has an uneven development, with media attention focusing on specific events that act as landmarks: in 2001 Adel Smith's participation to the TV programme *Porta a Porta*, followed by a Northern League campaign; in 2002 the pope's exhortation to defend the crucifix and the Ministry of Education's call for the crucifix to be displayed in classrooms; in 2003 Adel Smith's request to hang an Islamic symbol beside the crucifix in his son's classroom; in 2005 the court appeals of a judge (Tosti) and a mother (Lautsi) asking for the removal of the crucifix from a courtroom and a classroom; in 2008 the Spanish Socialist party's proposal to withdraw crucifixes from schools; in 2009 and 2011 the European Court of Human Rights' decisions on Lautsi's appeal.

Although the frames – already described in the previous section of the paper – remain substantially the same, the ways social and political actors use them change significantly.

First, until 2008, the crucifix issue comes to the fore in relation to individuals' initiatives, and the dynamics are quite fragmented, revolving around specific events. The main problem at stake is indeed the right way of framing the crucifix issue: therefore, there is no arguing about the specific public buildings that hang the crucifix – be they schools, courtrooms, or hospitals. The social actors' positions are quite steady – the Left mostly focusing on political secularism, the mainstream centre-right on tradition and identity, the Northern League on the alleged Islamic threat, and the Catholics on respect. In this phase, the church barely intervenes, and it starts to take a more active role in the discussion only with Benedict XVI's papacy, from 2005. After this date, Catholic civil society also increases its role in the discussion, mainly underlining the universal value of the crucifix as a symbol of tolerance and dignity. However, it is only in 2009 that the debate significantly changes, as a consequence of the courts' decisions, turning into a reactive discussion, while local events gain media coverage only as examples reframed in the broader debate about the meaning of the crucifix symbolism. In 2008, the Spanish case had already shifted attention towards the fate of the crucifix in other (Mediterranean) countries, and the debate had also started to be reframed in an international context. In this phase the debate can therefore be qualified as a reaction to policy/court decisions, while new – both national and international – actors intervene and the discussion enlarges its horizons, becoming more coherent and international. The domestic debate also becomes more polarized, in a context marked out more openly by the politicization of ethical and identity-related issues. However – although the positions range from the Northern League's stance, demanding the crucifix be displayed everywhere, to the one of the radical left, asking for the crucifix to be removed from public spaces – a large majority of social and political actors takes a hostile stance towards the possibility that the European Court will impose the removal of crucifixes (also framing the issue in terms of respect for national sovereignty). As a whole, the dynamic of political and public opinion seems therefore to be focusing on maintaining the status quo: while in the early phases of the debate most actors (even most Catholic actors) oppose the Northern League's attempts to impose the crucifix by law, in the second phase there is a wide consensus (including the political centre-left) in opposing its removal as a consequence of a court sentence.

More broadly, this debate shows the problems in managing the role of religious symbols in the public sphere in contemporary Italy. These problems are apparently increased by two factors connected to the recent developments in the Italian political system: on the one hand, we can see a Catholic Church increasingly aware of its public role as an advocacy interest group (which confirms the hypothesis of a trend towards a greater involvement of the churches in politics highlighted in the introduction to this special issue), in a political system no longer marked out by the presence of a 'big' Catholic party; on the other hand, it is evident that an increasing range of social and political actors are eager to exploit religious issues for their ends. This translates, in turn, into a multiplication not only of frames, but also of dynamics of interaction among frames as well as among actors. This situation is complicated by the fact that an issue such as that related to the presence of the crucifix in public spaces is at the crossroad of several debates, related to the boundaries between religion and state secularism, to the tensions engendered by the growing processes of secularization and



religious pluralization (as a consequence of the increasing presence of Islam), and also to the limits of the power of the European institutions, face to face with the nation-states.

Perhaps as a consequence of this complicated situation, however, most Italian actors – with the exception of some groups and parties: the Northern League and some of its allies in the mainstream right on the ‘Catholic’ side and the Radical Party and the parties connected to the communist left on the ‘secular’ one – seem to be willing not to shift the boundaries between religion and politics, but rather to maintain the status quo.

In sum, this case confirms on the one hand that the wall of separation between religion and politics in Christian-majority European countries is not necessarily so impenetrable and immovable. On the other hand, our research shows (at least on the issue of religious symbols in public spaces) a rather stable situation that most relevant political and social actors seem willing to maintain, despite the growing challenges.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a historical reconstruction of the Italian legislation about the crucifix and the specific regulations of its display in public spaces see Manco (2005).

<sup>2</sup> For a critical summary on the wide literature on frames see also Dewulf et al. (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Except for the Royal Decree n. 4336 (15.9.1860) addressing elementary schools. The RD was a law enacted by the Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont – the founding state of the kingdom of Italy, which was established in 1861.

<sup>4</sup> This document stated that the changes intervened in the discipline of religious teaching in public schools (that is, the secularization of the educational system and the transformation of religious teaching into an optional course) should have no impact on the presence of the crucifix (defined by the council as ‘the symbol of the Christian culture and civilization, in its historical roots, as a universal value, independently from a specific religious tradition’).

<sup>5</sup> And the crucifix also became a matter of scientific debate, especially in the Law field (see Bin et al., 2004; Cardia, 2010; Mancini, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Smith is an Italian citizen who converted to Islam, well known for his radical stances on many issues and his provocative statements. He is the leader of the Union of Italian Muslims (Unione dei Musulmani d'Italia), which he claims to be representative of the Muslim community in Italy, although its opponents contend that it numbers very few members.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Padania’ is the name traditionally used by the Northern League to refer to the northern Italy areas, that they would like to become independent or, at least, autonomous from the Italian state.

<sup>8</sup> Waldensians are a small but authoritative Protestant church, whose followers are traditionally settled in some areas of the Piedmont region.

<sup>9</sup> Luzzatto (2011) also wrote a book, *Il crocifisso di stato*, supporting the removal of the crucifix.

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