

## Sanctity and Modernity: Opposition or Agreement?

### An Introduction to *Profiling Saints*

The cult of saints and the development of the Modern world appear to have coexisted in quite a problematic way. Even if we leave to one side the Weberian concept of modernity as a process of ‘disenchantment of the world’ (*Wissenschaft als Beruf*, 1919), we cannot deny that many of the political and cultural phenomena that have shaped our reality have brought with them a deep aversion to the traditional Christian conception of the sacred, materialized in the form of sanctity, in the form of holy places and relics, for example.<sup>1</sup>

Just to mention a few historical examples, we can remember the iconoclastic moment that characterized the radical fringe of the supporters of the Spanish Republic in the 1930s, with several episodes of the public display of the bodies of saints and ordinary monks and nuns and the destruction of holy images, or mock processions like that of the image of Nuestra Señora de la Consolación near Madrid in 1936. A well-known victim of this was St. Francis Borja, the third general of the Society of Jesus, whose body was destroyed during the fire in the Jesuits’ residence in the Spanish capital, set alight by the supporters of the Republic in May 1931.

A few years earlier, a similar iconoclastic campaign had been organized in Russia and Belarus in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. This was not a consequence of popular rage against the Church or the anticlerical program of the anarchist movement and the trade unions, as it was in Spain, but was, rather, the political strategy of the soviet Ministry of Justice, then named the Peoples’ Commissariat to Justice, intended to unmask and eradicate all superstitious belief in the power of the relics of the saints, as part of a process to modernize the country.<sup>2</sup>

Between 1919 and 1921 the bodies of about 58 saints, all of them, with one exception, belonging to the Orthodox Church, were displayed in public ceremonies

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1 The concept of a ‘disenchantment of the world’ has been more recently developed by Marcel Gauchet in his controversial book *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999 [French original 1985]). As for the idea of secularization in general see, among others, H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Boston: Mit Press, 1985 [German original 1966]); J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); *Die Säkularisation im Prozess der Säkularisierung Europas*, ed. P. Blickle – R. Schlögl (Epfendorf: Bibliotheca Academica, 2005).

2 S. A. Smith, *Bones of Contention: Bolsheviks and the Struggle against Relics 1918–1930*, «Past and Present», 204 (2009), 155–94.

Fig. 1 A mock procession of the Holy Lady with the phrygian cap, in Michel Vovelle, *La Rivoluzione francese. Un racconto per immagini 1789–1799* (Roma: Editori riuniti, 1989 [French original 1986), vol. 4, 151.

and translated to local museums, in order to demonstrate the falsehoods the people had been exposed to for centuries: they were not only relics of monks and churchmen, but also of princes and aristocrats who had been venerated as saints – we must remember that Nicholas II, the last Tsar of Russia, has also figured among the Russian saints since 2000. Relics were examined by official commissions made up of representatives of the local soviets, members of the clergy, and coroners: the commission charged with investigating the relics of prince Mikhail Yaroslavich in the cathedral of Tver, in Central European Russia, consisted of 24 members, and performed its task before an audience of more than three hundred onlookers.<sup>3</sup> These rites of exposition had the overall aim of desacralizing the relics, but not desecrating them, as was later to happen in republican Spain.

If we take a further step backwards of about 130 years, to the French Revolution, we can find the archetype of the clash between modernity and the Christian sacred sphere (Fig. 1). In August 1793 the entire symbolic construct of the alliance between sanctity and power that had supported the monarchy of the *Ancien Régime* was merrily demolished with the destruction of the royal graves in Saint-Denis in Paris,

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3 Smith, *Bones of Contention*, 168.

including those of the dynasties of the Valois and the Bourbons, and the dispersion of the royal relics they preserved.<sup>4</sup>

Now, none of the historical events I have just summarized should of course be taken as evidence of a supposedly ‘natural’ opposition between sanctity and Modern political culture. Each of them must be interpreted and placed within its proper historical context. From this viewpoint, we can see that Modern political discourse has always created a holy dimension in its own terms, both as a reaction to contrary ideas and systems, and as a simple substitution of symbols and references.

To go back to the examples I have just mentioned, it is enough to recall that the experience of the secularized Spanish Republic came to a tragic end with the creation of the clerical fascist regime of Francisco Franco, which asserted an alliance between the State and the Catholic Church as a pillar of the re-established traditional order. This is well illustrated by the construction of the sanctuary of the ‘Valle de los caídos’, the ‘Valley of the Fallen’, the monumental graveyard of those who had died for the cause of nationalist Spain, embedded into a Benedictine abbey, and the consecration of the country to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the same Sacred Heart whose monument had been ‘executed’ in August 1936.

At a different level, the ‘war against relics’ in the Soviet Union ended with the proclamation of the program of the New Economic Policy in 1921, and was soon converted into the sacralization of the Soviet regime with the embalming of the corpse of its founder, Vladimir Ilic’ Lenin in 1923, and its public exhibition outside the Kremlin’s walls, where it is still visible today.<sup>5</sup> Going back further, the de-Christianization program launched by the French Convention led, as we know, to the proclamation of the cult of the Supreme Being, while in that same August 1793 the revolutionary officials tasked with supervising the demolition of the royal tombs in Saint-Denis gave care and attention to the corpses, noting those that appeared to be more or less intact, taking a death mask of Henry IV and sketching the mummy of general Turenne, a renowned hero of French wars under Louis XIV. Among these events, the desacralization of Christian symbols was accompanied by lay miracles intended to legitimize the new secular order established by the Revolution (Fig. 2).<sup>6</sup>

4 P. Boutry – Dominique Julia, *Reliques et Révolution française*, in *Religione cultura e politica nell’Europa dell’età moderna. Studi offerti a Mario Rosa dagli amici*, eds. C. Ossola – M. Verga – M.A. Visceglia (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2003), 337–52.

5 N. Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin-Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1983). The case of the cult of Lenin in the Soviet Union is one example among many of what historians call ‘political religion’: see, on this topic, D. Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society. Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2003), and several essays by E. Gentile, like his short synthesis *Political Religions in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, in *Die Säkularisation im Prozess der Säkularisierung Europas*, 551–62.

6 A general framing of this topic in N. Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France, 1780–1804* (London: MacMillan, 2000), 259–330.

Fig. 2 Truth appearing before a priest, convincing him to reject his clerical status, in Vovelle, *La Rivoluzione francese*, vol. 4, 156.

Finally, when we come to more recent phenomena, we must not forget that the massive irruption of the Christian faith in the public sphere during the late 1900s was decisively promoted by the large-scale canonization policy of John Paul II, who himself canonized 482 saints, more than half the number of all the saints that have been proclaimed since the founding of the Congregation of Rites (now the Congregation for the Causes of the saints) in 1588.

Now, if we move from a consideration of the political dimension of holiness in the Modern world to its cultural and philosophical premises, we cannot underestimate the meaning of the process of secularization in Modern Europe. This statement requires us to move to a deeper cultural level, stepping back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, to find the roots of a larger process that involved an overall criticism of the very concepts of sanctity and the supernatural.

Leaving aside the harsh critiques of the idea of the possibility of miracles by rationalist thinkers of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century such as Spinoza and Pierre Bayle, it will be enough to look at a couple of the most celebrated expressions of the mainstream Enlightenment thought of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. If we read the entry *Miracles* in Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), which enjoyed an enormous clandestine success all over Europe, we can see the very idea of miracles radically demolished both at a physical and a moral level: on one hand, writes Voltaire, "a miracle is the violation of laws which are deemed to be mathematical, divine, unchangeable, and eternal. According to this definition, a miracle is a contradiction in its own terms. A law cannot be unchangeable and violated at the same time"; on the other, "Why should God perform a miracle? To accomplish a design concerning some living being. [...] But this would be an admission of God's weakness, not of His power".<sup>7</sup> We can easily grasp why Voltaire's work was prohibited by the Paris Parliament and condemned in Rome as well as in Geneva.

A more moderate, but nevertheless still radical criticism of the cult of the saints, based on historical grounds, can be found in the pages of Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. Here sanctity is described as a cultural phenomenon not exclusive to Christianity, but common to the different religions of humanity, starting from the ancient pagan religions whose cults and feasts had been simply adopted and renamed by the Christians.<sup>8</sup>

From this viewpoint, it cannot be denied that biblical criticism and the widespread adoption of philological and historical methods by scholars held a key role in the 18th century in reshaping the Western attitude toward religion and the sacred. Despite this, it cannot be denied that saints continued to be proclaimed, and, with even greater frequency since the pontificate of Pius IX in the second half of the 19th century, their images continued to be offered prayers and precious objects, and miracles continued to be performed, even with the direct involvement of physicians and scientists in the beatification and canonization processes.

This simple fact should induce us to adopt a different meaning of 'modernity' when dealing with sanctity and, more broadly, with the historical development of Christianity in the Modern world. On the one hand, it cannot be disputed that the formation of modernity has been aided and shaped by phenomena like the Scientific revolution, the growth of capitalism and the rise of an economic and scientific rationality. Yet, on the other, if we take early Modern European history as a set of processes, such as the geographical discoveries, the rising of colonialism,

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7 *Dictionnaire philosophique*, in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 36 (Paris: Thomine et Fortin, 1821), 499–519, 499–500.

8 *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. R. Morrissey – G. Roe (University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project [Autumn 2022 Edition]), vol. 14, 522, <https://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu>. Accessed on 28 December, 2022.

the Reformation and so on, that marked a profound discontinuity with the reality that preceded it, and took place mainly in the period between the mid-15<sup>th</sup> and the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, then there can be no doubt that sanctity in the West, both in the way it was conceived and in the way it was practised, underwent a rapid and important change in the decades that followed the Council of Trent, becoming something very different from what it had been in the late Middle Ages.

Such a change was mostly, but not exclusively, prompted by two main elements, which exerted a deep influence on the Catholic Church: the need to respond to the spread of the Protestant rejection of the saints and the power of their relics and images on one hand, and, on the other, the strategy of pursuing a new cultural and moral hegemony over believers through the resources offered by the cult of the saints, and the performance of miraculous healings in the first place.

These two elements define what can be considered as Counter-Reformation sanctity, which according to its different aspects has been extensively investigated, by scholars like Simon Ditchfield, Jean-Michel Sallmann, Stefan Samerski, Angelo Turchini and Miguel Gotor among others. In my opinion, these elements converged into what can be viewed as a true ‘system of sanctity’: it was a system in the sense that it had an aim, to reaffirm the power of saints, their relics and the prayers addressed to them; an objects, holy men and women who had lived not only in the past, but also, and mostly, in the present-day Church, and who largely belonged to the institutional hierarchy; and a method, the tools used to assess the reality of their acts and their supernatural powers.

In the decades between 1588 (the foundation of the Congregation of Rites by Sixtus V) and the decrees of Urban VIII, issued between 1625 and 1634, sanctity underwent a strong process of centralization in the hands of the Roman curia, since the proclamation of saints became strictly linked to the office of the pope and to his infallibility, thus acquiring the profile of an outstanding theological and political matter. Moreover, a transition took place from the traditional pattern of legitimation of the holiness of a man or a woman, largely based on their fame, shared memory and legends, and the importance of his or her local cult, to a judicial model administered by the professional figures of skilled theologians and canonists like the *promotor fidei* and the *consultores*, the advisers of the congregation.<sup>9</sup>

Those events can also be seen as evidence of a tension between a surging demand for the supernatural springing from society, fostered and controlled by bishops, religious orders, local Churches and local powers on the one hand, and the rising bureaucratic attitude of the Apostolic See, always keen to underscore its supreme privilege of surveillance and judgment, on the other. We have a revealing example

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9 M. Gotor, *I beati del papa. Santità, Inquisizione e obbedienza in età moderna* (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2002).

of this in the overwhelming rise of the figure of Charles Borromeo (d. 1584), a bishop and symbol of the Counter-Reformation, whose celebrations held in 1602 and 1603 summoned tens of thousands of faithful to Milan, forcing Rome to rapidly canonize him, on the 1st of November of 1610, just twenty-six years after his death. On the other hand, we must remember the interventions of Clement VIII and the Spanish Inquisition to arrest any manifestation of devotion – such as altars, *ex voto*, unauthorized pictures and biographies – toward Ignatius of Loyola, effectively promoted as an ‘informal saint’ by the Society of Jesus since the 1570s.

Such a redefinition of sanctity heavily relied on the resources granted by the new holy figures that lived and acted in the years corresponding to and following the Council of Trent. These were the new characters who responded to a rising need for the supernatural - the blessed, the *beati*, those men and women whose acts, bodies and relics performed miracles and healings during their lives, or immediately after their deaths, but whose cult still needed to be verified and guided by the officers of the Roman curia.

These holy people were forceful instruments of the divine power conveyed on the Catholic Church. Paul V paved the way, beatifying twelve men and women between 1605 and 1619. Just two of them, Margherita da Città di Castello and Isidro Labrador, had lived in previous centuries (respectively, in the 14th and the 12th century); all the others had died between 1552 and 1595, meaning that many of them were more or less contemporaries of the pope himself (who was born in 1552, the same year as the death of Francis Xavier). Some of them, specifically Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Ávila, Francis Xavier, Filippo Neri and Isidro Labrador, to whom we must add Charles Borromeo who was never formally beatified, were canonized in the following years. None of them was a martyr, unlike many of the blessed and the saints who were to be celebrated as martyrs by the Church between the late 17<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most of them belonged to religious orders and showed their charisma among their contemporaries through miracles and the holiness of their life, meaning that institutional bodies of the Church, like regular orders and congregations, played a role as key actors in controlling and promoting popular devotion, facilitating miracles, and mediating the supernatural.

The generations of Churchmen and simple Catholic believers living in these decades shared the idea of belonging to a new age of sanctity, maybe not too dissimilar to what had been early Christianity. A new age of sanctity that was thought to foreshadow the final triumph of the Church over heresy and, at the same time, its future conquest of the whole world, as symbolized in the famous frontispiece of the first volume of Daniello Bartoli’s *Historia della Compagnia di Gesù*, the history of the Society of Jesus (1653), where the supernatural light shed by the holy father Ignatius illuminates a world depicted in its cartographical reality (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Daniello Bartoli, *Historia della Compagnia di Gesù*.  
*L'Asia* (Roma: Nella stamperia d'Ignazio de' Lazzeri,  
1653), frontispice.

We can argue this not only on the basis of evidence like the multiplication of holy graves and sanctuaries and the huge flow of people to the funerals of the servants of God, but also from a higher testimony like that of cardinal Bellarmine – later himself a saint, canonized in 1930 – as mentioned in the foreword to the first volume of the *Acta sanctorum* of the Bollandists, published in 1643: «We have been told that cardinal Bellarmine used to say that this century in which we live is a century of saints, because God seems to have communicated His gifts, and the most clear reasons to display sanctity more largely than in the previous ages; so we can agree in saying that never before have the acts of the saints been demonstrated as they are now».<sup>10</sup>

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10 *De actis sanctorum Ioannis Bollandi praefatio*, in *Acta sanctorum*, ed. I. Bollandus (Venetiis: apud Sebastianum Coleti et Io. Baptistam Albrizzi, 1734 [1st ed. 1643], vol. 1, *Januarius*, I–LII, XI.



Fig. 4 *Acta sanctorum*I. Bollandus (Venetiis: apud Sebastianum Coleti et Io. Baptistam Albrizzi, 1734 [1st ed. 1643]), vol. 1, *Ianuarius*, frontispice.

Of course, this reference to cardinal Bellarmine, the prominent Jesuit controversialist, must not be considered as accidental, since his fame derived from the great effort he made to prove the truth of Catholic faith – including the belief in the saints – on theological and historical grounds. Indeed, the Bollandists' *Acta sanctorum* were precisely conceived to collect and organize the saints' lives in order to prove their truth and reliability. The question of truth, along with that of the method, was central in the Counter-Reformation system of sanctity, as shown by the inscriptions on the monumental base engraved in the architectural frontispiece of the first volume of the work: *veritas*, on the right side, and *eruditio*, that is historical method, on the left (Fig. 4).

We must remember that the *Acta sanctorum* were not really the first attempt to establish a new method in assessing the reliability of the collections of saints' lives: they were preceded by the *Vitae sanctorum priscorum Patrum*, the 'Lives of the first

Fig. 5 Marco d'Agrate, *St. Bartholomew* (1562), Cathedral of Milan.

holy Fathers of the Church' published by Luigi Lippomani from 1551, and by the *De probatis sanctorum historiis*, 'The proven histories of saints' by Laurentius Surius, published between 1570 and 1575, the most prominent collection of hagiographies before the Bollandists.

Lippomani was also the author of the *De ritibus sepeliendi mortuos apud veteres Christianos*, 'On the burial rites of the ancient Christians', the first archaeological work on the catacombs of Rome, followed by the renowned *Roma subterranea* of Antonio Bosio, printed in 1629. We are here clearly dealing with the problem of creating a foundation of historical evidence of the Christian tradition in the face of the criticism issued by the Reformation: it was the same problem that, as I have noted, was then being dealt with by Bellarmine in his *De controversiis Christianae fidei adversus huius temporis haereticos*, 'On the disputed matters of Christian faith, against the heretics of our time' (1586–93), with regard to Catholic doctrine, and by cardinal Baronius in his *Annales ecclesiastici* (1588–1607), with regard to Church history. The 'heretics of our time' and 'the saints of our time' were, from this point of view, the opposite sides of the same coin.

However, in my opinion, these considerations do not fully complete the true meaning of the Modern 'system of sanctity' I have tried to sketch: together with the apologetic aim suggested by the struggle against the Reformation, I think we should

consider another side of the problem, which is equally linked to the question of truth.

The search for a true representation of history, nature, and the body was undoubtedly one of the key elements that shaped early Modern culture, science, and the arts: be it in Machiavelli's account of the mechanisms ruling political power; in the formalization of the physical laws presiding over the motion of the earth and the skies by Kepler and Galileo; in the representation of the human body in Andreas Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica*; or in the illustration of the reality of the pains suffered by martyrs, as in the case of the well-known statue of St. Bartholomew by Marco d'Agrate in 1562 (Fig. 5), shown in the Duomo of Milan, which certainly owes much to Vesalius' iconography, we are actually dealing with a sort of 'quest for truth' which appears to have been shared by many disciplines.

What is more, D'Agrate's statue should be paired with a later interest in martyrdom which found expressions in the treatise by Antonio Gallonio on the tortures suffered by the ancient martyrs, the *Trattato degli instrumenti di martirio* printed in 1591, and with the opening pages of Pedro Ribadenyra's hagiographic collection, the *Flos sanctorum* of 1599, devoted to the ancient instruments of martyrdom, to show us that the relationship between sanctity, modernity, and truth, which in these cases appears to be mediated by the evidence given by suffering, should not be placed in the background.

