

A Pagan Landscape: Pope Pius XI, Fascism, and the Struggle over the Roman Cityscape

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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Abstract

This article examines the two visions of Rome put forward by Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini and Pope Pius XI and the tensions they caused. The rivalry between the two men over the meaning of the Roman landscape became sharper in the 1930s when the Fascist regime transformed the Eternal City through extensive demolition and increasing archaeological activity in the city. Pius XI increasingly viewed these activities as an attempt to “paganize” Rome. The Pope’s fears over paganism came to a head in the days of Adolf Hitler’s famous visit to Italy in May 1938. The development of closer relations between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany made Pius XI increasingly concerned about what he called the “neo-pagan” nature of these ideologies. Ultimately, the cityscape of Rome was transformed into a kulturkampf between Fascism and the Vatican which not only gives us a fuller picture of the seemingly cordial relations between Pius and Mussolini in the 1930s, but also reveals Fascism as a political religion inevitably in conflict with the other religion, Catholicism, which saw Rome as its own.

Résumé

Cet article analyse deux visions de Rome, l’une exprimée par le dictateur fasciste Benito Mussolini, et l’autre par le pape Pie XI, ainsi que les tensions qu’elles ont créées. La rivalité entre les deux hommes en ce qui a trait à la signification du paysage romain s’accroît dans les années 1930 alors que le régime fasciste transforme la Ville éternelle en la démolissant considérablement et en augmentant l’activité archéologique. De plus en plus, le pape Pie XI voit dans ces actions une tentative pour « paganiser » Rome. Les craintes du pape à ce sujet prennent forme au cours de la célèbre visite d’Adolf Hitler en Italie au mois de mai 1938. L’évolution des relations étroites entre l’Italie fasciste et l’Allemagne nazie fait craindre de plus en plus à Pie XI ce qu’il appelle la nature « néo-païenne » de ces idéologies. Au bout du compte, le paysage de Rome est transformé en un kulturkampf entre le fascisme et le Vatican, ce qui nous donne non seulement une image plus complète des relations apparemment étroites entre Pie XI et Mussolini dans les années 1930, mais aussi

un portrait du fascisme comme une religion politique entrant inévitablement en conflit avec le catholicisme, l'autre religion, qui considérait Rome comme sa propriété.

In the spring of 1938, Rome, the seat of the Roman Catholic Church, became the centrepiece for the growing friendship between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. For seven days, Fascist Italy's leader Benito Mussolini played host to Adolf Hitler and a large retinue of Nazi officials. At the heart of the visit was Rome, which was transformed into a stage on which was performed a spectacle that left many awed by the occasion. One person who was not impressed was Pope Pius XI, who took great offence at the ubiquity of swastikas and fasces which adorned the Eternal City.¹ The visit created tension between the Vatican and Fascist Italy, putting in danger what had been a largely harmonious relationship since the crisis over Catholic Action in 1932. The Roman pontiff chose to express his displeasure over the aesthetic transformation of the city, which brought to light a long running dispute between Pius and Mussolini over the character of the Eternal City. Both leaders in their own way had engaged in the transformation of Rome since the 1920s, bringing the city into line with their interpretations of what Rome should look like. For Pius, the city's ecclesial character needed bolstering, especially since the actions of the Italian State had been secularizing the landscape since 1870. For Mussolini, on the other hand, Rome had to shine as an example of *Romanità* where the ancient monuments of Imperial Rome served the interests of Fascist ideology.² This paper examines the competing visions of Rome put forward by Mussolini and Pius, and how these reflected the emerging status of Fascism as a religion in direct competition with Catholicism.

Religion permeated Rome. It was the home of the Catholic Church and the object of desire for a new political religion: Fascism. This paper contributes to the renewal of historical interest in Fascism as a type of political religion which began in the 1990s. The scholarship on Vatican-Fascist relations has invariably focused on the institutional level of that relationship. This paper proposes to look beyond the institutional by examining Fascism and Catholicism as world views that were, in many ways, diametrically opposed, especially with respect to the symbolic and historical image of Rome. The tension between Fascism and Catholicism as competing world views was especially pronounced in the actions and relationship of their leading spokesmen: Benito Mussolini and

1 The *fasces* were the symbols of Fascism. Deriving from ancient Rome, they were bundled rods denoting unity.

2 Much has been written on Fascism's cult of *Romanità*. See Borden W. Painter, Jr., *Mussolini's Rome: Rebuilding the Eternal City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 21-38.

A PAGAN LANDSCAPE: POPE PIUS XI, FASCISM,
AND THE STRUGGLE OVER THE ROMAN CITYSCAPE

Pius XI. Viewing Fascism as a political religion is especially useful in this respect as it suggests that Mussolini's movement was, in many ways, a rival religion to Catholicism, albeit one that borrowed many of its rituals from Catholicism.³ The result was a political ideology which presented itself as a new religion to rival the old. The essentially religious nature of Fascism and Nazism has recently received emphasis in Michael Burleigh's new history of Nazi Germany, and in a collection of essays under the direction of Hans Meier, which explores the intersections between totalitarianism and religion in the twentieth century.⁴

The tension between Fascism and Catholicism as rival religions was revealed by two developments: the rebuilding of Rome by the Fascist regime under the banner of *Romanità* (the Fascist policy of identifying the current regime with the glories of the Roman Empire), and the ever-deepening relationship between the Fascist State and Nazi Germany. In the words of Michael Burleigh, Fascism and Nazism sought to replace the values of "obsolescent Christianity ... whatever their tactical accommodations with the Churches."⁵ The Fascist vision of Rome, laid out in the Master Plan of 1931, was invested with a sacred aura which borrowed terminology and myths from religion.⁶ In response, the Vatican questioned the Italian State's intentions in shaping the Eternal City to its own image. Disagreement over the meaning of the Roman landscape gradually came to the surface in the late 1930s, as Fascist Italy moved closer to Nazi Germany. Their growing affinity was met with contempt by Pius XI, who on several occasions denounced both regimes as pagan. The first time he associated Fascism with paganism came during the dispute over Catholic Action in 1931. Catholic Action was a lay movement which Pius XI hoped would influence Italian society and politics. The Fascist regime perceived the movement as a threat to its sovereignty, especially when Catholic Action began having a more active influence in education and among youth groups in 1930-1931.⁷ In the midst of the dispute over Catholic Action, which frequently erupted into violent clashes between Fascist Blackshirts and Catholic Action members, Pius had released the 1929 encyclical, *Non abbiamo bisogno* (We have no need), which denounced the level of violence and the actions of the Fascist regime in attempting to suppress Catholic

3 Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Bari: Laterza, 1993), 267-85.

4 Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000); Hans Maier, ed., *Totalitarianism and Political Religions*, vol. 1: *Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships* (London: Routledge, 2004).

5 Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, 10.

6 Gentile, *Il culto dell littorio*, 220-32.

7 Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce: Vol. 1: Gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1974), 249-72. De Felice gives a comprehensive account of the dispute between the Vatican and the Fascist State over Catholic Action.

Action. Although not an unequivocal condemnation of Fascism or its leader, Pius's encyclical did condemn the growing tendency to worship the state in Fascist Italy:

And here We find Ourselves confronted by a mass of authentic affirmations ... which reveal beyond the slightest possibility of doubt the resolve to monopolize completely the young ... for the exclusive advantage of a party and of a regime based on an ideology which clearly resolves itself into a true, a real pagan worship of the State — or “Statolatry.”⁸

This document marks the first time that Pius used the word pagan to describe the politics of the Fascist regime. He would use the term on many occasions to define Nazi Germany in subsequent years. Although the conflict over Catholic Action was settled, an uneasy peace descended on Vatican-Italian relations in the 1930s. Despite areas of common interest, such as colonialism, where the Church generally supported Fascism's imperialistic adventures in Africa and Albania as an opportunity to evangelize, Pius continued to view the developments in Italy and Germany as pagan, especially in the summer of 1938 when the Italian regime, basking in the glow of the new-found friendship with Hitler's Germany, promulgated the Racial Laws. These laws, introduced in the summer of 1938 by the Fascist regime, imposed severe restrictions on Italian Jews similar to the Nuremberg Laws in Germany. Pius XI publicly opposed these measures in a speech given to officials of the College of *Propaganda Fide* on 28 July, where he spoke of the Catholic Church as universally rejecting any exaltation of race. In this spirit, he called for the use of the word “human-kind” to replace “human race.”⁹ The Fascist Foreign Minister, Galeazzo Ciano, denounced this speech as “violently anti-racist.”¹⁰

By labelling Fascism and Nazism as pagan, Pius identified the new ideologies as essentially religious in nature. In so doing, Pius was echoing the views of other religious and non-religious thinkers of the 1930s. A sociological study of civic education by the University of Chicago in 1929, for example, argued that the Fascist regime was inventing itself as a pagan religion, complete with rituals like the burning of debts in October 1927, which took place on the reconstructed altars to the pagan deities Minerva and Lucina.¹¹ Arnold Toynbee, in

8 Pope Pius XI, *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* (29 June 1931), <<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius11/P11FAC.HTM>>, (viewed 18 August 2004), article 44.

9 Carlo Confalonieri, *Pius XI: A Close-Up* (Altadena, CA: The Benziger Sisters Publishers, 1975), 304.

10 Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario, 1937-1943* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1980), 162.

11 Herbert W. Schneider and Shepard B. Clough, *Making Fascists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), 73-4.

A PAGAN LANDSCAPE: POPE PIUS XI, FASCISM,
AND THE STRUGGLE OVER THE ROMAN CITYSCAPE

a 1937 article in the *Christian Century*, declared Fascism as a “rival religion” that was essentially pagan in its exaltation of human organization and power.¹² Catholic thinkers like Christopher Dawson and Aurel Kolnai also had little doubt that the emphasis on the supremacy of the state in Germany and Italy was pagan in inspiration.¹³

What did paganism mean in this context? In several allocutions and speeches, Pius used the term paganism to denote three essential features of the policies of Fascism and Nazism. One was the rejection of universalism in favour of ideologies which exalted either a particular race or a nation above all others.¹⁴ The Roman pontiff had established this theme in his first encyclical, promulgated on December 1922, *Ubi Arcano Dei Consilio* (On the Peace of Christ in His Kingdom), where he warned against too much “patriotism,” which he blamed for the instability in international affairs.¹⁵ Could he have been hinting at the dangers posed by the Fascist Party which had come into power only a few months before? The new party not only preached hyper-nationalism, but also another feature of paganism which Pius and Catholic opinion emphasized in later years: a cult of the state.¹⁶ A second feature of paganism, according to Pius, was the exaltation of the material world, especially the exaltation of monuments and public works schemes. In the 1930s, Pius specifically identified as pagan the desire to build marvellous works, a sly reference to Fascism’s vast public works projects like those found in the Master Plan of 1931. The third feature of paganism that Pius challenged was a specific view of history which differed from the Catholic interpretation of the past. It was around this third feature of paganism that the rivalry between Pius, Mussolini, and Hitler would revolve. Especially in the wake of Hitler’s visit, the Roman landscape became the site on which the pagan and Christian conceptions of history would be defined.

The Two Romes

Pope Pius XI placed the city of Rome at the top of his agenda from the moment he was elected by the College of Cardinals. Cardinal Achille Ratti

12 Arnold J. Toynbee, “The Menace of the New Paganism,” *The Christian Century* (March 1937), <<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=476.htm>>, (viewed 20 April 2006).

13 Christopher Dawson, “The Recovery of Spiritual Unity,” in Gerald J. Russello, ed., *Christianity and European Culture. Selections from the Work of Christopher Dawson* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 246; Aurel Kolnai, *The War against the West* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1938), 236-48.

14 “Germanesimo razzista e Romanesimo Cattolico,” *Civiltà Cattolica* 89, no. 2 (1938): 289-92.

15 Pius XI, *Ubi Arcano dei Consilio*, (23 December 1922), <<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius11/P11ARCAN.HTM>>, (viewed 18 August 2004), article 25.

16 G. Messina, S.I., “L’Apotheosi dell’uomo vivente e il Cristianesimo,” *Civiltà Cattolica* 80, no. 3 (1929): 514.

became Pope Pius XI in February 1922, just eight months before Mussolini's Blackshirts marched on the city. When Ratti was elected Pope, Fascist violence was gripping the city, especially in the working-class San Lorenzo quarter where Fascists and Socialists often engaged in bloody battles.¹⁷ From the beginning, Pius had taken seriously his position as the Bishop of Rome.¹⁸ For Ratti, the city was central in the mission of the Catholic Church, and he made this known when he became the first pope in over fifty years to venture out of the Vatican after the signing of the Lateran Accords in 1929, which brought to an end the so-called Roman Question. In this dispute, the Vatican refused to recognize the Italian State after Italian forces annexed the city of Rome in 1870. On the occasion of signing the Accords, in February 1929, Pius XI was greeted by thousands of Romans on the streets of the city.¹⁹ Pius also revived the tradition of the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing when he was elected Pope, a ceremony which required him to appear on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, serving notice that Rome belonged to the church.²⁰ At the heart of Pius' renewal of the Roman mission was nostalgia for the ecclesial Rome he had first seen in 1879, and which was quickly disappearing under the heels of modernity and its transformation into the capital of the Italian state.²¹ Pius XI's biographers often compare him to Pope Sixtus V who, in the sixteenth century, had remodelled Rome during his own tenure.²² Like Sixtus, Pius became deeply involved in restructuring the Papal city, giving it a new train station in 1933 and modern means of communication, like the 1931 founding of Vatican Radio.²³ Outside the Vatican, he presided over the refurbishing of several basilicas and churches, as well as the building of new seminaries and colleges throughout the 1930s.²⁴ Pius XI was thus continuing the policy of Pius

17 Mimmo Franzinelli, *Squadristi: Protagonisti e tecniche della violenza fascista, 1919-1922* (Milano: Mondadori, 2003), 357.

18 Luigi Fiorani, "Un vescovo e la sua diocese. Pio XI, 'primo pastore e parrocco' di Roma," in École Française de Rome, ed., *Achille Ratti. Pape Pie XI* (Palais Farnèse, Rome: École Française de Rome, 1996), 428-30.

19 Ibid., 426.

20 According to contemporary observers, the act by the Pope of giving the address caused "great emotion" amongst those present. David A. Binchy, *Church and State in Fascist Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 78.

21 Ibid., 423.

22 Zsolt Aradi, *Pius XI. The Pope and the Man* (New York: Hanover House, 1958), 165; Confalonieri, *Pius XI: A Close-Up*, 29. Sixtus V (1585-1590) was known for his public works projects in Rome, including road building.

23 In his recent book on the Vatican's finances, John Pollard has argued that Pius' ambitious building schemes were aimed at "re-asserting the visibility of the papal 'presence' in Rome" in the face of Fascism's urban planning. John Pollard, *Money and the Rise of the Modern Papacy: Financing the Vatican, 1850-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 134-5.

24 Cardinal Confalonieri, who knew Pius XI, claimed that the Pope had converted Rome into a "builder's yard" with his extensive building. Confalonieri, *Pius XI: A Close-Up*, 32.

A PAGAN LANDSCAPE: POPE PIUS XI, FASCISM,
AND THE STRUGGLE OVER THE ROMAN CITYSCAPE

IX, who, after the 1870 annexation of Rome by the Italian State, had called for the building up of ecclesial Rome as an act of defiance against the new order of things. If the Vatican could not retake Rome by force, then it could build an alternative city within the Italian capital.²⁵

Pius XI's concern for ecclesial Rome found its way into the Lateran Accords of 1929, which emphasized the "sacred character of the city." Article 10 stated: "No building open to worship can be demolished for any reason, unless previously agreed upon with the competent ecclesiastical authority." Article 33 claimed the catacombs or "subsoil" of Rome as Vatican patrimony.²⁶ The protection of ecclesiastical property was high on Pius' motives for signing the Lateran Accords, due to a fear of violence against church property. This fear was realized in 1931 at the height of the conflict between the Vatican and the regime over Catholic Action, when Blackshirts often attacked churches. In May 1931, the Vatican's newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, dedicated most of its front page to reporting such attacks throughout Italy, especially in Rome.²⁷

The protection of church property became particularly important in the 1930s, when the Fascist regime embarked on its ambitious scheme to remake the Roman landscape. The plan called for massive demolitions, known as *sventramenti*, in order to reveal the ancient ruins of Rome, and to create more room for traffic. To be sure, the Vatican agreed with some of the Fascist schemes, including the construction of the Via della Conciliazione, the wide boulevard linking St. Peter's with the Tiber River. Other parts of the sprawling Master Plan, however, raised potential friction. Several Pontifical institutes, as well as churches, wrote to the Roman municipal government and to Mussolini, arguing that some provisions of the plan directly threatened the pastoral mission of the church in Rome. The planned demolitions of some churches raised objections. The director of the San Lorenzo Choir, for example, claimed that the choir would cease to exist, without even a "piece of bread" left, if their church was demolished.²⁸ The rector of the Conservatory of St. Eufemia, an orphanage run by the church, demanded financial compensation for the 15-20 orphans under its care, claiming that the state was demolishing 400 years of social assistance run by the conservatory.²⁹

25 Andrea Riccardi, "La Vita Religiosa," in Vittorio Vidotto, ed., *Roma Capitale* (Bari: Laterza, 2002), 273.

26 John Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism, 1929-1932: A Study in Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 206, 212.

27 "Le violenze contro l'Azione Cattolica si estendono a persone e ad edifici ecclesiastici," *L'Osservatore Romano*, (31 May 1931): 1.

28 Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereafter ACS), PCM 1934-1936, b. 1959, f. 7.2.208/10, "P.R.: Chiesa russa cattolica a San Lorenzo ai Monti."

29 Ibid., f. 7.2.208/9, "P.R.: Espropriazione di un palazzo di proprietà del Conservatorio di S. Eufemia."

Pontifical institutions of other kinds were also threatened by the Fascist State. The rector of the Germanic-Hungarian Pontifical College openly accused the regime of violating the Concordat by demolishing its church in order to widen a road.³⁰ Violation of the Concordat had possible international repercussions in the case of the Armenian Pontifical College in Rome, which served as a place of asylum for Armenians. The delicacy of the situation forced the Italian Foreign Minister Dino Grandi to intervene in the matter. Not only was the church a place of asylum, according to the Vicar General of the Armenian Patriarchate, but also a place where Armenian culture could be preserved.³¹

The most prestigious Pontifical institution to be threatened by the regime's Master Plan was the Pontifical Agricultural Institute at Vigna Pia. Located on the Via Portuense, near St. Paul's Gate, the land on which the Institute stood was slated to become a public park in keeping with Mussolini's dictum to open up Rome to air and sunlight. Founded by Pope Pius IX, the institute's mission was to train poor Roman youths in the art of agriculture. The Superior General of the Order of the Holy Family, which ran the facility, wrote an impassioned plea to Mussolini in 1930 arguing that the Institute did not need to be replaced by a park since it was already providing the "healthy fresh air" which the Duce had called for in his installation of the Master Plan.³² The Institute's case was also pleaded by the Vicar General of the Roman Archdiocese Cardinal Pompili to the Roman Governor Boncompagni-Ludovisi. The Cardinal gave a brief history of the Institute and the order which administered it, noting that it had produced great works of civic education, both moral and intellectual, and was now threatened by the Master Plan. He then proceeded to remind the Governor that the subsoil of the Institute contained catacombs. Not only was this an efficient and modern institution tracing its heritage to the scientific advancements of the nineteenth century, but the zone provided an important historical connection to the early Christian martyrs. For this reason, argued Pompili, the Institute should not become the victim of demolition, but rather a site that could be preserved and built upon: "Here is not the place to demolish, but to amplify and perfect."³³

The remaking of Rome under Fascism confirmed for Ratti that the regime was pagan in inspiration as it contributed to the worshipping of the state and its organizing power, and to the cult of materialistic progress. Speaking to Catholic Action members in 1933, Pius warned of a new paganism "with its

30 Ibid., f. 7.2.208/12, "P.R.: Pontificio Collegio Germanico-Ungarico." The conflict was eventually resolved but only after difficult negotiations. Arturo Bianchi, "La via XXIII Marzo," *Capitolium* 15, no. 3 (marzo 1940): 592.

31 ACS, PCM 1934-1936, b. 1959, f. 7.2.208/8, "P.R.: Pontificio Collegio Armeno."

32 Ibid., f. 7.2.208/14, "P.R.: Istituto Agricolo di Vigna Pia. Lettera A. Crisio a Mussolini, October 14, 1930."

33 Ibid., "Lettera Card. Pompili al Governatore, July 14, 1930."

A PAGAN LANDSCAPE: POPE PIUS XI, FASCISM,
AND THE STRUGGLE OVER THE ROMAN CITYSCAPE

horrors and errors” accompanied by “material splendour” like that of ancient Athens and Rome.³⁴ Pius made further, if veiled, reference to the Fascist regime’s attempts to revive the grandeur of ancient Rome in another address to university students on 5 November 1933, when he condemned scientists who shed too much light on the “creature rather than the creator.”³⁵

The struggle between paganism and Christianity was reflected above all in Pius’ idea of history and the place of Rome within that history.³⁶ Achille Ratti’s biographers all emphasize the importance of history to the future Pope. Ratti’s knowledge of history, it was said, was also the reason he was appointed Apostolic Visitor to Poland in 1918.³⁷ Pius XI was a great lover of Manzoni’s historical fiction, with its deeply Catholic sensibility. Father Gemelli, the rector of the University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, who knew the Pope well and was a fellow “Manzonian,” recalled, “Achille Ratti made it a point to read Manzoni before making any decision. Above all he read Manzoni before writing encyclicals For him, Manzoni was a practical guide in a world strange and sometimes hostile.”³⁸ In the nineteenth century, Manzoni was the favourite author of those who wanted the Pope to lead the unification of Italy. The Milanese writer was popular with those who opposed the increasingly secular interpretations of history proposed in the 1800s. The Pope had also published several papers on historical topics.³⁹ His interest in secular history, uncommon for church leaders, was informed by his passion for Dante’s philosophy of history which granted the “City of Man” its own positive development not entirely opposed to the “City of God.”⁴⁰ Pius’ view of history was naturally a Christian one. His view of periodization, for instance, was that the Incarnation was the moment which abolished for humanity and for history the “life without grace” associated with the pagan world.⁴¹

Rome was at the heart of this Christian view of history. A recurrent theme in his talks with various groups was that of the “Roman Christ.” Constantly

34 Pius XI, *Discorsi di Pio XI*, Domenico Bertetto, ed. (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1959), 2: 998.

35 *Ibid.*, “A giovani universitari: Scienza, fede, e formazione cristiana,” 29.

36 On the Christian versus Pagan view of history I am indebted to Thomas Molnar’s *The Pagan Temptation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987).

37 *Ibid.*, 96.

38 Aradi, *Pius XI*, 42-3.

39 Philip Hughes, *Pope Pius the Eleventh* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1938), 23. Hughes provides a comprehensive list of Ratti’s published papers.

40 On Dante’s influence on Ratti, see Aradi, *Pius XI*, 42. Dante proposed a different version of history than St. Augustine, but one which still remained faithful to a Catholic vision of history. Christopher Dawson, “The Christian View of History,” in Rusello, ed., *Christianity and European Culture*, 223-5.

41 Pius XI, *Discorsi di Pio XI*, “Ai giovani di Azione Cattolica Italiana,” 998.

worried about the spread of Protestantism, Pius XI affirmed that Rome was central to authentic Christianity. Speaking in 1925 on the birthday of Rome, 21 April, a date that would eventually become a Fascist holiday, Pius said, “You are not fully Christian unless you are Catholic, and you are not fully Catholic unless you are Roman.”⁴² Earlier that year, which Pius had declared as Holy Year, the Pope had told a group of pilgrims from Cremona that Rome was the “motherly home” of all Christians, a site which offered a chain of monuments leading back to Christ through the Apostles who had made Rome a “sacred soil” of catacombs on whose foundations were built the great basilicas.⁴³

Throughout his pontificate, Pius returned to a vision of Rome as a city “sprinkled with the blood of martyrs.” He referred to the Eternal City as the “first *patria*” and as a “classical book” which needs to be re-read constantly in order to learn new things: “In that book, how many centuries, how many historic moments, what varieties of nature, of art, of history could be found.”⁴⁴ In Pius’ view, the most important moment in that history was the arrival of the Apostles in Rome, especially St. Paul, whose work had transformed Rome from a “temporal to a spiritual power.”⁴⁵ With the arrival of the Apostles came the transformation of paganism to Christianity. What was lost in this transformation was and should be lost forever in the face of the transforming power of the Apostles and the martyrs. Pius had no regrets about the loss of that pagan world, which he described as a “miserably degraded society based on the domination by a powerful minority of the slave-like majority” that was swept away by the efforts of the early apostles like St. Paul.⁴⁶

Pius was increasingly concerned in the 1930s with his perception that Fascism and Nazism were reviving this buried paganism. Speaking to a congress of doctors in 1935, Pius expressed concern that topics in the congress included eugenics and sterilization, blaming the popularity of these topics on the rise of the Third Reich and its attempts to restore “full paganism” both in the lives of the individuals and the community.⁴⁷ A key element of the pagan view of history, and one which Pius returned to in his various addresses, was the retrieval of an ideal past and its re-creation in a modern form.⁴⁸ Related to this was a rejection of anything that came between that ideal past and the present, including the rise of Christianity.

42 Ibid., “A studentesse della Polonia: Unione nella fede cattolica,” 1: 233.

43 Ibid., “Al pellegrinaggio cremonese: L’efficacia della parola Divina,” 1: 347-8.

44 Ibid., “A giovani collegiali: Roma La Prima Patria,” 2: 153.

45 Ibid., “Al congresso giuridico internazionale: I rapporti tra il diritto romano e quello canonico,” 3: 236.

46 Ibid., “Al congresso degli ospedali: Verità e bene,” 3: 330.

47 Ibid., 331-2.

48 Molnar, *Pagan Temptation*, 42.

A PAGAN LANDSCAPE: POPE PIUS XI, FASCISM,
AND THE STRUGGLE OVER THE ROMAN CITYSCAPE

The differences between the Christian and pagan views of history could be seen in the practice of archaeology. Speaking to a congress of Christian archaeologists in October 1938, five months after Hitler's visit to Rome, Pius warned of an "erroneous archaeology" which digs only for "what is ancient and not [for] what is sacred."⁴⁹ Rather than explore the divine ways of God in history, argued Pius, the modern archaeologist looks for the lost paganism and its heroes, like Adolf Hitler's idol, Julian the Apostate.⁵⁰ To be sure, this was a somewhat extreme view of the extensive archaeological work taking place in Rome at the time, but Pius XI was anxious to point out what he considered errors in the Fascist State's approach to the Eternal City.

Mussolini's vision of archaeology was diametrically opposed to that of the Pope. Speaking to the Royal Society of National History in 1927, Mussolini called for the ruins of antiquity to be liberated from the "accumulated ugliness of the centuries of abandonment."⁵¹ Only when the monuments of antiquity are uncovered, argued the Fascist dictator, can one kneel before them in reverence. In sharp contradiction to Pius' rejection of a pre-Christian past, Mussolini's "pagan" view of history was revealed in this desire to retrieve what had been lost in the intervening centuries. The past could be elusive and forever lost, claimed Mussolini, who called for discoveries to be photographed immediately since they could disappear in the light of day due to exposure to light and air.⁵²

Mussolini did not hide the fact that this approach to archaeology was an attack on the Christian heritage of the city. During the work on the Master Plan, the Fascist dictator had shown impatience at the uncovering of lost Christian churches, brushing them off as irrelevant.⁵³ He also joked to a local priest that he would lose parishioners as a result of the demolitions, which would force the eviction of thousands of Romans from the city centre.⁵⁴ During his feud with Pius over the Racial Laws of 1938, Mussolini often used an archaeologi-

49 Pius XI, *Discorsi di Pio XI*, "Agli archeologi cristiani: Dio regolatore degli eventi," 3: 842.

50 Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Table Talk 1941-1944* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 253-4.

51 ACS, Autografi del Duce, "Casetta di zinco," b. 4, f. 5.1.2, "1927 discorsi: April 9, 1927-V: Discorso all R. Società romana di storia patria (Scavi di Ercolano-Navi di Nemi)."

52 Mussolini's scientific observation could also be placed in a broader metaphoric sense. Rather than accept the organic notion of history implicit in Catholicism, Mussolini suggested that history had been destructive of the primordial greatness of Rome. The elusiveness of the past and the threat posed to it by the present, especially in Rome, was captured in a subsequent era by the Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini in his 1972 film *Roma*. In a scene where a Roman villa is discovered while excavating the Metro, as soon as the chamber is opened, the frescos fade away. Edward Murray suggests this scene is symbolic of a past lost to the march of progress. Edward Murray, *Fellini the Artist*, 2nd ed. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc., 1985), 209.

53 ACS, PCM 1928-1930, f. 5, n. 2/4293, "Roma-Scavi nell'Aula Senatoria-Campidoglio-Conservazione della Chiesa di S. Adriano."

54 "Mussolini acclamato dagli operai visita le grandi opera romano del primo Decennale," *Il Lavoro Fascista* (7 October 1932): 1.

cal motif to threaten that he would “scrape away the crust that envelops Italians and return [them] to their anticlericalism. The Vatican is composed of men who are mummified and out of touch.”⁵⁵ Mussolini’s brother, Arnaldo, had already served notice to the Vatican in 1927 that the Pope would have to get used to a new Rome “which reveals the ancient Roman temples to the admiration of the world and shows a Rome that will be the centre of new doctrines appropriate to modern states.”⁵⁶ Discovering pre-Christian temples was a major goal behind Fascism’s archaeological excavations in Rome. Speaking to an audience of war invalids visiting from Bolzano in 1928, who had stopped at Palazzo Venezia (Mussolini’s headquarters in Rome) on their way to St. Peter’s, Mussolini urged them to visit the pagan temples discovered in the Largo Argentina near the Vatican.⁵⁷ After all, to the Fascist eyes of Mussolini, pagan architecture was more important than Catholic monuments. In the Fascist Roman landscape, St. Peter’s was just one temple among many.

On the occasion of the signing of the Lateran Accords, Mussolini made it clear where he stood on the position of Rome and Christianity, announcing that it was Rome that had transformed an obscure Jewish sect into a universal religion, and not Christianity that had sanctified Rome, a claim which provoked an angry response from Pius XI’s Secretary of State, Cardinal Gasparri in the pages of the Vatican’s official newspaper, *Osservatore Romano*.⁵⁸ Mussolini’s interpretation of history closely resembled Hitler’s, in that he saw the grandeur of Rome as independent of Christianity.⁵⁹ For Hitler, Christianity was an intrusion that “set itself systematically to destroy ancient culture.”⁶⁰ Hitler compared Christianity to Bolshevism in its role as destroyer of culture, an opinion he would express during his visit to the Diocletian Baths Museum during his Roman tour.⁶¹ Like Mussolini, who also subscribed to this cyclical view of history, Hitler was convinced that the Catholic Church would eventually die out due to the force of evolution. History, in this sense, was nothing more than the story of civilizations and epochs which rise and fall, a view contrary to the teleological Christian notion of history.

55 Ciano, *Diario*, 166.

56 ACS, Autografi del Duce, “Casetta di zinco,” b. 6, f. 5.6.16, all. 3, “Il Popolo di Roma” (18-19 October 1927).

57 *Ibid.*, b. 6, f. 6.1.7, “2 luglio 1928-VI: Discorso del Duce ai mutilate Altoatesini.”

58 Aradi, *Pius XI*, 158. Mussolini repeated this argument to Emil Ludwig. See Ludwig, *Colloqui con Mussolini* (Milano: Mondadori, 1950), 174.

59 Hitler’s anti-Christian views are a constant theme in his *Table Talks*. Richard Steigmann-Gall has recently raised questions about this interpretation, suggesting that Hitler’s views were more ambiguous. Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 252-9.

60 Hitler, *Table Talk*, 88-9.

61 *Ibid.*, 143; Renuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, *Hitler e Mussolini 1938: Il viaggio del Fuhrer in Italia* (Roma: E/o, 1995), 26-7.

A PAGAN LANDSCAPE: POPE PIUS XI, FASCISM,
AND THE STRUGGLE OVER THE ROMAN CITYSCAPE

For Hitler, Christianity's destructiveness was mainly due to a "Jew," Saul of Tarsus (St. Paul), who had distorted Christianity by denying the "Aryan Jesus."⁶² It was precisely over the role of St. Paul that the competing views about history held by Hitler, Mussolini, and Pius XI clashed in the days of the Hitler visit. Whereas Hitler denounced St. Paul as the first religious propagandist, Pius saw the Apostle as the one responsible for converting the pagan Romans to Christian truth. Both Hitler and Pius agreed that St. Paul was the central figure in transforming ancient Rome: the disagreement was about the value and meaning of that transformation. These interpretations of St. Paul were set against the backdrop of a renewed interest in the Apostle in pilgrimages made by the faithful to the Eternal City in the 1930s. The Jesuit journal *Civiltà Cattolica* ran a series of articles on the Apostle, noting in one case how the tombs of Saints Paul and Peter had become major attractions for modern pilgrims. The Catholic journal thought this phenomenon significant as the tombs were not simply ordinary monuments, appealing to curiosity, nor were they simply shrines attracting Catholic devotion. Instead, the tombs "attested to the primacy of Rome" in turbulent times.⁶³ Undoubtedly, *Civiltà Cattolica* tried to present these pilgrimages as a counterpoint to the Fascist regime's focus on pagan sites like the temples at the Largo Argentina or the *Ara Pacis*, Augustus' altar dedicated to the Roman Peace.

The New Apostle

The rising interest in the Apostles and Rome coincided with the visit of Adolf Hitler to Rome in the spring of 1938. The previous year, Pope Pius XI had issued the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* (With burning sorrow), which denounced Nazism as paganism.⁶⁴ Angered by perceived violations of the 1933 Concordat with Nazi Germany, Pius XI had become strident in his criticisms of the German Reich, especially over Nazi beliefs in euthanasia and racial superiority.⁶⁵ The Hitler visit immediately raised tensions with the Pope,

62 Hitler, *Table Talk*, 76, 143.

63 "Sulle memorie e I monumenti dei SS. Apostoli Pietro e Paolo a Roma," *Civiltà Cattolica* 86, no. 2 (1935): 247.

64 In this encyclical, Pope Pius XI denounced what he perceived as violations of the Concordat signed between the Vatican and the Reich in 1933. The encyclical was published in German and proclaimed to German parishioners in the spring of 1937, causing a deep rift in the relations between the two states. On the problematic relations between the Vatican and the Fascist regime especially in the days of the Hitler visit, see Binchy, *Church and State in Fascist Italy*, 658-63. Some Catholic theologians viewed the encyclical as a veritable call to arms to German Catholics to resist the encroaching paganism of the Nazi ideology. Mario Bendiscioli, *The New Racial Paganism*, George D. Smith, trans. (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1939), 63.

65 On the crisis of 1931 over Catholic Action, see Arturo Carlo Jemolo, *Chiesa e Stato in Italia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1977), 183-310.

who demonstrated his displeasure by announcing his intention of leaving the city for the duration of the German leader's stay, literally turning off the lights of the Vatican. In the months preceding the visit, the Vatican had expressed a desire to set up a meeting between Hitler and the Pope to discuss the status of German Catholics. The Germans refused, arguing that the purpose of the visit was ideological, not diplomatic, and that a meeting would be "impossible."⁶⁶ In order to smooth things over, the Italian government had attempted to mediate, but this effort was half-hearted and accomplished little.

Hitler's Roman itineraries circumnavigated the Vatican, generally ignoring its existence. St. Peter's Basilica was peripheral to Hitler's itinerary. *Civiltà Cattolica* reported that Hitler glanced at St. Peter's from the balcony of the Castel Sant'Angelo but made no attempt to cross the Vatican's threshold.⁶⁷ Few churches made it onto the tour and the few that did were there only for artistic, not religious, reasons. Hitler did not visit the interior of any church in Rome except for the Pantheon, which he visited twice, an ancient Roman temple which had since been converted to a church and a mausoleum for the royal family. What interested Hitler most was the architecture, not the contents of the temple.⁶⁸

Some observers noted the possible tension Hitler's visit could cause with the Papacy. Louis Gillet, a member of the *Academie Française* in Rome, wrote, "One could not enter any parish without hearing the long prayers of the Rosary offered in reparation of this outrage."⁶⁹ The problem was the ubiquity of Nazi flags around the city which appeared to masquerade the Christian symbols which permeated Rome. Pius XI found the presence of Nazi flags in Rome especially problematic. The Pope made several pointed remarks about the "apotheosis" of the German dictator during his stay in Rome, and the omnipresence of the swastika on the capital's major buildings, which Pius condemned as "not the cross of Christ." Despite the discomfort caused to the Vatican by the visit, the Fascist regime remained unapologetic. Coming six years after Mussolini's more cordial official visit to the Vatican, Hitler's visit to Rome symbolized the new hostility between the Papacy and the regime.

In this light, the choice of St. Paul's Gate as the entry point for Hitler's visit to Rome takes on enormous significance. The area around the gate had been the focus of intense development by the State in the years preceding 1938.

66 Commissione per la pubblicazione dei Documenti Diplomatici, *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* (Roma: Libreria dello Stato, 1952), Ottava. Seria, vol. 8: "Il Consigliere dell'Ambasciata a Berlino, Magistrati, al Ministro degli Esteri, Ciano," (15 March 1938), 380-1.

67 "Cronaca contemporanea," *Civiltà Cattolica* 89, no. 2 (1938): 376-7.

68 Fascist newspapers called this act by Hitler one of renewal. *Il Popolo* wrote: "Even this old section of Rome has had a great day." "La visita al Pantheon," *Il Popolo d'Italia* (5 May 1938): 1.

69 Louis Gillet, "Hitler à Rome. Choses vues," *Revue des deux mondes* (1 June 1938): 683.

A PAGAN LANDSCAPE: POPE PIUS XI, FASCISM,
AND THE STRUGGLE OVER THE ROMAN CITYSCAPE

Located on the Viale Ostiense and the Via del Mare, the gate was the route to the E42 (short for *Esposizione 1942*, this new development was to host the World's Fair in 1942. Only half completed by 1945, today it is known as the EUR). The gate could be considered the most important link between the new and old Rome. It was here that the modernist-styled *Stazione Ostiense* was constructed to greet Hitler's train, a marked improvement, according to the journal of the *Touring Club Italiano*, on the nineteenth-century Termini Station and its adjoining Piazza Esedra.⁷⁰ Older monuments and landmarks in the zone around St. Paul's Gate made it favourable for the entry of the new anti-apostle, Adolf Hitler. Straddling the gate was a massive Pyramid, a tomb for a Roman senator who had had a love of things Egyptian. This striking monument was in a style that both served to remind observers of the eastern influences on the Romans and suited the African motif favoured by the regime after the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1936.⁷¹ The gate was also the site chosen for the Obelisk of Axum and the Ministry of Italian East Africa, both symbols of the new Italian empire. This was especially important as it showed Christianity as only one of several eastern religions to find a home in Rome.

Next to St. Paul's Gate also stood the so-called Protestant cemetery, burial place of the Romantic poets Shelley and Byron, and final resting place of other illustrious individuals who were not in communion with the Catholic Church. Carlo Cecchelli, in an article on Hitler's route in *Capitolium*, called this cemetery "sacred ground," a description guaranteed to arouse the ire of the Vatican.⁷² A main preoccupation of Pius XI's papacy was the spreading influence of Protestantism in the Eternal City.⁷³ Hitler's entrance took on extra significance in the context of the regime's tensions with the Church. It must have been a bitter irony for the Vatican that Hitler should use the gate named after the Apostle whom the German leader disdained and blamed for the destruction of ancient, pagan Rome.

A further insult to the Vatican was that Hitler's night entrance into the Eternal City was choreographed as a religious ceremony leading Gillet to exclaim, "He is a priest. He is almost a God."⁷⁴ The route was lit up with floodlights and gas canisters illuminating the monuments of the city. Candles placed in the arcs of the Coliseum created an evocative atmosphere. Hitler's entrance was accorded the feeling of a religious procession as this new missionary of Fascism was carried through the gate. The slow gait of the horse drawn carriage suited perfectly this notion of religious pilgrimage. A central feature of the entrance was the elaborate lighting put in place by the regime.

70 Archivio LUCE, "Giornale Luce B1013."

71 Carlo Cecchelli, "Itinerario imperiale," *Capitolium* 13, no. 4 (April 1938): 169.

72 *Ibid.*, 170.

73 Riccardi, "La Vita Religiosa," 306.

74 Gillet, "Hitler a Rome," 679-80.

According to *Il Messaggero*, some 3500 kilowatt of light pouring out of 300 candelabra awaited Hitler's carriage as it entered the city.⁷⁵ The results stunned even Romans, long accustomed to political and papal pageantry. The journalist Leo Longanesi noted years later that Romans were left with their "mouths open" at the sight of the "wide imperial avenues, incredulous at our richness, admiring our splendour."⁷⁶ Rome was "transformed into a vast opera stage in which at night the Führer could admire a spectacle worthy of Nero."⁷⁷ Hitler was similarly impressed by the "magical spectacle of the Coliseum in flames reflecting off the ruins of the Forum."⁷⁸

Conclusion

On the opening night of Hitler's visit, Rome was transformed into a Fascist spectacle reminiscent of religious ceremony. The mystical atmosphere constructed for this event by Hitler's Italian hosts seemed to have created the desired effect. A future leader of Italian neo-Fascism who witnessed the visit recalled:

I had been in the capital only a few months [and] that sudden encounter with the triumphalism of the regime and of a capital overcoming its traditional inferiority with respect to Germany left my fragile youth with my heart in my throat. I believed in everything. I believed that the two revolutions were forged into a common destiny; that indissoluble ideological, political and military links existed between the two leaders and that their concordance would sweep away the old democracies.⁷⁹

Fascism, through the attempts to reshape Rome made by Mussolini's government was consecrated as a political religion in the days of the Hitler visit, but this process had been under-way long before that. This paper suggests that although the Roman Question had been legally settled in 1929, and accommodation between the regime and the Vatican reigned in the 1930s, the clash of cultures between Roman Catholicism and Fascism was ever-present in the symbolism of Rome itself. To be sure, there existed, in the words of R.J.B. Bosworth, "quite a few social and cultural zones of agreement" between the Vatican and the Fascist state, especially before 1938, yet the dispute over what Rome signified was always simmering below the surface.⁸⁰

75 "Dalla stazione Ostiense al Quirinale," *Il Messaggero* (4 May 1938): 1.

76 Leo Longanesi, *In piedi e seduti, 1919-1943* (Milano: Longanesi, 1968), 212.

77 *Ibid.*, 211.

78 "Le giornate romane," *L'Urbe* 3, no. 5 (May 1938): 42.

79 Nino Tripodi, *Fascismo così. Problemi di un tempo ritrovato* (Roma: Ciarrapico, 1984), 279.

80 R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life under the Dictatorship 1915-1945* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 259.

A PAGAN LANDSCAPE: POPE PIUS XI, FASCISM,
AND THE STRUGGLE OVER THE ROMAN CITYSCAPE

That much ambiguity rested behind the seemingly cordial relations between the Fascist State and the Vatican could be seen on urban projects, such as the construction of the Via della Conciliazione, the wide boulevard connecting Rome with St. Peter's Square, a project not completed until after World War II. This boulevard necessitated massive demolitions of the Borgo, the dense, medieval neighbourhood surrounding the Vatican. Even in this attempted conciliation between the Vatican and Rome, however, there existed tensions. Giuseppe Bottai, former Governor of Rome, and a leading Fascist intellectual, noted with barely concealed glee that St. Peter's basilica no longer appeared as a "sudden revelation" for Christian pilgrims or as a symbol of beauty amidst ugliness which many wanted to maintain.⁸¹ Ultimately, according to R.J.B. Bosworth, the effect of the Via della Conciliazione was ambiguous, leaving it to the viewers to "decide if it offered a path for a Fascist triumph over old faiths or the chance for the Vatican to dispatch its Christian soldiers on a mission into Italy and the world."⁸² Far from reconciling the opposing interpretations of Rome by the Vatican and by the Fascist Italian State, the new road only confused things for those who wanted a true reconciliation between Church and State in the 1930s.

Both Mussolini and Pius XI saw in Rome the site on which this clash of cultures would be won or lost. It was here that Fascism's character as "political religion" was clearly revealed. Although the Vatican and the Fascist state enjoyed generally cordial relations between the flare-ups of 1931 and 1938, there was, in the words of Renzo De Felice, "no real friendship" between them.⁸³ Underneath this cordiality lay a growing *kulturkampf* played out on the landscape of Rome. By May of 1938, it seemed as if Fascism had succeeded in this "struggle of culture" by making the Eternal City its own; but this was only an illusion. Five years later, in July 1943, after the Allies had bombed Rome, devastating the working-class San Lorenzo quarter, it was Pius XI's papal successor, Pope Pius XII, who visited the area. Mussolini was conspicuous by his absence, an oversight that lost him any sympathy that had remained for him after the disastrous decision to enter the war. Just days after the bombing, Mussolini was arrested, bringing the Fascist regime to an end. As the historian Andrea Riccardi has recently written, the Papacy for the first time since 1870 had regained the moral upper hand in Rome. The Vatican, it seems, had won out over paganism.⁸⁴

The collapse of the Fascist State in 1943 left Rome in the hands of the Vatican, if only briefly. Although the Fascist regime and the Vatican enjoyed an accommodation since the 1929 signing of the Lateran Accords, they had

81 Giuseppe Bottai, *Il Rinnovamento di Roma* (Roma: R. Accademia dei Lincei, 1937), 54.

82 Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, 263.

83 De Felice, *Mussolini. Il Duce: Vol. 1*, 274.

84 Riccardi, "La Vita Religiosa," 320-1.

diametrically opposed views on the character and history of Rome. Ultimately, Catholicism and Fascism, as philosophies and as religions, were fated to clash over the ownership of the Eternal City. Rome was not big enough for these two contenders. This paper has demonstrated that beyond the political and diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the Fascist State, there lay a deeper “struggle for culture,” or *kulturkampf*, between Catholicism and Fascism. While this struggle was glimpsed over Catholic Action and the Racial Laws, these flashpoints must be set against a backdrop of continuous struggle between Mussolini and Pius XI over the symbolic landscape of Rome.

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