

The Witch and the Crucifix

Abstract

In his work “The Witch and the Crucifix” author Paolo Portone traces the various phases of the complex relationship between Christianity, as it becomes the dominant religion, and the *antiqua religio*, the pre-existing Pagan traditions and folklore, analyzing the effects of the evangelical effort carried out by the Church against heresy on popular folklore and pagan cultural heritage, identified with expressions of a diabolical cult. The book outlines the historical and cultural background in which the origin of a new figure is set, the invention of the diabolical Witch, as a doctrinal and legal figure in Medieval Christianity, created as a scapegoat for social issues and means of persecuting dissent, leading to the great hunt of the witches in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The invention of this diabolical Witch figure in the 15th century in Italy is one of the most evident expressions of the ideological process carried out by the Catholic Church with the intent of demonizing the Pagan magical universe and folklore traditions, along with all aspects constituting a link to the past and an obstacle to the affirmation of the supposedly only true doctrine. This line of action was intensified beginning in the 15th century to fight religious and ethnic dissidence towards the doctrinal formulations and precepts of the Church. Instruments for this, the Inquisition and Catholic preachers conducted a slow and constant effort to equalize the surviving Pagan heritage to demonology, producing an identification between folklore magic tradition and diabolical heresy. Popular beliefs and practices, such as the ancient tradition of the *Domina Ludi*, once entered in the sphere of ecclesiastic demonology were dramatically transformed in function and meaning. Numerous studies were produced proving folklore magic beliefs to be true, with the aim to justify their persecution. The crime of *Diabolicae Superstitiones* was created. Harmless female

figures, acknowledged and respected in rural and town communities, the holders of informal powers such as country healers, diviners, experts in natural remedies, midwives, widows, *vetule*, sorceresses and enchantresses, became known with a different name: witches. The term to designate the invention of a figure which has no equivalent in Pagan tradition, was coined in the early 15th century based on the Latin *strix*, whose original meaning was completely transformed to indicate a monstrous figure, the sum of the most terrible creatures in literary and folkloric imagination, the essence of evil and the true manifestation of a very real diabolic presence, that flew at night time, gathered at the *sabba*, and made human sacrifices to the Devil. The inversion of Pagan symbolism and tradition was complete. The times were ready for the great hunt of the witches.

The book focuses on the Italian situation, bringing a valuable contribution to the political debate recently arisen around the concepts of national identity and of clash of civilizations, providing the necessary cultural and anthropological background to fully understand and appreciate the roots of Western civilization and its relationship with different cultures and religions. The so much debated cultural identity which is supposedly based on Christian tradition is in fact rooted much deeper in the past than the defenders of Catholic values actually admit. The common historical view which places the victory of Christianity as a radical and definitive event, sweeping away all previous and needless to say inferior religious and cultural expressions, is indeed misleading, as the Author clearly demonstrates throughout the book with a detailed account of how Pagan and folkloric traditions survived and where integrated into the new dominant religion.

Unlike what happened in Protestant countries, where repression of pagan superstition was radical and systematic, in Italy an interpenetration took place between traditional folkloric culture and the symbolic Catholic universe.

In fact the Protestant Reform became a greater threat to the Church of Rome than the folkloric religious practices and beliefs, once its most dangerous aspects were mitigated, and revealed itself as a good ally in contrasting Lutheran propaganda. In the late 16th Century the situation in Italy was such that even while asserting the real nature of diabolical witchcraft, the ecclesiastic authorities didn't consider the fight against it to be the priority anymore, a fact that favoured the survival of the *antiqua religio* within the official religion, to our day.

In present-day Italy the political debate on cultural identity reflects the struggle over a Christian or a secular public identity. The political use of Christianity made in Italy by conservative parties and fundamentalists in the fight against the Islamic threat has gone a step further, addressing social issues such as cultural relativism and religious indifference. The discussion mounted over the lack of any reference to the Christian roots in the Introduction of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union was a signal of a renewed interest in religious issues and of the accord between the political right wing and the positions of neo traditional Catholicism.

Currently, the reference to Christian heritage is used in the "identity battle" with the aim to save an endangered spiritual tradition without which Europe would succumb to the "new barbarians". Only the revaluation of the Christian religion, as a founding and unifying feature of European identity, can give new vigour to a declining civilization. In Italy the dispute about whether or not the crucifix should be exposed in public spaces such as classrooms, hospitals, offices, is prompted by such ideological positions: for the champions of Christianity the defence of tradition comes to coincide with the defence of the entire Western civilization, with no distinction made, in the name of superior moral principles, for the survival of Europe and the entire Western culture under attack from the outside and threatened within by migrations and religious indifference. Indeed in 2002 the Ministry

for Education, University and Research issued a directive in which school directors were invited to insure the “exposure of the crucifix in classrooms”. Following events, such as the exposure of Muslim religious symbols in a school in Ofena, Italy, as requested by the president of the Italian Muslim Union, led to a court ruling in 2003 ordering the removal of all religious symbols from that school. This decision spurred the debate once again, which took on traits of a more open conflict towards the different ethnic groups living in the country. Once again, the constitutional legitimization of the crucifix was sustained by advocating a “cultural” argument: this is an interesting point, considering that the same argument was used in the past by members of the Church opposing the political use and the reductive transformation of the symbol of the Passion of Christ into a generic emblem of shared cultural values, such as peace and solidarity. A subsequent court ruling in favour of the public exposure of the crucifix was based on an outright oxymoron: the conclusion being that on the one hand the crucifix remains a religious symbol, not merely historic and cultural, and at the same time the universal values which it represents determine its unsectarian nature, therefore making it compatible with the State laity and its constitutional principles.

The defence of the *Homo occidentalis* manifests itself in this monstrous hybrid between old and new resulting in religious patriotism, invoking the conservation of religious tradition, a grotesque representation used as a weapon against different cultures, religions and values. The revival of Christian values is strongly linked to the praise of past traditions and values. In this context, the impudent use of the folklore repertoire, including its religious aspects, is often misleading and aimed at promoting the more accessible aspects of the Christian doctrine.

Ultimately, the book questions the definition of our roots as Christian roots, and suggests a different perspective considering this identification as the result of a forced imposition carried out

over centuries by the Church authorities. The historiographic material presented throughout the book in support of this thesis illustrates the phases of the process of indoctrination by which Christianity was in fact imposed from above by the efforts of the Church, which were constantly aimed at contrasting and eradicating the ancient popular customs and traditions. No doubt Christianity constituted an important contribution to European culture, and well beyond the Middle Ages most of the European population Europe had been converted, but to what cost?

The price paid by the evangelical message was its partial distortion, in complying to the traditional religious sentiment, favouring the passage from the old to the new, in the systematic effort to replace and transform ancient cults and divinities, and the polytheistic heritage. The Christian calendar, for example, was simply superimposed on the pagan one, preserving the customs and traditions of the *antiqua religio* to our days. Many of our holidays directly descend from ancient pagan rites, Christmas for example can be traced back to an archaic celebration of the sun.

Throughout the Middle Ages in Italy Christianization was accomplished not only with the destruction and transformation of the places and the symbols of pagan tradition, but also through the appropriation of its magical and spiritual aspects, concealed under a new guise. The miraculous power of the new religion, more effective in the conversion effort to Christianity than the moral and scriptural precepts, was often adapted to the pre-existing pagan sacred tradition, keeping the same functions and salvific attributes. There are many examples of this in present day Italy, where many places of worship have been built on previous pagan sanctuaries. In the heart of Rome, the Church of Saint Bartholomew located on the Tiber Island, stands on the site of the former temple of Aesculapius, of which traces remain still today, encompassing the previous divinity's healing functions, including a well with supposedly curative powers. Even at the time of the construction of the Church pilgrims used to travel to the Tiber Island to practice the ancient rite

of the *incubatio*, in which the cure would be revealed in a dream while sleeping at the entrance of the temple.

It is very difficult to trace a divide between Christianity and pagan tradition and polytheism, outside of the theological frame. The differences were not so evident in the eyes of the newly converted, if not for the assumption of the superiority of the Christian religion. The pre-existing cults and beliefs were deprived of the original meaning and took on a negative meaning, which led to their pure and simple identification with witchcraft. The battle against superstition was fought also within the Church itself, where pagan and folklore beliefs survive, still today, within the official religious frame.