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Reviewed by Malcolm D. Magee, Michigan State University

Giuliana Chamedes’s “The Vatican and The Reshaping of the European International Order After the First World War,” coming as it did in 2013 seems prescient given the current Pope’s initiatives in the Middle East and his seeming success in instigating a rapprochement between the United States and Cuba. While much attention has been paid to the Vatican’s role in the rise of Fascism and Nazism, the larger topic of Vatican involvement in the broader international context between the wars has been largely neglected. Chamedes does much to remedy that situation by adding this broader Vatican diplomatic thread to the tapestry of international history.

It is helpful to use the word ‘thread,’ when correcting the under-emphasis of religion, or in this case the specifics of Vatican diplomacy, because the correction should not lead to a corresponding over-emphasis. The tapestry of international history during this period is quite complex, and the competing emphasis and subjects should be examined on their own and not at the expense of other balancing interests. In the case of this article that seems to be exactly what has been done.

Using Vatican archives and other diplomatic records, Chamedes makes a claim that the Catholic Church in all its anti-democratic clothing was able to find ways to regain influence and even endorse or support a number of newly emerging democratic governments in post-Great War Europe. Her argument hinges on less used Vatican sources which seem to indicate that church diplomats, acting within the theological worldview that the Vatican was operating in, were trying to build as broad an international political base as possible for their religious/political views to operate. That they were actively trying to shape the post war world into a Catholic Christian image where possible. With its specific history of acting as an agent of diplomacy (and
sometimes political intrigue) in Europe from the fall of the Roman Empire to the present, the Church of Rome seemed to be in an ideal agent to exert soft power over the emerging nation states that resulted following the break up of the European empires at the end of the Great War. The centerpiece of this Vatican influence - the Concordats - and the creating of formal diplomatic ties with a number of nations by the Church is in itself interesting. Of even greater interest, however, is the fact that this scholarship allows a new look at European politics during this period. Through this prism, Chamedes illuminates how the struggle for mastery of Europe became a struggle of ideologies, all of which were at their core religious in some manner of speaking. Recent scholarship, ranging from Charles Taylor and John Milbank to other philosophers who have recently argued that there is not a clear religious/secular divide. Many of these works have explored the religious underpinnings of secularism and its corresponding Western ideologies.

It is interesting in light of this scholarship that according to Chamedes, the Vatican found itself with two ‘secular’ rivals. Aside from the obvious rival to the Church rooted in the atheist Marxism that was embodied in the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the more immediate and real competition in Europe was Wilsonian secular internationalism. Atheism can in many ways be viewed as an anti-religious religion, with its own zealots and evangelists who are bent on spreading the message. The historian Stephen Prothero recently included atheism in his book *God Is Not One: The Eight Religions that Run the World.* But it was the American President, Woodrow Wilson, put the other secular competition forth. Chamedes adds the word ‘secular’ to the term ‘Wilsonian internationalism.’ While many historians and certainly the Vatican would have viewed it that way, there is a growing body of scholarship that indicates that Wilsonian internationalism was in fact at its foundation a very religious – even Protestant – program. That Wilson’s ‘secular’ program was at its core a Protestant and Presbyterian view of the world which had been in competition in one form or another with the Vatican for centuries only adds to the tale of competing ideologies with religious claims.

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1. Among the books arguing that secularism itself springs from a religious framework are Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, 2007. Another Philosopher, John Milbank, makes a similar claim in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2006. There are others who critique the idea that there is a strict separation between the religious and the secular, Slavoj Žižek might be an example.


What this article enables the historian to do is to see the degree of fragmentation and competition among the European actors between the wars. There were more actors than are typically given credit. Attention tends to focus on Bolshevism, Fascism/Nazism, and Western Style Democracy in the flux leading up to the Second World War. Chamedes adds another actor to this competition. Between the World Wars Wilsonian internationalism waned as far as American involvement was concerned. The return to normalcy pushed by President Warren Harding and his successors, the view that United States involvement in the war had been a mistake, and the increasingly isolationist mood within the U.S. marginalized Wilsonians in American policy making. There were, however, European actors who continued their own versions of Wilsonianism internationalism.

What seems to be central to the story here though is the Vatican’s perception, or fear, that it would be marginalized in the conflict between Wilsonianism and Marxism-Leninism. (958) Regardless of the temporary death of Wilsonianism in the U.S. between the wars, the competition the Vatican was responding to, which began during the height of the struggle between these two competing political models during the Great War, continued. All three of these political ideologies argued that they held the path to ‘peace in our time.’ There was the intensely anti-religious Bolshevism arguing for peace via a communist Internationale; Another was Wilsonianism, arguing that international American style democracy and the right to national self-determination would produce peace; and finally the Vatican, which was pursuing the policy of signing concordats with willing national partners in the hopes of bringing peace through a degree of alliance, or at least alliance of common interest, between church and state. The Vatican in a sense was trying to capture a neo-traditionalist world, perhaps some vestige of the Holy Roman Empire.

What seems to come through in this article, however, is not just the Vatican’s tireless efforts to reassert its influence in European affairs, but also the tragedy of timing and association. For instance, in the early part of their endeavor, while the war was still raging, the Vatican’s rival peace plan quickly found support from Spain and the Central Powers. This, of course, was the kiss of death to the possibility of success. Once Germany accepted it, even in principle, it became a poison pill for the allies. One wishes that Chamedes had spent a bit more time elaborating on how that association affected the success of the plan. Did the United States and the allies view it, as the friend of my enemy is my enemy? Alternatively, was there any serious consideration of this overture? Had the Vatican been able to get signers on both sides of the conflict might it have been viewed better? Was there any discussion in the Vatican about the catastrophic success of getting one side to sign too quickly? Or is this beyond the scope of the available evidence?

Another association problem alluded to in Chamedes’s article is Benito Mussolini and the rise of Italian Fascism. Reading between the lines it seems that Mussolini was able to use the Vatican to help him solidify power. The anti-Bolshevik and traditional nature of
Fascism lent itself to alliance with Rome on general domestic issues. However, as Chamedes points out, Mussolini and the Fascists were untrustworthy partners. It makes one wonder just how loyal Fascist leaders were to the Vatican in the first place. Here it seems that the old accusation that the Vatican enabled Fascism along with its anti-Semitism might find some credence. Once in power, these leaders were apparently unreliable. But was the endorsement of the Vatican one of the means by which they came to power? Was the Vatican actually gaining influence or was it being used by these dictators as a means to legitimize their grab for power? One might argue that Vatican in its attempt to thwart atheistic communism fell off the horse on the other side by supporting Fascism.

Despite the questions raised, or perhaps because of the questions raised, this article seems to be an important addition to the scholarship of this period of European and international history. The addition of the understanding of religion’s role in the shaping of international relations does not take away from the other secular trends in that same history. What it does is add an important additional thread to it. It would be good to see more scholarship on the Vatican’s role during this time. I am hopeful that Chamedes will continue to build on this research and that other scholars will follow suit.

Malcolm Magee has a Ph.D. in the history of international relations. He is an Associate Professor in the Departments of History and Religious Studies at Michigan State University. He is the Director of The Institute for the Study of Christianity and Culture. His fields include American religious history, progressive era politics and nineteenth-century political and religious thought. He has written, What the World Should Be: Woodrow Wilson and the Crafting of a Faith Based Foreign Policy (Baylor University Press, 2008) as well as a chapter in the Blackwell companion series on Woodrow Wilson. He is currently working on several academic projects as well as some recently published fiction and poetry.