

SACRED NATIONS, CONTESTED LANDSCAPES

Regimes, Religions, and Monumentality in the Short Twentieth Century

One-day workshop

January 21, 2027

Aula Bisconti

Roma Tre University – Department of Humanities, Via Ostiense, 234, 00146 Roma

Organizers: Gianfranco Bria (Roma Tre University); Franco Baldasso (Bard College)

9:30–9:40 - Institutional Welcome

Prof. Alberto D'anna – Dean of the Department of Humanities, Roma Tre University

9:40–10:00 - Introduction

Gianfranco Bria (Roma Tre University)

Franco Baldasso (Bard College)

Sacred Nations, Contested Landscapes: Concepts, Chronologies, and Comparative Perspectives

10:00–11:45 - Keynote Lecture

Andrea Cortellessa (Roma Tre University) - Il culto dei mutilati e i suoi luoghi

10.45–11:00 - Coffee Break

11:00–12:30 - PANEL I

Sacralizing the Nation: Political Myths and Monumental Architectures

Stefano Romagnoli (Sapienza University of Rome) - *Monumentalizing the Nation: Triumphal Arches and the Sacralization of Public Space in Meiji Japan*

Gabriele Guerra (Sapienza University of Rome) - *Germanic Sacredness: The Monument to Arminius as a Political Myth of German Identity between the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*

Lorenzo Benadusi (Roma Tre University) - *Marcello Piacentini between the Sacralization of Politics and the Modernization of Religious Architecture*

Chair: Maria Chiara Giorda (Roma Tre University)

13:00 –14:30 - Lunch Break

14:30–16:30 - PANEL II

Contested Sacred Landscapes: Regime Change, Religious Heritage, and Spatial Negotiation

Karen Barkey (Bard College) - *Monument in Transition: Hagia Sophia across Three Regimes*

Giuseppe Tateo (Roma Tre University) - *New Cathedrals in Postsocialist Europe: Turning Chance into Destiny*

Massimo Mammarella (Sapienza University of Rome) - *The Peak of Contention: Claiming Ownership over a Shared Sacred Landscape in Contemporary Montenegro*

Silvia Omenetto (Sapienza University of Rome) - *Monumentalizing Pluralism: The Evolution of Sikh Gurdwara Aesthetics in Singapore*

Chair: Andrea Mammone (Sapienza University of Rome)

16:30–17:00 - Coffee Break

17:00–18:00 Final Roundtable

Sacred Nations after the Short Twentieth Century

20:00 - Workshop Dinner

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Regimes, Religions, and Monumentality in the Short Twentieth Century

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The “short twentieth century” was marked by political regimes that developed powerful governmental and ideological practices profoundly shaping the societies they ruled. Central among these was the “cult of the nation”, conceived as the sublimation of national collective belonging. In line with Daniel Bell’s analysis of nationalism as a form of secularized sacred commitment, the nation may be understood as an object of quasi-religious devotion: a symbolic community invested with moral ultimacy, capable of mobilizing affect, loyalty, and sacrifice. For Bell, modern nationalism operated as a surrogate faith in secular societies, endowing the political community with transcendental meaning and ritualized forms of attachment. This cult did not merely elaborate the idea of “imagined communities”; it actively aimed to inculcate a deeply affective sense of belonging to them. It translated national identity into ritualized practices, monumental aesthetics, political liturgies, and disciplined forms of participation. This dynamic reached its most explicit and violent form in twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. Scholars such as Emilio Gentile and Robert Mallett have described this phenomenon as “political religion,” while others, including Enzo Traverso, have used the term “civil religion” to capture the evocative power of regimes’ narratives and symbols in constructing a shared cultural memory. Through these mechanisms, the masses were encouraged to imagine themselves as a cohesive social body unified by myth, ritual, and destiny.

The sacralization of the nation was a structural feature of modern political regimes as such, though it found its most radical and systematized expression in twentieth-century totalitarianism. To limit this phenomenon exclusively to totalitarian systems would therefore be misleading. Across the political spectrum of the short twentieth century, various modern regimes fostered romanticized national sentiment through disciplined corporality, monumental aesthetics, political liturgies, and the cult of leadership. Public space became a stage for rituals, symbols, and narratives designed to instill reverence and shape collective memory. This often involved constructing a mythologized past, as in Greece, or projecting a civilizing and emancipatory future, as in many communist regimes. The building of a shared memory required the production of a material and visual culture capable of embodying autopoietic national myths and palingenetic narratives, as exemplified by the fascist *sacrari militari* in Italy, such as Redipuglia or Cima Grappa, which monumentalized collective sacrifice and transformed the landscape into a liturgical space of national regeneration. Architecture became a particularly powerful instrument, operating simultaneously on rational and emotional registers. Regimes reshaped urban and rural landscapes according to their conception of history (past, present, and future) and of the people as a national community. In some cases, this included the monumentalization or symbolic re-appropriation of religious architectural heritage; in other cases, as in the Soviet Union, it entailed the destruction or radical transformation of sacred sites (most emblematic in the 1931 demolition of Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour) thereby inscribing the ideological rupture with the religious past directly into the urban landscape.

Regimes also reconfigured their relationship with religious institutions in line with the technologies mobilized for “the cult of the nation” and their ideological conception of religion. Such efforts were often grounded in a post-Westphalian understanding of the relationship between state and religion, structured around a dialectical hierarchy in which religious institutions were subordinated to political authority. While this model implied subordination, it did not exclude negotiation or collaboration. State secularism could selectively incorporate religious symbols and practices, producing mimetic or hybrid forms. In communist and socialist regimes, processes described as the “domestication of religion” ranged from overt anti-religious campaigns (such as the Chinese Cultural Revolution) to the incorporation of national ideology into religious structures.

These dynamics were reflected in the transformation of religious architectural landscapes. Sacred buildings were repurposed, nationalized, destroyed, or integrated into state projects, as in Albania’s 1967 anti-religious campaign. Yet neither fascist nor communist regimes fully succeeded in erasing religious monumental landscapes. Religious authorities and believers developed strategies of negotiation, adaptation, and resistance, preserving or re-signifying sacred spaces. In Soviet Central Asia, for instance, specific sacred sites (such as the shrine of Ahmad Yasavi in Turkestan) became focal points for the reconstruction of communal memory serving as a spatial node through which Islamic and cultural identities were preserved, negotiated and re-signified.

Starting from the concept of the “cult of the nation” - as a modern form of secular sacralization of political community - this workshop aims to explore, from interdisciplinary perspectives (historical, sociological, anthropological, architectural, and archaeological), how regimes of the short twentieth century shaped religious monumental and architectural landscapes. It seeks to examine both strategies of state control and the practices of negotiation and resistance that redefined the spatial and symbolic boundaries between political power and religious life.

- In what ways did regimes of the short twentieth century sacralize the nation and translate national belonging into ritual, architectural, and spatial forms?
- How did the cult of the nation interact with pre-existing religious traditions, institutions, and sacred landscapes? Did it seek to appropriate, suppress, transform, or coexist with them?
- How did 20th century regimes borrow, imitate, or reconfigure religious symbols, liturgical forms, and architectural vocabularies to sacralize political authority?
- How were religious architectural sites re-signified, negotiated, or resisted under regimes seeking to monopolize collective memory, and what discursive strategies (legal, ideological, historiographical, aesthetic) were mobilized to legitimize such transformations?
- Can the transformation of religious monumental landscapes function as a privileged lens for analyzing the ways in which 20th century regimes negotiated the boundaries between nationalism, secularism, and religion?

Speakers

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