

AGAPEIST ETHICS IN GIOVANNI PAPINI'S *STORIA DI CRISTO*

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Sommario

La Storia di Cristo (1921) di Giovanni Papini ha segnato l'inizio di una nuova fase nel tortuoso viaggio intellettuale e spirituale dal suo originario ateismo. In questa biografia leggermente romanzata, egli ha posto l'accento sull'etica dell'assoluta rinuncia del sé di Gesù, come appare nel Sermone sul Monte, con particolare attenzione alla non-resistenza di fronte alla violenza. In questo modo il pacifismo di Papini ha ricevuto un fondamento religioso. La sua meta-etica cristocentrica si opponeva diametralmente all'affidarsi alla legge naturale tipico della tradizione cattolica, che lentamente avrebbe perso molto del suo potere normativo nella teologia morale cattolica nel proseguio del ventesimo secolo.

The publication of Giovanni Papini's quasi-novelised biography of Jesus, *Storia di Cristo* in 1921 was one of many turning points in the tortuous intellectual and spiritual journey of this prominent Italian man of letters whom Ernesto Livorni justifiably placed among the "most prolific and influential intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century".¹ It was the first major fruit of his Catholic period, the *terminus a qua* of which can be imprecisely dated to the First World War. Papini's *metanoia* at that

¹ Ernesto Livorni, "Giovanni Papini", in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 264, *Italian Prose Writers, 1900-1945* (Detroit: The Gale Group, Inc., 2002): 233.

time was of no mean proportions. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, he had gained moderate renown in Italy as a radical intellectual, advocate of social reform, and atheist but, like many others of his generation, reached an unsatisfying impasse in an era of rapid cultural transition. In what many commentators regard as his most carefully crafted work, his autobiographical *Un uomo finito* (1912), he revealed his partial anomie in exploring the story of his soul.

It was therefore not surprising that while the war raged and seemed to threaten what remained of traditional European culture and stability, Papini sought a fundamentally new direction. That he found it through extensive reading of Christian and other religious texts, however, may have amazed some of his *confrères*. Expressions of his interest in spiritual matters were manifested *inter alia* in *La paga del sabato* (1915) and *Polemichi religiose* (1917). These works are not those of a mature Christian intellectual, but they pointed to what was to come after Panini emerged as a spiritually vibrant if theologically immature Catholic. Before the end of the war this native of Florence retreated from contentious urban life to a rustic area between the Tiber and Arno rivers to live among Tuscan peasants, whose uncomplicated lifestyle and unsophisticated piety appealed to him. Unlike much of the sceptical intelligentsia with whom Panini had associated for more than a decade before the war, they had remained faithful to their Catholic institutions, living their faith according to centuries-old traditions and, apparently, unsullied by the winds of intellectual and cultural change which had blown away the faith of many of their urbanised compatriots. It was through daily contact with these *contadini* that he discovered how meaningful the Bible could be to himself.² Shortly thereafter, Papini began to write *Storia di Cristo* to present what he had accepted as the

essential truth of Jesus in what many readers of the original Italian text and numerous translations apparently perceived as a meaningful mooring in a world gone adrift. Papini's attraction to the utterly non-nationalistic ethics of Jesus is all the more comprehensible against the backdrop of the intensely national sentiments which had contributed to and been magnified during the First World War. He clearly perceived in the New Testament the antidote to the poison which had again laid Europe low.

It is my intention in the present article to analyse contours of a central dimension of *Storia di Cristo* which is crucial to an understanding of Papini in general, namely his advocacy of Christocentric, agapeist ethics anchored in selfless love, particularly with regard to matters concerning war and violence. His stance in the early 1920s is noteworthy in terms of literary history, because it placed him at odds with the anti-pacifist position of the Fascist movement which propelled Mussolini into power in 1922. But Papini, in another remarkable shift in his personal journey, would eventually embrace Fascism and dedicate his 1937 *Storia della Letteratura Italiana* to Mussolini.

The noun *agap'* (together with its nominal and verbal derivatives) is one of the most important concepts in the New Testament. As discussed below, it refers to selfless love inspired by God. It occurs only a few times in the gospels, with all but two of these occurrences in the Gospel of John. The most familiar of these is in John 13:34-35, where, at the Last Supper, Jesus famously says, "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." The Johannine epistles also employ *agap'*, e.g. I John 3:18: "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth," and I John 4:8: "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." Dozens of occurrences in the Pauline epistles, most notably in I

² "An Italian Life of Christ", *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 1,017 (14 July 1921): 446.

Corinthians 13, supplement these instances. As generally used by specialists in Christian ethics, “agapeist ethics” is an approach to ethical decision making based not on the minutiae of specific prescriptions designed to address a variety of problems in life, but teleologically, proceeding from the general principle of divine love and adapting one’s conduct to serve the goal of distributing that love to others and to the general good of all.

The Historical Context of Papini’s Pacifism

Papini and every other Catholic of his era who professed pacifist views dissented markedly from a normal position which had existed in their branch of Christianity for nearly 1,500 years. To the extent that one may generalise succinctly about a massive and historically complicated topic in the history of Christian theology, Catholic moral teaching about violence and war has been derived in large part from natural law, *i.e.* the supposedly inherent principles which imbued all of God’s creation from the outset and can be discerned by non-Christians and Christians alike. This was one root of the classic “just war” theory which in the history of Western civilisation was born in classical Greece where Plato, among others, advanced it, taken over by Augustine early in the fifth century and incorporated by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century in his *Summa Theologica*. Particularly in its Thomistic expression, it became the normative and influential Catholic position with regard to international violence from the Middle Ages until the twentieth century.

Closely following Augustine but making only scant reference to the Bible, Aquinas propounded three fundamental conditions for a war to be just. The first was “the authority of the sovereign by whose command the war is to be waged”; it was not to be undertaken by private individuals. The second was “a just cause”, “namely that those who are attacked,

should be attacked because they deserve it on account of some fault.” Finally, “it is necessary that the belligerents should have a rightful intention, so that they intend the advancement of good, or the avoidance of evil.” Aquinas quoted Augustine uncritically: “True religion looks upon as peaceful those wars that are waged not for motives of aggrandisement, or cruelty, but with the object of securing peace, of punishing evil-doers, and of uplifting the good.”³ This obviously left no room for absolute pacifism, notwithstanding the fact that dissenting individual Catholics had played prominent roles in peace movements since the nineteenth century, including many of those in Italy cited above and some, clearly a minuscule minority, had eschewed violence altogether.

Looking ahead contextually, the “just war” theory has remained normative in Roman Catholic moral theology, although a document issued by the Second Vatican Council in 1965 opened the door to differing interpretations. *Gaudium et spes*, which addressed a wide array of issues confronting Christianity in the twentieth century, by no means adopted a pacifist position. However, it acknowledged the legitimacy of various responses to the scourge of warfare in an age when the bitter fruits of nuclear physics and other natural sciences had facilitated devastation on an even greater scale than in the past. Its drafters accordingly declared, “Eodem spiritu moti, non possumus non laudare eos, qui in iuribus vindicandis actioni violentae renuntiantes, ad media defensionis recurrunt quae ceteroquin etiam debilioribus praesto sunt, dummodo hoc sine laesione iurium et obligationum aliorum vel communitatis fieri possit.” Yet *Gaudium et spes* also included words which reasserted a traditional justification of militarism: “Qui vero, patriae servitio addicti, in exercitu

³ The “*Summa Theologica*” of St. Thomas Aquinas, Part II, Second Part, Question XL, Article 1 (London: R. & T. Washbourne, Ltd., 1917): 501-502.

versantur, et ipsi tamquam securitatis libertatisque populorum ministros sese habeant, et, dum hoc munere recte funguntur, vere ad pacem stabiliendam conferunt.” Furthermore, *Gaudium et spes* explicitly underscored that “Concilium ante omnia in memoriam revocare intendit permanentem vim iuris naturalis gentium eiusque principiorum universalem.”⁴

The historical context of Papini’s explicit rejection of the use of force and implicit rejection of the “just war” cannot be adequately understood apart from an awareness of the rudimentary history of pacifism in Europe, which, especially in its absolute form which totally rejected the legitimacy of armed conflict, even defensive resistance to unambiguous foreign aggression, was obviously light years removed from the “just war” doctrine. In brief, during the nineteenth century, as the Continent recovered from the trauma of the Napoleonic wars, numerous Christian and secular movements were initiated to foster greater international cooperation, provide peaceful means of resolving tensions between nations, and otherwise reduce the likelihood of the scourge of armed conflict. Many resulting organisations existed by the 1830s, and they multiplied during the latter half of the century. Some took their cue from Christian ethics. This was in itself a highly significant development, because prior to the nineteenth century pacifism, especially pacifism of the absolute sort which denied the legitimacy of any use of force, regardless of the circumstances, had previously been the nearly exclusive province of the historic “peace churches”, such as the Society of Friends (or “Quakers”), various Anabaptist groups, the Church of the Brethren in Germany. This has been cogently argued by *inter alia* Peter Brock in his classic studies of

⁴ Florentio Romita (ed.), *Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II Constitutiones - Decreta - Declarationes* (Rome: Desclée, n.d.): 204-206.

the topic.⁵ Larger denominations, such as the Roman Catholic Church, the state Lutheran denominations in Scandinavia and numerous German principalities, and the Church of England had certainly not been of pacifist bent. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, much of the leadership of peace movements in one European country after another came from historically non-pacifist religious backgrounds. Other pacifists, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were socialists who rejected war as a function of an ethically indefensible social and political structure rooted in bourgeois control.

Although Italy was never a major centre of this general movement, it eventually spawned a remarkable number of peace organisations. In 1868, for example, Timoteo Riboli founded in Torino the Lega di libertà, fratellanza e pace, which was affiliated with a parallel body in Geneva, the Ligue internationale de la paix et de la liberté. In its wake followed, to name but a few, the Unione lombarda per la pace e l'arbitrato internazionale, the Società della pace, the Società per la pace e l'arbitrato internazionale, and the Comitato delle signore per la pace et l'arbitrato internazionale. Like their counterparts abroad, Italian peace advocates published journals to advance their cause. Two were *La Libertà e la pace*, and *La Vita internazionale*.⁶ As in most other European countries, the *fin de siècle* witnessed the greatest growth of peace movements in Italy, and this continued until the outbreak of the First World War. As Sandi E. Cooper generalised in her cogent study of the subject, "The years 1899 to 1914, a quarter-century filled with crisis and threats to the breakdown of peace, were also a twenty-five-year period of unremitting growth of both

⁵ Peter Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Peter Brock, *Freedom from Violence: Sectarian nonresistance from the Middle Ages to the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

⁶ Sandi E. Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism: Waging War on War in Europe 1815-1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991): 215-216, 279.

national and international peace movements.”⁷ In Italy, most of the organisations in question co-operated to form at a congress held in Torino in 1904 a national body. This constituent assembly attracted more than 150 official delegates from twenty-five societies. Indicative of the breadth of the movement’s appeal, there were also representatives from Masonic lodges, veterans’ organisations, universities, workers’s associations, feminist societies, socialist organisations, and political circles.⁸

Complicating matters for Italian pacifists of various hues, however, was the fact that their country was allied with expansionist, militarist Germany and Austria-Hungary in the Triple Alliance from 1882 until shortly before the outbreak of the First World War (despite the fact that Italy was a rival of Austria-Hungary for hegemony in the Balkans and for control of the Adriatic), and clamouring for a resolution, by arms if necessary, of the *Italia irredenta* issue. Italian pacifists were by no means of one mind with regard to these matters. After the turn of the century, Italian imperial aspirations in North Africa contributed to a fracturing of the peace movement on the home front, manifested especially in a conflict between rival factions led by Moneta and Edoardo Giretti, and its virtual collapse in 1911. It was thus in a climate of perennial international tension but cautious optimism that harmony among nations could be attained in part through activism that Papini began his career as a writer. The impact of the 1914-1918 war on peace activists was thus all the more sobering.

The extent to which Christianity directly influenced the peace movements in Italy and elsewhere is debatable. Unquestionably, large numbers of participants, regardless of their political and economic views, were secular people who would have ascribed their motivation to other factors. On the other hand, it has often been pointed out that many

⁷ Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism*: 8.

⁸ Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism*: 66.

individuals, such as the internationally renowned Russian author and pacifist Leo Tolstoy, found much of their motivation in the Sermon on the Mount with *inter alia* its ethic of turning the other cheek. When Papini, who had participated in peace movements before the First World War, turned with increasing vigour to the New Testament after the armistice, he found a message which resonated with his earlier convictions.

Storia di Cristo

Storia di Cristo is fairly described as a hybrid work, a retelling of its eponymous theme adapted with frequent smidgins of artistic licence and imbued a generous slathering of authorial commentary. Theologically, it is generally a conservative work which many Catholic theologians of that day undoubtedly could endorse, although a rigorous reading reveals that Papini did not hew as closely to the accounts of the gospels as earlier commentators tended to believe – a matter to which we shall return shortly. The account is divided into several dozen short chapters, the first few of which are devoted to a description of the world into which Jesus was born. Papini's narration reflects his post-socialist conviction that the salvation of humanity lies less in the transformation of society than in the metamorphosis of individual souls.

Storia di Cristo has often been described as an account faithful to the New Testament portrayal of Jesus. Although much of it doggedly follows the contours of the texts of the gospels, one would deny Papini's creativity by suggesting that he merely paraphrased their familiar story. Repeatedly he embedded in his tale fictional elements which can justly be labelled the hybrid fruits of Catholic tradition, authorial imagination, and unrestrained respect for the person of Jesus. Some of the earliest such dimensions occur in Papini's presentation of the childhood of Jesus. "Nella casa di Nazaret Gesù medita sui comandamenti della Legge ma soltanto nei

Profeti, nelle parole di pianto e di fuoco dei Profeti, riconosce il suo destino.”Moreover, Papini declares, he was supposedly aware of the minutest detail of everything that would befall him (82).⁹ The juvenile activities are also described from a fictional perspective: “Mentre Gesù, nello stambugio di Nazaret, maneggiava l’ascia e la squadra”, John the Baptist begins his prophetic ministry (88). There is no unambiguous Scriptural warrant for these musings. Nor will one find anywhere in the New Testament coverage for Papini’s description of the young Jesus in Galilee as a man deeply attached to nature: “Sempre cara gli fu quella costa solatía del suo Lago – lunto la conca d’acqua placida, limpida e serena, appena mossa dal vento del deserto, appena popolata dalle barche che bordeggiano silenziose e sembrano, da lontano, senza padroni” (115). The point is not to undermine Papini’s artistry with pettyfogging criticism but rather to emphasise the fact his willingness to enhance the biblical narrative in accordance with his own perceptions.

Establishing the Contrast between Jesus and Judaism

Papini’s presentation of the radical ethics of Jesus is predicated on the conviction that Jesus had fundamentally departed from Judaism and that there was little common ground between the message of the Gospel and Jewish religion of the first century or previously. Indeed, this is the lynchpin in Papini’s portrayal of Jesus as essentially a new departure from any preceding or contemporary belief system. The ethics of Jesus was for the young Italian writer a profoundly novel act on the stage of human history. This perception goes hand-in-hand with Papini’s commitment to the teachings of Jesus as special, or unique, revelation and his implicit rejection of natural law.

⁹ Giovanni Papini, *Storia di Cristo*, Vol. V, *Tutte le Opere di Giovanni Papini* (N.p.: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1962). All page references are to this edition.

Flowing through *Storia di Cristo* is an anti-Jewish subcurrent which repeatedly manifests itself. Papini, who after Mussolini's accession to power would emerge as an unabashed anti-Semite, allowed his penchant for generalisation to affect much of his description of the ancient Hebrews. Benché pastorale piú che guerriero non fu mai in pace né con sé stesso né cogli altri," he declared. "Guerregiò coi suoi vicini, coi suoi ospiti, coi suoi príncipi; guerregiò coi suoi Profeti e col suo stesso Dio. Marcio di scelleratezze, governato da omicidi, traditori, adulteri, incestuosi, briganti, simoniaci e idolatri, pure vide nasacere dalle sue donne, nelle sue case, i piú perfetti santi dell'Oriente: giusti, ammonitori, solitari, profeti" (76). Papini enlisted Jesus to corroborate his negative portrayal: "Sa che gli Ebrei, carnali, materiali, mondani, abbeverati di umiliazione, pieni di rancori e di mali pensieri, non aspettano un Messia povero, odiato e mansueto" (85).

Papini did not mince words or qualify his generalisations in describing the extent to which Jesus challenged accepted truths and inverted the values inherited from Jewish culture. History is punctuated by nonconformists, he conceded, "Ma il piú grane Rovesciatore è Gesù. Il supremo Paradossita, il Capovolgitore radicale e senza paura." To Papini, a pivotal characteristic of Jesus and his message was that he refused to accept the supposed unalterability of human nature. "Egli ha detto al Passato, assiderato nella sua agonia, alla natura, troppo di buon grado ubbidita, all'Opinione universale e volgare, il piú reciso NO che la storia del mondo registri" (138).

No Love in Judaism and Classical Antiquity?

Papini's argument about the novelty of Jesus' demands for love collapses under the burden of his generalisations about the absence of love before the Sermon on the Mount was preached. This zealous convert clearly had

some awareness of pre-Christian cultures in the Mediterranean and other regions of the world hardly enough knowledge of them to justify certain categorical judgements he made about them. This is particularly obvious in his pivotal declaration about the non-existence of *agap'* in antiquity: "Il mondo antico non conosce l'Amore. Conosce la passione per la donna, l'amicizia per l'amico, la giustizia per il cittadino, l'ospitalità per il forestiero. Ma non conosce l'Amore" (172).

This qualification apparently reflects a basic awareness of the distinction in ancient and Hellenistic Greek between three terms for love, namely self-gratifying *eros*, the caring for friends and relatives in *philia*, and other-directed *agap'*. However, Papini's categorical denial of the existence of the third before it was demanded by Jesus as the basic commandment from which all others proceed is born of ignorance. Gerhard Kittel discussed the matter in considerable detail in his authoritative *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (which was not compiled until the early 1930s). He acknowledged that in pre-biblical Greek the meaning of the substantive *agap'* (and its verb forms) was sometimes imprecise and inconsistent but that in the main it denoted a showing of love, "a giving active love on the other's behalf". (By contrast, *eros* in pre-biblical Greek referred to the seeking in others "the fulfilment of its own life's hunger".) Kittel could cite numerous classical Greek usages in this sense.¹⁰ Of them, however, Papini evinced no cognisance.

Turning to Hellenistic Judaism of the period immediately before and concurrent with the ministry of Jesus, Kittel could point to "love for one's neighbour" as "a favourite theme", one which rested on the foundation of centuries of Jewish tradition. As early as the seventh century B.C. Menander the Sage, who, *nota bene*, had recorded an antecedent of what is known as the "Golden Rule" in Matthew 7:12, called attention to the

¹⁰ Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. I (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964): 36-37.

importance of love for one's neighbour. The slightly older contemporary of Jesus, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, made a systematic presentation of selfless love as a set of concentric circles progressing from the innermost (compatriots, proselytes, and neighbours) outward to enemies, slaves, animals, and plants, so that all of creation would be included as the objects of human love.¹¹

Papini did not limit his generalisation about the non-existence of satisfactory, selfless love before Jesus to what in the history of Western civilisation is generally perceived as the ancient world. Looking much further east, he was certain that it was also absent in East Asia. Papini allowed that Gautama Siddharta, the founder of Buddhism, had "raccomandò l'amore per gli uomini, per tutti gli uomini, anche i più miserabili e disprezzati." But Papini found fault with this, as well: "Il buddista non ama il fratello per amor del fratello, ma per amor di sé stesso, cioè per scansare il dolore, per sopraffare l'egoismo, per avviarsi all'annullamento. Il suo amore universale è gelido e interessato, egoista [...]" (165-166).

The Human Condition: the Reality of Fallen Man

In the wake of the First World War, Papini apparently had no difficulty accepting the foundational doctrine of universal sin. His description of primal man particularly reveals his perception of what lay beneath the veneer of civilisation: "Gli uomini degli antichi tempi, gli uomini carnali, fisici, corporali, corpulenti, sanguigni, atticciati, ben costrutti, gli uomini dal pelo folto, dalla rossa faccia, mangiatori di carne cruda, sverginatori di vergini, rubatori d'armenti, sbranatori di nemici [...]" (144). In modern times, Papini observed, people were no better morally. "L'avarizia degli

¹¹ Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. I: 40.

uomini è tanto grande che ciascuno s'ingegna quanto può di prender molto dagli altri e di render poco," he lamented. "Ognun di noi odia la maggior parte degli uomini coi quali vivi. Si odiano perché hanno più di noi, perché non si, danno tutto quello che si vorrebbe, perché non si curano di noi, perché son diversi da noi, infine perché esistono." In Papini's world, this loathing of humanity has reached an extreme: "Arriviamo a odiare i nostri amici, anche quelli che ci hanno fatto il bene" (162).

The crucial question determining the course of the human species, as Papini posed it, was whether this state was fixed. "Sono gli uomini immutabili, non trasformabili, non migliorabili?" he asked. "Può invece l'uomo trasumanarsi, santificarsi, indíarsi?" Papini acknowledged that according to conventional, non-Christian wisdom, the answer was negative: "Molti hanno creduto e credono che della vita si posson cambiar le forme, ma non il fondo e che all'uomo tutto sarà dato fuorché cambiare la natura del suo spirito" (140-141).

Jesus and the Transformation of Human Nature

In presenting Jesus Christ as the only answer to the human predicament, Papini was obviously writing in the shadow of the war which had just devastated wide areas of Europe and obliterated the remnant of international public optimism that had endured until 1914. The appeal to him, and to a new generation of pacifists in one country after another, of a radically non-violent ethic was therefore understandable. Papini asserted categorically that "il comando di Cristo è l'unico che possa risolvere il problema della violenza." The stakes were high; nothing less than the future of the world hinged on its truth and its acceptance. "Se Cristo ha sbagliato non ci resta che la negazione assoluta e universale e il volontario annullamento," he judged (87, 142).

In *Storia di Cristo*, Papini effectively adopted a radically dissenting position, a Christocentric one grounded not in generalised natural law but in the specific teachings of Jesus Christ. To Papini, natural law was not the final word, but something which had been subordinated to the Gospel. Of course, he conceded, “La non resistenza al male repugna profondamente alla nostra natura.” But however deeply rooted the instinct of survival was in natural man, it was not fixed, for “Gesú esiste perché la nostra natura arrivi a sentire schifo di quel che oggi le piace e ami quel che ieri le faceva orrore. Ogni sua parola presuppone questa totale rinnovazione dello spirito umano” (158).

How is this accomplished? Papini’s reading of the gospels, and especially the Sermon on the Mount, gave him an answer which, to be sure, many other Catholic and non-Catholic Christians would have rejected. For him in the early 1920s it lay not in the restructuring of society or the rearrangement of international relations, but rather in the total transformation of human nature on an individual basis. This, Papini believed, was possible only through Jesus Christ. His reading of Matthew 7:43-48 challenged him with the key to the radical renewal of humanity and the consequences thereof:

Voi avete udito che fu detto: Ama il tuo prossimo e odia tuo nemico Ma io vi dico: Amate i vostri nemici, benedite quelli che vi maledicono, fate del bene a quelli che v’odiano, pregate per quelli che vi fanno torto, che vi oltraggiano, che vi perseguitano. Affinché siate imitatori del Padre vostro che è ne’ cieli; poiché Egli fa levare il suo sole sopra i malvagi e sopra i buoni e fa piovere sui giusti e sugli ingiusti. Perché, se amate quelli che vi amano, che merito ne avete? Non fanno anche i pubblicani lo stesso? E se fate accoglienza soltanto ai vostri fratelli, che fate di singolare? Non fanno anche i pagani altrettanto? Voi dunque siate perfetti com’ è

perfetto il Padre Vostro celeste.

To Papini, these six verses were “la magna carta della nuova razza, della terza razza non ancora nata.” He identified the first two as the “Bestie senza Legge e il suo nome fu guerra”, and the second as the “Barbari dirozzati dalla Legge e la sua piú alta perfezione fu la Guistizia.” Infinitely higher would the third soar; it would be “non somiglianti alle Bestie ma a Dio” (175). This transition could be effected only by the man-God Jesus. Yet to Papini, humanity seemed halfway to that goal: “La divinità è in noi; la bestialità la fascia e la stringe come una mala cortecchia che ritarda la nostra crescita.” Attaining the final stage required, in his bold words, that “noi dobbiamo incielare, indiare, trasumanare noi stessi; diventare simile a Dio; imitare Iddio” (177). Such achievements were possible through following without inhibition the commandment of Jesus to love one another as God has loved us (John 13:34). This implied loving universally, not merely one’s neighbours, but also one’s enemies. “L’amore per i nemici, alla ragione comune sembra pazzia,” confessed Papini in another confrontation with conventional, worldly wisdom. “L’amore per i nemici rassomiglia all’odio per noi medesimi” (177).

Sheep and Goats

A further New Testament text which Papini used, although with surprisingly brief commentary, given its frequent employment in agapeist interpretations of the ethics of Jesus, is Matthew 25:31-46. In this parable, Jesus suggests that at the end of history people will be judged like sheep and goats according to whether they evinced practical love for others. Papini quoted the text at length before declaring that the extension of love to “i poveri e gli infelici” could be adequately described as “pietà”. In explaining the words of Jesus that by extending mercy in various ways to

the disadvantaged people actually were doing the same to him, Papini professed that from the first century until the present day Jesus has lived spiritually “sotto la specie dei poveri e dei pellegrini, dei malati e dei martoriati, dei vagabondi e degli schiavi”. Rather than justification by faith, eternal salvation would result be the reward for deeds of love. The concluding words in Papini’s treatment of this parable are a lucid reflection of the conventional Catholic position on the relationship of works to salvation: “Il grande povero, nel giorno della sua gloria, retribuìrà ciascuno colle sue infinite ricchezze, secondo giustizia” (360). The extent to which he drew his inspiration from this text is impossible to ascertain. In any case, Papini’s commentary on it is much briefer than his treatment of the teaching of non-resistance in the Sermon on the Mount. This imbalance may stem from the fact that the mercy in Matthew 25:31-46 was not in itself controversial at any time, whereas of course the pacifism inherent in Papini’s interpretation of the injunction to love one’s enemies had been a matter of intense debate throughout his career.

“Preghiera a Cristo”

The final evidence of Papini’s agapeist ethic and how far he was from the ethos of Fascism in 1921 is manifest in the ultimate chapter of *Storia di Cristo*, “Preghiera a Cristo”. In these eight pages, he bared his soul on behalf of humanity. Our species, he lamented, was living in misery and despair. Papini pinpointed many causes of this woeful condition. Among the foremost which had recently exacerbated it was the devastation of the First World War. Sharing a widespread sentiment, he did not mince words in condemning its economic roots and what it had wrought:

Il mondo, per quattr’ anni interi, s’è imbrattato di sangue
per decidere chi dovera aver l’aiola piú grande e il piú grosso

marsupio. I servitori di Mammona hanno cacciato Calibano in opposte interminabili fosse per diventare piú ricchi e impoverire i nemici. Ma questa spaventevole esperienza non ha giovato a nessuno. Piú poveri tutti di prima, piú affamati di prima, ogni gente è tornata ai piedi di fango del dio negozio a sacrificargli la pace propria e la vita altrui (558).

In the wake of the war, humanity as Papini knew it had sunk even deeper into the abyss and removed itself further from the spirit of Christ: “Tutte le fedi, in questo marame infetto, smortiscono e si disfanno. Una sola religione pratica il mondo, quelle che riconosce la somma trinità di Wotan, Mammona e Priapo; la Forza che ha per simbolo la spada e per tempio la caserma; la Ricchezza che ha per simbolo l’oro e per tempio la borsa; la Carne che ha per simbolo il phallus e per tempio il bordello” (559).

In retrospect, Papini’s forebodings of the consequences of this idolatry seem particularly prescient. Humanity in general had failed to learn anything from recent history which had left “immanti armenti di cadaveri infraciditi”, and the carnage would therefore continue: “Eppure, come se tutti quei morti non fossero che una prima rata dell’universale distruzione, seguitano ad uccidersi e ad uccidere.” International relations, despite the creation of the League of Nations, remained in disarray, and oppression continued. “Le nazioni opulente condannano alla fame le nazioni povere,” while “nuovi dittatori, profittando dello sfasciume di tutti i sistemi e di tutti i regimi, conducono intere nazioni alla carestia, alla strage e alla dissoluzione” (557). Published a year before the accession of Mussolini, Papini’s words read like an epitaph on the tombstone of Italian history of a slightly later date.

Conclusion

The radically selfless ethical demands made in the Sermon on the Mount have been variously interpreted during the history of Christianity. In medieval Catholicism, they were classified as “evangelical counsels”, together with chastity, obedience, and poverty, which were typically incorporated in monastic vows, rather than commandments to be imposed on all Christians. Papini, of course, like many other Christian pacifists, both Catholic and non-Catholic, did not recognise the validity of this distinction. To him, the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount were directed at Christians in general, not a spiritual elite among them.

By no means was Papini the first prominent European man of letters to regard them as generally binding, as the well-known case of Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) demonstrates. By the 1860s this Russian novelist had achieved international renown but, by his own testimony, was living a spiritually vacuous life until he repeatedly read the Sermon on the Mount “with the same emotional ardor”, especially when he encountered “the verses which exhort the hearer to turn the other cheek, to give up his cloak, to be at peace with all the world, to love his enemies”. This proved to be an epiphany experience which changed his life, though only after he had wrestled with it for years and, in his view, been misled by biblical commentaries which sought to dilute the injunctions of Jesus. He eventually dispensed with the commentaries and concluded, “It seems, then, that Jesus meant precisely what he said.” Tolstoy lamented that “and yet neither believers nor unbelievers will admit this simple and clear interpretation of Jesus’ words.”¹² A former army officer who has experienced the horrors of combat in the Crimean War, Tolstoy responded by becoming one of the most visible Christian pacifists of his era.

Papini later supported Fascism and lauded Mussolini personally, even though the Fascist ethos was diametrically opposed to the agapeism

¹² L.N. Tolstoy, *My Religion* (London: Walter Scott, 1889): 5, 11-12.

espoused in *Storia di Cristo*. That this Catholic intellectual would endorse a nationalist, imperialist movement and a man whose relations with the Roman Catholic Church were at times strained is not entirely ironic or without precedent. As has been repeatedly noted for many decades, at times both the Italian fascist movement and parallel ones elsewhere had millions of supporters among both the priesthood and the laity of the Church of Rome. The notion of the corporatist state, according to some of its apologists, resonated with the papal social encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). Furthermore, Mussolini's hostility to Italian Jewry reverberated with Papini's unvarnished anti-Semitism. When juxtaposed with the radically agapeist morality set forth in *Storia di Cristo*, Papini's eventual enthusiasm for Fascism underscored the magnitude of his political metamorphosis.

Finally, seen in the historical context of Christian ethics, Papini's agapeist ethics, focussing on the love of Jesus, is particularly significant because it anticipated a major shift in Catholic moral theology. Prior to the Second World War, natural law in the Thomistic tradition held the field within Catholic meta-ethical thought. As the eminent historian of Christian morality J. Philip Wogaman has pointed out, however, during the latter half of the twentieth century moral theologians such as the German Bernard Häring (1912-1998) and the American John Courtney Murray (1904-1967) (the latter of whom, to be sure, remained partly committed to a grounding in natural law) brought about a general shift of emphasis towards a more directly biblical and christological one while simultaneously arguing for individual responsibility in ethical decision-making and ecclesiastical freedom rather than a continuation of the traditional, paternalistic state church model which had been normative in Catholicism since it had become the official religion of the Roman Empire

in the fourth century.¹³ It would be folly to suggest that Papini laid the foundation for this fundamental change and erroneous to believe that he was the only Catholic thinker of the 1920s who anticipated it. However, any serious study of Papini's eclectic ethical thought must take note of how this professional *littérateur* and amateur student of the Bible challenged readers to follow revelation rather than reason more than four decades before the Second Vatican Council legitimised this crucial meta-ethical revolution.

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¹³ J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1993): 235-237.