

Sergio Luzzatto

Padre Pio. Miracoli e politica nell'Italia del Novecento. Turin, Einaudi, 2007 pp. viii + 419, notes and index.

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The cult of Padre Pio has engulfed the Catholic Church: in Italy more people pray to Padre Pio than to the Virgin, to any saint, or indeed to the very figure of Jesus Christ, and it has spread throughout Europe and the Americas. Padre Pio prayer groups constitute a worldwide devotional movement; the impoverished hamlet of San Giovanni Rotondo, on the plateau of the Gargano peninsula in Puglia, to whose minuscule convent the young Capuchin was sent during the First World War, has become a thriving pilgrimage destination, on a par with Lourdes, Santiago de Compostela and Medjugorje, and has recently seen the completion of an overbearing Renzo Piani sanctuary. This is big business, and also, as Luzzatto tells us in delicious, if sometimes sarcastic, detail, big politics.

The story goes back to Pio's stigmata, whose receipt is dated 20 September 1918, when he was aged 31. For decades thereafter the hierarchy, including several Popes, were troubled by the story, by the mass devotion and by the accompanying unsavoury rumours: John XXIII called him an *idolo di stoppa* - a straw idol. But in Southern Italy Pio's miraculous powers were not in doubt. Supernatural claims are not unusual. But very occasionally, as at Lourdes and Fatima, a story catches on and a person and a locality of no character at all become a subject of veneration and a pilgrimage site. In fact, the less character the better. This is what needs explanation, and this is why John Paul II promoted Pio's canonization process, which eventually culminated in 2002, only 34 years after his death.

Pio's stigmata date from a time when Italy was in a desperate state: 600,000 were dead and 950,000 wounded. Despite being - eventually - on the 'winning side', Italy had suffered the humiliating defeat by German and Austrian armies at Caporetto in 1917. The cause of the veterans, who roamed the country in rags and on crutches, was espoused - or exploited - by the extreme right and eventually by Mussolini. D'Annunzio spoke of the country's 'passion' on the model of that of Christ and the leader of the veterans described Mussolini himself as having received the 'stigmata of his own Passion'. Curzio Malaparte, another flowery apologist, wrote in 1923 of Italy's need for a new Christ, a miracle-maker and leader of men, bearded and peasant-

like (like Pio), who would lead the soldier-peasants against the citadels of humanism and liberalism.

Luzzatto is a historian of fascism, and he interprets the development of the cult of Padre Pio from that point of view. For him these writings and Mussolini's oratory show that the moment of someone like Padre Pio had come. He then tracks the affinity more concretely in the Gargano peninsula itself, starting with a massacre of a socialist demonstration in 1920, continuing with dubious figures who navigated between the circle of Padre Pio devotees and fascist politics, culminating even in the neo-fascism of the 1970s. When this book appeared last November it created a small scandal. The focus was on a couple of handwritten notes found in the Vatican archives, in which Padre Pio had asked a young, inevitably female, devotee to go to the nearby town of Foggia and buy some carbolic acid, and to keep the strictest secrecy. (The pharmacist did not like it and went to the Bishop.) Earlier in his career he copied letters from the purportedly stigmatized Gemma of Lucca and presented them to his mentor as his own ecstatic experiences. But these revelations have done nothing to diminish a cult nor has Luzzatto succumbed to the temptation of making them the centrepiece of the book.

It is tempting to read this exhaustively researched and seductively told story as reducing the entire Padre Pio phenomenon to nothing but a fascist plot. But that would be a misreading of Luzzatto, who sees in the cult a product of Italy's distinctive road to modernity. But that in contrast is too vague: to understand cults such as this one must have a theory of sainthood.

Saints tend to be individuals who are ordinary in the extreme, save in one crucial respect - an act of heroic charity, death by martyrdom, the gift of healing and so on; and the same goes for Padre Pio. He was a model cleric and perfectly ordinary save in this one characteristic: both accessible because of his ordinariness and mysterious because of the stigmata. Once the stigmata - having not been discredited by the church authorities - had received credence in the surrounding region, the fascination with his persona acquired epidemic proportions. Respectable people testified to miraculous deeds such as healing and bipresence. Luzzatto's account explains at least in part how the conditions for the institutionalization of the cult were created, but to explain why the phenomenon caught on in the first place requires such a cognitive understanding of how we construct these exceptional, yet also very ordinary, individuals.

This ordinariness was reinforced by Pio's genius as manager of his own persona. Despite controversies, inspections and inquiries, his discretion was absolute, the stigmata usually hidden from public view - thus of course adding to the aura of mystery. The thousands of his

letters and homilies which have been published are innocuous exercises in moral exhortation and devotional improvement. He had the good sense to distance himself from some of the more outrageous things done and said in his name, and never for a moment questioned ecclesiastical authority. Scenes of disorder would precede his celebration of the eucharist as devotees and pilgrims rushed to get a front-row pew, but he remained serene.

Luzzatto seems to see Padre Pio himself as a victim, alternately of a suspicious hierarchy and of the uncontrollable enthusiasm surrounding his person. This is evidenced in the dramatic confrontation with the Bishop sent to interrogate and inquire in 1919, described as the most dramatic moment of Pi's life after the stigmata themselves, when, laying his gloved hand on the Bible, he had to say whether his wounds were 'artificial, divine or some sort of a fraud'. The Curia's subsequent decision to remove him remained of course a dead letter. A similar sequence was repeated in the 1960s, and not long afterwards, as the friar's health declined, it was said that his wounds were healing, so that when he died in 1968 they had disappeared completely. The Convent authority nevertheless decided that the hands on the embalmed body should remain gloved as the masses came to pay their respects - to avoid 'fallacious and hasty interpretations' and so as not to 'scandalize the weak'.