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Response to Simon Levis Sullam Re: Nazism and Fascism and Italian Jews

Professor Sullam discussed various examples of Jewish relationship to fascism in Italy and argued that the high level of Jewish participation whether in fascism or in anti-fascism shows how thoroughly integrated Italian Jews were. It demonstrates how closely they shared the trends and ambiguities of larger Italian society. So once again, we return to this issue of total assimilation by Jews into Italian society. They didn't think of themselves as different, they didn't have an identity of being different from other Italians, so with other Italians, they either were proponents of fascism or opponents of fascism, but it seems that their relationship to fascism has not directly to do with their recognizing themselves as Jewish but with other, more general concerns shared by all Italians.

One of the questions that we continue to toss around is the relationship between Italian fascism and German fascism, as it is clear that they were different entities. Within this broad question, I have specific questions on the relationship between fascism and religion in both the Italian forms and German forms. First, to what degree did fascism serve as a secular religion? Sullam explained that nationalism did become a substitute religion for integrated Jews, and this contributes to the attraction to fascism.

We're seeing two different trends, however, in the fascist "religion", however. One is the "idealism", criticized centrally by Primo Levi throughout *The Periodic Table*, that is, any idealism that privileges spirit over matter. Levi shows that this is inevitably reductionist and inevitably violent, as such an abstraction from the concrete allows too great liberties to be taken in the pursuit of a spiritual ideal. This "spirit over matter idealism" is the danger of every idealism, every utopian vision that seeks something intangible and is willing to subordinate concrete details along the way as necessarily justified for the ideal.

On the other hand, we see a strong trend in Hitler's Germany towards a very concrete obsession with blood. There's evidence of a "blood religion", a cultic fetishism with blood that characterizes both the alienation of Jews as other in German culture and the "religion of fascism" in Hitler's party. For example, there were scientific investigations into the origins of the "pure race" in physical features and bone structures. There was also the ritual incorporation of the blood of political martyrs on a flag used then ritually to consecrate all future Nazi flags. So we see here, in the German form, a clear obsession with the physical, with the concrete.

Now, there is a clear distinction between these two strands that contribute to a "religion" of fascism. One is propelled toward an ideal of a non-physical spirit, and it is related to nationalism or patriotism in general, in both Italy and Germany, and it has evident roots in German Romanticism. The other is obsessed with the physical in the sense of a fetishism concerned with certain "sacred" objects and rituals. Is it fair to divide these two strands along the axis of Italian and German forms of fascism, so that we see Italian fascism as more spirit-oriented idealism with patriotic and nationalist roots and we see German fascism as more physically-minded nationalism concerned with physical blood and race as the key to the highest pure race?

Also part of trying to articulate the differences between German fascism and Italian fascism, I would imagine is the relationship between Protestantism and

Catholicism. Did the fascism in each case initially bear a close relationship with the dominant religious ideology (in the sense of providing certain preconditions) but later just roll into other elements of secular nationalism? To what degree did the differences in dominant religious denominations between Germany and Italy influence the particular kind of fascism that took hold in either country? In Italy, for example, the Catholic Church aligned with Mussolini and fascism because of its resistance to the threat of communism. It appears that the Catholic alliance with fascism in Italy led to a somewhat lighter brand of fascism than German Nazism. What other factors of religious ideology can we find for these differences?