The Stockholm Declaration was the statement which summarized the main aims of the Stockholm International Forum, which was organized to promote Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research globally (hereafter, the SIF 2000; the forum was held on 26–28 January 2000). And despite the presence of non-European states such as America, Israel, Russia and Argentina, political scientist Jens Kroh (2008) has rightly stated that one of the most significant symbolic elements of the liberal representation of the Holocaust at this event was the idea that, ‘coming to terms with such a negative past has almost turned into an informal criterion for accession to the European Union’ (Kroh, 2010). Hence, the Stockholm Declaration demonstrates that the recollection of Nazi-era crimes with a central emphasis on the Holocaust has become a principal part of civic moral education in liberal Western and Westernizing nation states, particularly in Europe since 2000. These views are also echoed in sociologist Helmut Dubiel’s opinion that the SIF 2000’s representation of the Holocaust as a ‘European foundation myth’ is an attempt to ‘release the moral potential of its remembrance’ (Dubiel, 2004: 216–17), as well as in Alon Confino’s view, following and taking to extremes the ideas of Dan Diner, that the symbolism of contemporary Holocaust remembrance as moral and historical rupture has replaced the significance of the French Revolution as the ‘foundational past’ of human values in the West (Diner, 2007: 9; Confino, 2012: 5–6).

This article will specifically employ Emilio Gentile’s paradigm of civil religion to build on the work of scholars such as Lothar Probst, Daniel Levy, Natan Sznaider and Dan Stone who have addressed the importance of civil religion in understanding post-1989 Western European Holocaust memory politics (Probst, 2003: 45–58; Levy and Sznaider, 2007: 167; Stone, 2013: 221–2). In interrogating the relevance of Gentile’s paradigm of civil religion in relation to the discursive construction of the Stockholm Declaration and its impact on various nation states, this article seeks to nuance our understanding of the historical dynamics and limits of contemporary liberal forms of post-Communist sacralized politics, particularly but not exclusively in

Larissa Allwork
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Europe. It also attempts to address the question as to whether international documents such as the Stockholm Declaration can be integrated into a canonical litany of rhetorical and symbolic motifs more often associated with the cultural, historical and sociological study of national civil religions. By exploring these themes and dynamics this article contributes towards delineating the globally metamorphosing forms of sacralized religion at the beginning of the third millennium. For as Amos Goldberg has noted in relation to major sites of Holocaust remembrance across the world such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Berlin’s Jewish Museum, Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM): ‘they mark a shift in the manner in which they relate to national territory, since they do not function merely as geographically delimited sites of a national civil religion but are also taking their place as global shrines of memory that attract pilgrims from a multitude of nations’ (Goldberg, 2016).

Civil Religion

Building on the intellectual legacies of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Emile Durkheim, the twentieth-century study of political, institutional and social forms of civil religion have become particularly synonymous with sociologist Robert Bellah’s path-breaking 1967 essay, ‘Civil Religion in America’. In recent decades studies of civil religion have been reinvigorated by scholars such as Marcela Cristi (2001) and Emilio Gentile (2006), the latter of whose definition and historical analyses of civil religion will be unpacked in relation to contemporary forms of Holocaust remembrance. Gentile’s approach which integrates both the politically constructed and organic elements of understanding and applying civil religion will be especially important in this analysis. This is because it opens up as opposed to narrowing the multiple ways in which sacralized politics can be comprehended, a flexibility which is particularly desirable when trying to understand the extent to which the paradigm of civil religion can be applied to the liberal remembrance of the Holocaust as implemented by various Western nation-states, primarily but not exclusively in Europe, and as mediated through a document such as the Stockholm Declaration.

Gentile categorizes civil religion as a sub-strand of what he calls secular religion. According to Gentile, secular religion is the by-product of processes of secularization and modernization, which nonetheless often mimic or incorporate the symbols and structures of traditional religions. For Gentile, there are two forms of secular religion, political religion and civil religion (Gentile, 2006: 138–46). Political religion is a type of sacralized politics that Gentile associates with states such as Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, the USSR and Maoist China and it is characterized by authoritarian, fundamentalist and exclusionary elements. While states with civil religions are not immune to forms of intolerance or bouts of communal violence towards perceived