Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter now, including display on the World Wide Web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Aman Bedi April 10, 2023

The Modes and Orders of Religion: An Exploration of the Political Use of Religion in Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*

by

Aman Bedi

J. Judd Owen
Adviser

Political Science

J. Judd Owen

Adviser

Tyler Thomas

Committee Member

Salmon Shomade

Committee Member

2023

The Modes and Orders of Religion: An Exploration of the Political Use of Religion in Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*

By

Aman Bedi

J. Judd Owen

Adviser

An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Political Science

2023

Abstract

The Modes and Orders of Religion: An Exploration of the Political Use of Religion in Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*
By Aman Bedi

In his *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli shows his dissatisfaction with Italy's current situation and holds Roman Catholicism as at least partly responsible. This thesis attempts to distill how Machiavelli thinks religion could be used for political purposes by analyzing Machiavelli's portrayal of Roman paganism, Roman Catholicism, and religion in general. Furthermore, the thesis concludes that for a religion to be used well, it must be good. This thesis contributes to the ongoing debate over Machiavelli's ideal religion by suggesting that Machiavelli is proposing to imitate the model of German Christianity right before the Protestant Reformation. Structurally, the first three chapters describe how Machiavelli thinks religion can be used politically as a maintainer, reformer, and moral protector. The final chapter focuses on how German Christianity contains the best attributes of Roman Catholicism and Roman paganism and thus is an example of a good religion.

The Modes and Orders of Religion: An Exploration of the Political Use of Religion in Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*

By

Aman Bedi

J. Judd Owen

Adviser

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Political Science

2023

Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have happened with people all throughout my life encouraging me to think about the big questions and exposing me to political philosophy. First, my parents for supporting me to think about the big questions and how their answers might be found in books. Next, my high school history teacher Mr. Fierce for introducing me to political philosophy and letting me bounce ideas off of him every day. I also want to thank Dr. Shapiro at Oxford College who taught me how to read these great and complicated texts books. He most of all is responsible for creating the love for political philosophy that motivated this thesis. Last and certainly not least, I want to thank Dr. Owen and all the Franklin Fellows for showing me how to pick up on the subtle clues in the text and use them to create theories.

Table of Contents

Introduction[1234]:

Rousseau famously stated that Machiavelli had a hidden agenda and was a strong advocate for republicanism and liberty despite appearing to the contrary[5]. Similarly, despite his blatant criticisms of Christianity, Machiavelli is a strong advocate for the correct religion. For him, religion is an important and necessary tool, especially when reordering and maintaining a republic. Yet, like all tools for Machiavelli, it can be used both for and against the best interests of the regime.

This thesis will focus on Machiavelli's longer and lesser-known political writing: *The Discourses on Livy*. This is because it is a much more thorough account of Machiavelli's political philosophy than *The Prince*. As Strauss points out, "Machiavelli treats in the *Prince* all subjects from the point of view of the prince whereas in the *Discourses* he treats numerous subjects from both the princely and the republican point of view. One is inclined to suggest that in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli presents the whole of his political teaching, whereas *in The Prince*, he presents only a part."[6] While *The Prince* is more (in)famous, it deals exclusively with principalities, and while those are of interest given the importance of liberalism in democracies, it is not as relevant, nor does it have an extended account of religion. As Dietz and Winholm explain, "Machiavelli's magnum opus, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy* (hereafter

[1] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., 2nd ed. (Chicago, Ill: [University of Chicago Press], 1998).will be abbreviated as *P*.
[2] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: [University of Chicago Press], 1996). will be abbreviated as *D.*
[3] Livy, "The history of Rome, books 1-5," ed. Valerie M. Warrior (Indianapolis, IN: [Hackett Pub], 2006). will be abbreviated as Livy.
[4] Livy, "Rome's Italian wars : books six to ten," ed. John Yardley and B. D. Hoyos (Oxford New York: [Oxford University Press], 2013). will be abbreviated a Livy.
[5] Maurizio Viroli, "REPUBLIC AND POLITICS IN MACHIAVELLI AND ROUSSEAU," *History of Political Thought* 10, no. 3 (1989), http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/44797142.
[6] Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: [University of Chicago Press], 1978), 16-17.

Discourses), present his most direct and multifaceted observations on religion, past and present, material, and symbolic."[7]

But this fact can be seen directly in Machiavelli, in the sharp contrast between the dedication of *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy*. The dedicatory letter in *The Prince* was written to Lorenzo de' Medici (the de facto ruler of Florence) with the goal that *The Prince* could be used to "acquire favor." Machiavelli writes, "I have found nothing in my belongings that I care so much for and esteem so greatly as the knowledge of the actions of great men, learned by me from long experience with modern things and a continuous reading of ancient ones."[8] It should be noted that Machiavelli explicitly says that *The Prince* was not written with the goal of flattery, "For I wanted it either not to be honored for anything or to please solely for the variety of the matter and the gravity of the subject.". That being said, Machiavelli believes that this will be pleasing to Lorenzo because it would allow Lorenzo to "arrive at the greatness that fortune and your other qualities promise you." In other words, *The Prince* is only what Machiavelli believes could help Lorenzo (a specific prince in Florence) achieve his potential.

This is in sharp contrast with the dedicatory letter of *The Discourses*. First, rather than being written to a prince whom Machiavelli wants something from, it is written to two of Machiavelli's friends: Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai. More than just mere friends, there were also his philosophical interlocutors whom he had discussions with. Machiavelli further praises them by saying, "I have chosen not those who are princes but those who for their infinite good parts deserve to be; not those who could load me with ranks, honors, and riches but those who, though unable, would wish to do so. For men wishing to judge rightly have to esteem

[7] Mary G. Dietz and Ilya Winham, "Niccolo Machiavelli," in *Early modern philosophy of religion*, ed. Graham Oppy and N. N. Trakakis (London: [Routledge], 2009), 21.
[8] *P* Dedicatory Letter

those who are liberal, not those who can be; and likewise those who know, not those who can govern a kingdom without knowing."[9] This has two significant consequences. First, unlike when writing to Lorenzo, Machiavelli does not have to worry about intentionally or accidentally including flattery in his remarks. Second, as his friends already know how to govern a kingdom and have infinite good parts, the *Discourses* can be considered more of a discussion among equals rather than a simplified education. This means that the *Discourses* can be considered a more honest representation of Machiavelli's thought.

The *Discourses*, according to Machiavelli, is not only a more honest representation but a more complete one. "I send you a present that, if it does not correspond to the obligations I have to you, is, without doubt, the greatest Niccolò Machiavelli has been able to send you. For in it I have expressed as much as I know and have learned through a long practice and a continual reading in worldly things"[10]. While the *Prince* may be what is useful and esteemed by Machiavelli, the *Discourses* contain everything. Thus, the *Discourses,* despite their difficulty and lack of popularity, are the obvious choice for investigating Machiavelli's thoughts on the political use of religion. Yet more than just what he views as useful aspects of religion in the abstract it is far more interesting to examine what he thinks a good religion is. He is dissatisfied with Catholicism. Thus, by engaging and understanding how Roman Paganism, Roman Catholicism, and religion in general have been well-used and misused we can arrive at what a good religion should look like.

Beiner believes the good religion Machiavelli describes is a "paganized" one. He argues that this paganization can also be viewed as an "Islamification" where Christianity would be an

[9] *D* Dedicatory Letter
[10] *D* Dedicatory Letter

armed religion concerned more about worldly things rather than otherworldly salvation.[11] Furthermore rather than a religion that maintains the shadows of it's ancient form, Beiner envisions Machiavelli advocating for violence as the tool to create the new religion. Beiner writes, "In order for refounding to work, there must be a profound, soul-shattering, 'shock and awe' effect on the civic population. … It would require in this sense a civil religion to displace Christianity and render it irrelevant to the same extent that Christianity displaced Judaism and paganism and rendered them irrelevant."[12] Beiner goes on to state that this shock and awe is not that of miracle but rather a "return to the terror inherent in man's situation."[13]

Sullivan on the other hand argues for a completely secular religion, arguing that even Roman Paganism does more harm than good. She writes, "The Roman recourse to religion was at best superfluous and at worst pernicious. One wonders if Machiavelli means to suggest that a state would be better served by forgoing appeals to extra human forces."[14] For Sullivan paganism itself presents problems it led to the creation and use of religious manipulation which eventually resulted in Rome being subjugated to Christianity. First, the creation of paganism and using it as a force to compel citizens to act virtuously led to the power of God being considered stronger than men, which leads to the disunity between church and state.[15] While this might be excused if there was no other alternative, that does not seem to be the case for Sullivan's interpretation of Machiavelli.

---

[11] Ronald Beiner, *Civil religion : a dialogue in the history of political philosophy* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 20.
[12] Ronald Beiner, *Civil religion : a dialogue in the history of political philosophy* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8.
[13] Ronald Beiner, *Civil religion : a dialogue in the history of political philosophy* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8.
[14] Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli's Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed* (Cornell University Press, 1996). http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/10.7591/j.ctvpwhfwk. , 21
[15] Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli's Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed* (Cornell University Press, 1996). http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/10.7591/j.ctvpwhfwk. , 15

Yet both of these theories miss the explicit "new religion" that Machiavelli describes. That is the Christianity practiced by Germany which is the one virtuous state left in Europe. German Christianity has the attributes that Machiavelli praises in Roman Paganism while at the same time being Christian in name thus allowing for the peaceful transition that Machiavelli prefers over the violence and terror proposed by Beiner.

This thesis proceeds by first investigating Machiavelli's longest and most explicit discussion of religion, wherein he analyzes how religion was used by the Romans, and the possible advantages Roman religion provides and the shortcomings of Christianity. The following two chapters focus on where Machiavelli implicitly thinks religion could be useful, though he rarely makes it obvious. Specifically, *Chapter II* investigates how Roman religion was used to reorder a corrupt regime and highlights how corrupt religion can doom the regime. *Chapter III* focuses on how religion in general can be used the support specific moral values such as freedom or love of the state. Finally, *Chapter IV* analyzes what exactly a good religion is for Machiavelli. Specifically, it looks at Machiavelli's comparison between Christianity[16] and Roman Paganism[17] and how Germany is an example of a state with a good religion[18] in Machiavelli's time.

[16] Given Machiavelli's historical situation all references to Christianity unless otherwise mentioned refer to Roman Catholicism and the pope.
[17] Which may also be referred to as the Roman religion
[18] Germany's religion will also be referred as German Christianity

Chapter I: Religion the Maintainer:

While Machiavelli makes numerous references to religion, including in the Preface of Book I of the *Discourse on Livy*, his first and by far longest direct analysis occurs in chapters 11-15 of Book I. In his commentary in the book *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders: A Study of the Discourses on Livy*, Mansfield even goes so far as to call this section "The Use of Religion."[19] Machiavelli explicitly points out that he has dedicated these chapters to religion. We know this for two explicit reasons. First, chapters 11 to 15 are the only ones with religion in the title. Second, at the end of these chapters, Machiavelli writes, "This testifies in full how much confidence can be had through religion well used. Although this part might perhaps require to be placed rather among foreign things … it appeared to me [good] to connect it in this place, so as not to divide this matter and to have to return to several times."[20] It is also worth mentioning that religion can mean one of three things for Machiavelli. First, Machiavelli could be referring to the Roman religion or Roman paganism. Second, he could be referring to Christianity, specifically Catholicism. Finally, Machiavelli could be talking about religion in the abstract or in other words talking about a shared aspect of religion that both Christianity and Roman Paganism share. With this in mind, we can now begin investigating how Machiavelli thinks religion can be used for political purposes.

Chapter 11:

Chapter 11 is primarily focused on Roman Paganism and describes its creation but also its advantages. Machiavelli explains that Rome was founded by Romulus, who was responsible

[19] Harvey Claflin Mansfield, *Machiavelli's new modes and orders : a study of the Discourses on Livy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
[20] *D* I 15.1

for the birth and education of Rome.[21] Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* further clarifies that Romulus created laws for the early Romans as "nothing else but law could unite them into a single body politic."[22] Yet, Machiavelli states that the heavens deemed the order of Romulus inadequate for such an empire[23]. In other words, while law may have created Rome it was insufficient in the long term. Thus, Numa, Romulus's successor, "turned to religion as a thing altogether necessary if he wished to maintain a civilization."[24] However, it is one thing to say that religion is required. It is entirely another to explain why it is required. Machiavelli attempts to show why religion is required throughout the rest of these chapters.

Machiavelli states explicitly that Roman religion was so well ordered that "for many centuries there was never so much fear of God as in that republic, which made easier whatever enterprise the senate or the great men of Rome might plan to make."[25] It should be noted that the Roman religion was polytheistic; thus, the Romans did not fear God but feared the gods. Machiavelli collapses the distinction between polytheism and monotheism, making not only the examples and actions of Rome more relevant as models to his audience but also suggesting that it is not essential. What is important is that the fear was so great that citizens were more afraid to break an oath than the laws. Thus, it might seem that the orders of Numa (religion) were stronger than those of Romulus (laws) because the fear of God was greater than that of the regime. This also provides an inkling of what it means for a religion to be no longer useful. It is when the fear of God is weakened to the extent that one is more afraid of the regime than the heavens.

---

[21] *D* I 11.1
[22] Livy, I 8
[23] *D* I 11.1
[24] *D* I 11.1
[25] *D* I 11.1

The first example Machiavelli provides to demonstrate the power of the Romans fear of God is during the Second Punic War. During the Second Punic War, Hannibal defeated the Romans at the Battle of Cannae. Devastated from the Carthaginian slaughter, many Roman citizens wanted to abandon Rome and move to Sicily. Machiavelli writes, "Hearing this, Scipio went to meet them and with naked steel in hand constrained them to swear they would not abandon their fatherland."[26]. First, it is necessary to point out that the oath was sworn under duress. Livy elaborates on this scenario, explaining that Scipio forced them to swear the oath while raising his swords over the heads.[27] Thus, the oath was sworn not out of fear of the gods but of fear of death. The Roman citizens were placed into a position where either they swore their oath and perhaps would be killed by Hannibal in the war, or they refused to swear it and would be killed by Scipio. This example demonstrates the power of religion only via the fact that Scipio made the citizens swear an oath rather than simply threatening them. Looking at the text of the oath as provided in Livy, it becomes apparent that if the Romans had broken their oath, then Jupiter would have killed them[28]. However, we can assume had Scipio merely threatened the Romans, the citizens would have only obeyed while Scipio was watching. Thus, if Scipio ever left, the Romans would have run away. Therefore, the Roman citizens could escape Scipio's blade, but they could not escape Jupiter's punishment. This example showcases two things. First and foremost is the power of fear and how fear could make the Romans not abandon their fatherland while the laws could not. It also clarifies what it means to fear the gods more than the regime. Machiavelli is not saying the fear of death from the gods is stronger than the fear of death from the regime. Rather it is the fact that the gods are always watching and thus one cannot

[26] *D* I 11.1
[27] Livy XXII 53
[28] Livy XXII 53

escape the death from the gods while one can evade the punishment from the state. Crucially this means that having a fear of the gods does not require notions of the afterlife or that one will be punished after death. Second, we see how Scipio, a representation of a great man of Rome, could use the fear of the gods to hold people to their oaths.

This example of Scipio and the Romans parallels the founding of Rome that Machiavelli described at the beginning of Chapter 11. There, the Romans had Romulus, who, through force, founded Rome. Yet religion via Numa was necessary to maintain Rome. Here Scipio, through the threat of force, made the Romans not abandon their homeland, yet the fear of the gods and religion was necessary for the Romans to keep their oath. In short, force founds, but religion maintains.

Machiavelli's second example showcases a slightly different point. There, Roman religion was used to quell a political dispute. Lucius Manlius, the current dictator of Rome, was accused by Marcus Pomponius, the tribune of the plebs. Titus Manlius, the son of Lucius, went to meet Marcus and "threatened to kill him if he did not swear to drop the accusation against his father, he constrained him to take the oath; and Marcus, having sworn through fear, dropped the accusation."[29] The oath Titus dictated for Marcus to swear was "that he would never hold an Assembly of the plebs for the prosecution of his father."[30] This oath does not make any explicit mention of the gods. Yet, Machiavelli still views this oath as an example of the power of religion, suggesting there was an inherent fear that God would punish oath breakers that made oaths sworn under duress superior to threats. Once again, the power of religion was activated under the threat of violence and death. Yet the biggest distinction is the end of the use of

[29] *D* I 11.1
[30] Livy VII 4

religion. While Scipio's oath was done to keep Romans loyal to the fatherland, Titus's was done out of strictly political and filial interest. Machiavelli had earlier stated accusations as a valuable and necessary method by which a republic could maintain its freedom,[31] and now Roman religion was being used to suppress them. Furthermore, tribunes were considered sacrosanct, and thus raising arms against a tribune went against the laws of Rome.[32] With this example, Machiavelli begins to elucidate the double-edged power of Roman religion. It compelled obedience to commands made by force regardless of if the commands have good ends. Thus, the immense fear of God that Romans had can only be considered a benefit, while the men who utilize this fear do so with good ends in mind.

While the examples of Scipio and Titus were used to showcase how Roman religion could maintain a command, Machiavelli also argues that Romans used religion to create orders. Here he explains how Numa, Romulus's successor, was able to use religion to persuade Romans to adopt "new and unaccustomed orders."[33] Machiavelli also provides more ancient examples showing how Lycurgus and Solon, by appealing to God, convinced their people to instantiate extraordinary orders that were for the purpose of the common good.[34] .[35] Machiavelli further supports this by providing his first modern example in his section on religion and shows how Friar Savonarola persuaded the Florentines that he had spoken to God and thus convinced them to adopt specific orders.[36] Using both Pagan and Christian examples, Machiavelli shows how religion in general can be used as a rhetorical tool to persuade the masses.

---

[31] *D* I 7.1
[32] Livy II 33
[33] *D* I 11.2
[34] *D* I9.3
[35] Livy I 19, *D* I 11.2
[36] *D* I 11.5

The final benefit that Machiavelli gives to religion in this chapter has already been partially fleshed out. Due to its spiritual nature, religion can last longer than any man's lifetime. Machiavelli holds that there must be fear, either of a prince or God, to prevent a kingdom or republic from falling into ruin.[37] This fear allows for good orders, which allow for good fortune, and from good fortune, the "happy successes of enterprises."[38] Religion even makes the introduction of arms or the creation of a military easier.[39] Since a prince will inevitably die and the odds of getting two virtuous princes via succession are rare, having a fear of God is a better way to keep a kingdom or republic from ruin.

Thus, as presented in chapter 11, Roman religion has two unique benefits. It can hold people obedient when typical loyalty and honor fail and can be used to maintain the orders that sustain a regime. Machiavelli has not provided any evidence yet to suggest that Catholicism would have access to those same benefits. The one benefit that seems universal is religion's power of persuasion and how it can be used for the adoption of new modes and order. Yet, as already alluded to in the example of Titus, the Roman religion is a double-edged sword and could be used for the benefit or harm of the regime. Machiavelli explores in the next chapter if the Roman religion's advantages cause more harm than good.

Chapter 12:

Machiavelli begins by talking about how religion in general continues either in a principality or a republic. A religion's political advantages are irrelevant if it does not last. A religion will not maintain itself passively but requires the regime's effort. First, the princes must

[37] *D* I 11.4
[38] *D* I 11.4
[39] *D* I 11.5

"maintain the ceremonies of their religion uncorrupt and hold them always in veneration."[40] The focus on ceremonies is of key importance. It is not that the beliefs of a religion must be held in esteem but rather the public displays of it. In other words, it is a prioritization of orthopraxy over orthodoxy and thus an implicit critique of Catholicism and its focus on "Faith and Works." Machiavelli even goes so far as to say, "All things that arise in favor of that religion they [princes of a republic or a kingdom] should favor or magnify, even though they judge them false, and they should do it so much the more as they are more prudent and more knowing of natural things."[41] While Machiavelli is not concerned with belief among the elite, he still requires that religion should be held by the broader populous. Or, in other words, while the elite may not fear God, the masses must. To that end, the elites cannot publicly seem like they have "less religion." He explains this in the context of Rome and how once the powerful started abusing the power of the divine prophecy, the people quickly lost faith in religion, without which a state could not remain happy, good, and united.

Next, Machiavelli segues to a discussion about how the Catholic Church has weakened Italy. Machiavelli made notice of this in the first preface, where he explains that there is a "weakness into which the present religion has led the world" and an "evil that an ambitious idleness has done to many Christian provinces and cities."[42] Yet at least in this critique, Machiavelli does not criticize any aspect of Christian belief. He focuses on how the Catholic Church and, specifically, the Pope, as Christ's vicar, is responsible for maintaining and promoting Christianity. In this it has failed. Specifically, in contrast with religion leading to a state being more united and happier, the Roman Church impaired the well-being of the cities of

[40] *D* I 12.1
[41] *D* I 12.1
[42] *D* I Preface.2

Italy. The first reason follows from Machiavelli's earlier insistence that princes maintain the foundations of a religion. The wicked examples of the papal court have resulted in Italy losing all devotion and religion.[43] In other words, the fear of God required for a religion to have a political use has through the Church been severely weakened. Machiavelli's second reason is that the Church has kept Italy divided and that no province can ever be happy unless it is united under one republic or one prince. While the Catholic Church was meant to maintain Christianity, in reality it had then become an obstacle for the very goals religion is supposed to achieve (i.e., being happy and united).

Machiavelli has described certain caveats to religion's political advantage. Religion is only useful as a tool for making the regime good while its foundation and ceremonies are maintained. These practices should be continued even if the ruling elite no longer believe them, as they are essential to keep the masses faithful. Furthermore, while religion is meant to keep people united, if poorly managed (as shown by the Catholic Church), it can then prevent unity if the religion's maintainers are so inclined. By holding the Church as responsible rather than an Italian prince, Machiavelli is also suggesting that religion is harder to maintain when not tightly coupled with the State. Machiavelli supports this point with examples of how the Romans religion accomplished great deeds when it was tightly coupled with the princes or the Roman political leaders.

Chapter 13:

The title of chapter 13 supports the claim that the Romans made their religion serve them.[44] Machiavelli intentionally chose the word serve here. Religion is not equal nor above the

[43] *D* I 12.2
[44] *D* I 13

people but rather is a tool to be used by them. Machiavelli argues that religion served the Romans by helping them reorder the city, carry out their enterprises, and stop tumults. He gives one example for each point, yet each seems short. Rather than strengthening the power of religion, Machiavelli is using this example to posit that even Religion used well, or Roman religion, has limits. Religion may be required for a state to be good and happy, but it is insufficient.

The first example Machiavelli provides is regarding the "reordering of the city."[45] The Romans created tribunes with consular power, and it just so happened that every one of the tribunes that year was a plebian except for one patrician. At the same time, certain plagues and famines were happening in Rome, and the nobles used those events to argue that the gods were angry and that the only remedy was electing only patricians as tribunes. Due to the fear of religion and therefore God, the people did exactly that and elected only noble tribunes.[46] Yet, to see this as a reordering would be a stretch. It was not a new precedent that patricians could be consular tribunes. Livy makes clear that it used to be that only patricians could be consular tribunes, and only recently had the office been opened to the plebians.[47] Even the example Machiavelli provides shows how one of the consular tribunes was a patrician. Thus, this reordering is the nobles using religion to win an election for their candidates. Reordering, for Machiavelli, usually refers to changes in modes and orders, not simply an election. Also, while religion was used to win the election, it was not a tool that could always be used. It was only because Rome, by chance, was currently experiencing extreme hardship that the nobles could appeal to the gods. Thus, this example merely showcases how the Roman nobles, if fortune or

[45] *D* I 13.1
[46] *D* I 13.1
[47] Livy V 14

luck was on their side, could use religion to win an election. This is not to say that the "reordering" was merely a chance affair. It did require the nobles to be able to provide an interpretation of natural phenomena that the masses believed. In other words, the nobles needed to control the religion for it to be used to achieve their ends.

The second example Machiavelli gives is a military one where the Romans used religion to win a siege. Specifically, the Romans had been seizing the city of the Vientes for ten years, and the soldiers wanted to return to Rome. By sheer chance, Lake Albanus had overflowed that year, and the captains of the Roman armies found that Apollo "said that the city of the Vientes would be captured the year that Lake Albanus overflowed."[48] This prophecy made the soldiers endure the siege for one more year resulting in the city's capture. This example once again shows the limitations of the power of religion. As used by its captains, the Roman religion did provide hope for the army, yet it required a chance event (the overflowing of the lake). Using religion for political or military purposes requires a fortune to be on one's side.

The third and final example Machiavelli provides is the most complicated of them all and is claimed to show how religion can stop tumults. A tribune known as Terentillus wanted to pass a law limiting the consuls' power and, thus, weaken the patricians. This divide between the tribunes and the consuls spilled over to a general tumult, with the plebians abandoning their civic duty and causing unrest until the Terentillian law was passed. There were two attempts to pacify this tumult. The first was a blatant appeal to religion. The nobles manufactured a religious prophecy that warned the city "to refrain from political strife."[49] Although it does not exist in Livy, Machiavelli points out that the tribunes exposed that the prophecy was fake. Nevertheless,

[48] *D* I 13.1
[49] Livy III 10

this prophecy calmed the people for a time, but it was not sufficient, as evidenced by the fact that the Romans had to resort to other attempts.

Their second attempt occurred after a man named Appius temporarily took over the citadel in the middle of the night. In response, "one Publius Ruberius, a citizen grave and of authority, came outside the Senate with words, part loving, part threatening, showing the dangers to the city and the untimeliness of their demands. So, he constrained the plebs to swear it would not depart from the wish of the consul, so that the plebs obeying, recovered the Capitol by force."[50] Unfortunately, Publius was killed during the battle, and a new consul took charge. This consul decided to create an army and attack a nation known as the Volsci. While the tribune and the plebians could traditionally refuse to supply men for the Roman army, the new consul, Titus, said the plebians had to follow him because of their oath to follow the consuls. The tribunes ultimately ended up at a compromise where they agreed "that for one year they would not discuss the Terentillian law and the consuls could not, for a year, take the plebs out to war."[51]

This incredibly complex final example provides multiple teachings and, in continuing the trend of the chapter, shows how weak the political power of religion is even when it is well-maintained. First, the Sibylline book example shows that religion alone cannot quell tumults. The prophecy, while effective for a short time, was insufficient. Second, we see how Machiavelli does not believe religion can stand alone. The religious prophecy was far less effective than an oath sworn to a great citizen. Religion once again is shown to help maintain a command (i.e., following an oath) but cannot incite people to act (i.e., ceasing rioting). Religion, for it to be useful, requires there to be a man whom the people can look up to and trust. Yet the power of

[50] *D* I 13.2
[51] *D* I13.2

that religious oath immediately diminished the moment the man died. If the oath had kept its full strength, then Titus would not have been forced to compromise, and the tribunes would have been forced to stop discussing the Terentillian law and go to war. While the Roman religion's power to maintain is still being used with this example, Machiavelli points out that the power to maintain grows weaker with time, writing "For all the beginning of sects, republics, and kingdoms must have some goodness in them, by means of which they may regain their first reputation and their first increase. Because in the process of time that goodness is corrupted, unless something intervenes to lead it back to the mark, it of necessity kills that body."[52] The power of Ruberius' oath, due to time and Ruberius's death, weakened to the extent that the Tribunes eventually accepted the compromise not because they believed betraying the oath would lead to their divine punishment, but rather they, "fearing because of this thing lest they lose all their dignity, agreed."[53] The final lesson Machiavelli provides is once again driving home how the Roman religion, to be used effectively, requires certain political or temporal conditions. The oath of Ruberius was not made in a vacuum but rather to respond to a political and imminent threat. When the consuls attempted to use the Sibylline books, the people were "on strike," but there was no existential threat. However, when Ruberius made the plebians swear their oath, it was done with an army having just taken over the Roman citadel. Whether the threat is a foreign army or plagues and famines, Machiavelli clarifies that extreme circumstances are required to use the Roman religion effectively.

Chapter 13 provides clear teachings while providing the least number of maxims and relying almost entirely on examples. We can see that the Roman religion requires fortune to be

[52] *D* III 1.2
[53] *D* I 13.2

on its side to be truly effective. Fortune here involves natural phenomena, such as famine or water rising, and political turmoil, such as a hostile force taking over a citadel. Machiavelli explains that these auguries or omens were central to the Roman religion for exactly this reason[54]. Yet to reliably have these omens, the Romans tried to create them either through animal sacrifice or the observance of animals. For instance, a common omen might be the specific position of entrails after a sacrifice. This event, entirely dependent on fortune, can then be interpreted by politically important Romans to predict that the gods desire certain things, and thus compelled Romans to act. We also see how religion's power is best actualized not via prophecies or texts but when it is tied to specific respected men such as patricians, military captains, or great citizens like Publius Ruberius. Yet perhaps most illuminating is the caveat to the vision presented earlier, where we see religion as a maintaining force. Religion's power wanes over time even when well-maintained. While it might last longer than any man's lifetime, it will not keep its strength forever.

Paprius and the Chickens (Chapters 14 and 15):

In keeping with the use of examples, Machiavelli concludes his explicit discussion on religion with the same example told from two different perspectives. This example is a battle between a Roman army led by Consul Paprius and the Sabines. One of the common auguries in the Roman religion was the use of chicken-men to determine if there should be a battle. These chicken-men placed chickens next to food. If the chickens ate, the Romans attacked; otherwise, they abstained from fighting.[55] Paprius wanted to attack the Samnite army because he believed that victory was certain, but he asked the chicken-men in keeping with the Roman religion. The

[54] *D* I 12.1
[55] *D* I 14.1

chickens did not eat, but the prince of the chicken-men lied and told the consul the opposite. Despite the deception of the prince, some other chicken-men relayed to the consul that the chickens had not eaten. Paprius said that he needed to do his duty, and if the chicken-men lied, they would be punished; thus, he placed the chicken-men on the army's front lines. By "chance," a javelin thrown by a Roman soldier killed the prince of chicken-men. Hearing this, the consul said they now had the gods' favor since the liar had been killed, and thus began the battle.

This example provides a clue on how Machiavelli thinks a leader should utilize religion. He expressed in *D* I 12 that a leader must always venerate and magnify a religion, but it is only now that he explains how this should be done. Paprius aimed to start the battle, but first, he conducted the Roman ritual of consulting the chicken-men. If the chickens had eaten, he would have been able to wage the battle he desired while honoring tradition. However, the chickens had not eaten in his case, and the prince had lied to him. Upon realizing that the prince of the chicken-men had lied, he could have done the reverent thing and refused to start the battle. Instead, he engineered certain circumstances to still have the desired battle without explicitly going against the auspices. He said, "If the man who is watching the omens makes a false report, he brings down the divine wrath on his own head. As far as I am concerned, I have received the formal intimation that the chickens ate eagerly, there could be no more favorable omen for the Roman people and army."[56] Then he placed the chicken-men in the front so they would be more likely to die, allowing Paprius to claim the gods were with him. Finally, rather than relying on an enemy killing the chicken-men, a Roman javelin killed the prince of the chicken-men. While Machiavelli says this was done by "chance," it is equally plausible that the prince of the chicken-

[56] Livy X 40

men was intentionally killed, as the prince of the chicken-men was killed by a Roman spear before the battle started.[57]

Paprius reinterpreting the chicken-men may seem to go against the earlier notion that religion requires fortune to achieve its ends, but it does not necessarily conflict. First, the use of the ritual of the chickens itself is a place for fortune to exert influence. For Paprius to have had his battle the prince of the chickens had to have lied initially. Had he not, Paprius could not have had his battle. The second and more compelling reason is that while Machiavelli says the ritual gave the Romans confidence, he does not attribute it to their victory. In other words, Paprius engaged in a ritual to venerate the Roman religion and manufactured the outcome to receive a result favorable to him. However, the ritual itself did not help him achieve his goal. This is not to say that Paprius should not be praised for his skillful reinterpretation. Keeping faith in the auspices is essential, something that Machiavelli stresses when discussing Appius Pulcher, who disobeyed the augers by drowning the chickens when he heard that the chicken had not eaten.[58]

While keeping the belief in religion is useful and might provide men confidence, it does not win battles; instead, temporal factors are responsible. Machiavelli makes this clear by showing how the Samnites underwent their own religious ritual involving ancient sacrifices and making the soldiers swear an oath to never flee. Like the oaths previously mentioned, this one was sworn under pain of death, with those who refused being executed. Yet ultimately, "When they came to conflict, the Samnites were overcome, because Roman virtue and the fear conceived out of past defeats overcame whatever obstinacy they were able to assume by virtue of religion and of the oath they had taken."[59] While religion may have the power to give men

[57] Livy X 40
[58] *D* I 14.3
[59] *D* I 15.1

confidence and make them hold out longer in a siege, it cannot create a victory when deficient in virtue. Showing inadequacy of religion in battle is an especially interesting way for Machiavelli to end his discourse on religion, given Christianity's political rise.

The standard view of Christianity's rise involves the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. The night before the battle, Emperor Constantine had a dream about using the sign of the cross to defend his army. In the morning, he ordered his soldiers to paint the symbols chi-rho (or the first two letters in Greek for Christ) on their shields. He won the battle and then, at a later point, converted to Christianity. Furthermore, he ended the persecution of Christians and began the process in which Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire. While modern historians have questioned the event's importance and even whether it happened at all,[60] it is doubtful that Machiavelli would have been aware of such criticisms. Thus, by questioning the importance of religious ritual and specifical the foolishness of "painted and gilded shields,"[61] Machiavelli is calling the very beginning of Christianity and its temporal power into question. Christianity's rise is not due to the power of its God but rather the virtue of the Roman Army and the Superstition of a Roman Emperor. Given how most of Constantine's soldiers were not Christian, this can be used to strengthen Machiavelli's view on belief.

While earlier it seemed that even if one does not believe in religion they should venerate it, now Machiavelli is arguing that it is preferable if the elite do not believe in religion. Doing so allows them to manipulate it like Paprius and prevent new traditions from rising to power as Constantine mistakenly did.

---

[60] Raymond Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4.
[61] *D* I 15.1

Furthermore, Machiavelli has explained that the Roman religion is a maintaining power. It cannot compel people to win a battle or end a tumult, but it can get them to remain loyal or end a dispute via oaths. Second, religion's power is not self-sufficient but relies on fortune and men. A religious command is strongest when tied to a specific well-respected individual or group, whether it be a king like Numa, a citizen like Publius Ruberius, Patricians, or a soldier's commander. Furthermore, a religion needs to be maintained through veneration and constantly promoted for it to remain uncorrupt and continue to unify men. These venerations do not necessarily have to result in subordinating one's ambitions to religion. Instead, they must merely show respect, as seen with Paprius and the chicken-men. Yet even if religion is maintained and has fortune and good men to base itself on, it will eventually decline and weaken as all things do. Thus, religion may be a long-lasting maintaining power, but contrary to the view of the immortal omnipotent God, it cannot maintain a regime endlessly.

Chapter II: Religion the Reformer:

Machiavelli's explicit description of religion is perhaps missing one of religion's most famous elements: morality. Religion is often associated with moral values, and yet Machiavelli does not explicitly describe how a religion's moral power can be used by the state, if at all. Yet he implicitly provides clues in the section right after his discussion on religion (*D* I 16-18), where he "considers corruption and how to overcome it."[62] Machiavelli acknowledges that countries today, or at least Italy[63] are corrupt. Thus, an important question arises: Given this corruption, how can a state maintain its freedom or even become free in the first place? An answer, though not implicitly mentioned in this section, is religion.

Machiavelli states that "Those princes or those republics that wish to maintain themselves uncorrupt have above everything else to maintain the ceremonies of their religion uncorrupt and hold them always in veneration; for one can have no greater indication of the ruin of a province than to see the divine cult disdained."[64] Yet before even discussing how religion could be used to achieve such a task, it is essential to understand what Machiavelli means by corruption. First and foremost, disdain refers to if the religion is believed or not believed. Or rather, is there still fear of God? For if there is no fear of God there is no reason for the people to believe in the religion. This explains why the prince must maintain the ceremonies. Yet, such a definition would place Machiavelli in an interesting predicament. It would mean that a prince should support any religion as long as it is popular. It would mean that, since most Italians were Catholics, the prince should support the Church. Given Machiavelli's hatred of the Catholic Church, this interpretation

[62] Mansfield, *Machiavelli's new modes and orders : a study of the Discourses on Livy*, 79.
[63] *D* I 17.2, 49.2
[64] *D* I 12.1

is not likely. Yet a caveat should be made. There is a distinction between something being corrupt and something providing a common benefit. For Christianity not to be corrupt means that people fear the Christian God and therefore uphold Christian values. For instance, a non-corrupt Christianity would praise mercy. Similarly, a corrupt Christianity would be merciless. Yet at the same time, mercy is not a Roman Pagan virtue; rather, the Roman religion glorified ferocity. Thus, both corrupt Christianity and un-corrupt Roman Paganism would glorify ferocity and un-corrupt Christianity and corrupt Roman Paganism would praise mercy. This seems akin to relativity. Machiavelli writes "This lack of corruption—men having a good end—was the cause that the infinite tumults in Rome did not hurt and indeed helped the republic."[65] Because Rome was not corrupt, their tumults were in line with Roman values and thus helped the republic. Irrespective of something being corrupt or not is the question of if Machiavelli thinks it is useful or even ideal. What exactly Machiavelli thinks is an ideal or good religion will be further explained in *Chapter 4* with German Christianity. Yet given how corruption refers to the values of the Regime, and not an absolute notion of good or evil, a question remains. Why is ensuring that a religion remains uncorrupt so important?

The answer to this question requires reading Machiavelli closely. When describing the importance of the removal of the Roman Kings, Machiavelli writes, "For considering how much corruption those kings had come to, if two or three such had followed in succession, and the corruption that was in them had begun to spread through the members, as soon as the members had been corrupted it would have been impossible ever to reform."[66] The danger with a corrupt king is not that they would make a wrong decision but rather that the corruption would spread to

[65] *D* I 17.2
[66] *D* I 17.1

the people dooming them. This is also the danger with religion. If the religion itself became corrupt, it would spread to the people corrupting them as well. Thus, everyone would become opposed to the values and virtues that the regime had considered good. Machiavelli even provided an example of this, saying that had the papal Church shifted to the Swiss, it would have taken a state who lived like the ancients regarding religion and military and corrupted them into a disorderly state.[67] The only way the Catholic Church can have this effect is if its corruption infected and transformed the Swiss. Religion's longevity makes it even more dangerous than a corrupt king. For corruption to contaminate the people, it requires "two or three" bad kings in succession. Thus, there is a chance that a good one could arise after one bad prince or leader and thus prevent the city's corruption. This was the case for Rome, who replaced the extremely corrupt Tarquin with the immense virtue of Brutus, who was so motivated toward the common benefit that he killed his sons.[68] Religion, as expressed above, lasts for far longer than one lifetime. Thus, the only remedy when a corrupt religion arises is to either turn it away from corruption and thus make it aligned with the common values of the regime or replace it altogether. Replacing it in many ways embraces corruption. It takes advantage of how people no longer fear Jupiter to instead promote fearing Christ and thus enables one to install new values as the regime's good.

Yet this immense danger that a corrupt religion poses becomes a strength if it remains pure. First, religion becomes another guard against corruption. If people believe in an uncorrupt religion, it is dubious to see how they can be corrupt themselves. Yet the more obvious strength is in using religion to redeem a city. Machiavelli holds that well-ordered laws can only help a

[67] *D* I 12.2
[68] *D* I 16.4, 17.1, III 1.6, Livy II 4, 5

corrupt city when it is instantiated "by one individual who with an extreme force ensures their observance so that the matter becomes good."[69] Yet the amount it can help is limited by the lifespan of the lawgiver. "If a city that has fallen into decline through the corruption of matter ever happens to rise, it happens through the virtue of one man who is alive then … as soon as such a one is dead, it returns to its early habit ... the cause is that there cannot be one man of such long life as to have enough time to inure to good a city that has been inured to bad for a long time."[70] As we have seen, religion has no extreme force and cannot create these reforms. Yet it can be used to maintain these reforms and make them last beyond the lifespan of the lawgiver. We have already seen religion having the power to make people follow edicts even after the orderer's death, and this is just another application of it. Yet, unlike previous examples, it is insufficient for the reformer to appeal to religion as Scipio or Ruberius did. If a regime's people are corrupt, their religion must also be corrupted. Instead, this reformer must find a new religion or reorder an existing one in order for it to support the reforms he desires after his death. It should also be noted that a religion being corrupt is what provides the opportunity to enable one to create a new religion. As religions are not limited by biology, they allow one man's virtue to persist in the city indefinitely.

Machiavelli understands the permanence and power of these religious founders and, for this reason, writes, "Among all men praised, the most praised are those who have been heads and orderers of religions."[71] Machiavelli even provides an example of how religion can make reforms persist even when the matter is corrupt. He first explains that towards the end of the Roman Republic, corruption was rampant, and "although the two Cato's emerged in Rome ... there was

[69] *D* I 17.3
[70] *D* I 17.3
[71] *D* I 10.1

so much distance between them for one to the other, and they remained so alone, that with their good example, they were not able to do any good work—and especially the last Cato, who finding the city in good part corrupt, was not able to make the citizens become better."[72] This is so far consistent with our understanding. Due to the limitations of their lifespans, individuals cannot make lasting improvements in a corrupt body. Yet, in the next paragraph, Machiavelli explains how two such individuals, Saint Francis and Saint Dominick, were able to renew corrupted Christianity and bring it back to its initial pure state. Despite there being two individuals, this is not the succession of great men that Machiavelli viewed as one way in which a corrupt city could be reformed.[73] Saint Francis and Dominick were contemporaries, with Saint Francis dying just five years after Saint Dominick, and they both founded orders of monks (the Franciscans and Dominicans, respectively) that persist to this day. "For with poverty and with the example of the life of Christ they brought back into the minds of men what had already been eliminated there. Their new orders were so powerful that they are the cause that the dishonesty of the prelates and the heads of religion do not ruin it."[74] Saint Francis and Dominick were founders of religious orders and, as such, could lessen the corruption that had infected the rest of the Catholic Church. While Machiavelli may disagree with the specific message that they had taught[75], they are the only successful example of reformers of corruption in the entirety of the *Discourses*. They were able to reinforce the values of Christ after the Church had all but abandoned them. It should be noted that it is never religion by itself which does anything but rather great men whose actions are maintained by religion that cause change.

---

[72] *D* III 1.3
[73] *D* I 17.3
[74] *D* III 1.4
[75] Nathan Tarcov, "Machiavelli's Critique of Religion," *Social Research* 81, no. 1 (2014): 198, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26549607.

Despite the section on corruption never mentioning religion, Machiavelli has made clear that religion is at the back of his mind and continues to provide examples of how religion can be used to renew a state. These benefits arise from typical advantages of religion, such as its longevity and persuasive ability. They also show how using religion to renew can be a less fortune-reliant remedy. This was seen with Saint Francis and Dominick, who were able to renew the corrupt state of Christianity despite not having any successors. We also see that corruption is a relative term with respect to the regime's value and that corruption also presents an opportunity for a new sect to arise.

Chapter III: Religion the Protector:

Logically, as religion can be used to reform a corrupt regime, it can also be used to prevent it from becoming corrupted in the first place. It does this by promoting specific values. It was this aspect that Machiavelli alluded to when he wrote, "A republic ... should maintain the foundations of the religion they hold, and if this is done, it will be an easy thing for them to maintain their republic religious and, in consequence, good and united."[76] Machiavelli does not explicitly state how religion can lead to the regime being good or united, but he does provide subtle suggestions.

First, despite religion's power, Machiavelli still clarifies that it has limitations. "Many times, deceived by a false image of good, the people desire its own ruin; and if not made aware that that is bad and what the good is, by someone in whom it has faith, infinite dangers, and harms are brought into the republic."[77] Religion, in the abstract sense, while making things easier, is just a tool to be used by an actor. Someone needs to bring moral distinction to light. Machiavelli also clarifies that what religion can persuade someone to do is limited by the rhetoric of the orator. "When gain is seen in the things that are put before the people, even though there is loss concealed underneath, and when it appears spirited, even though there is the ruin of the republic concealed underneath, it will always be easy to persuade the multitude of it; and likewise it may always be difficult to persuade it of these policies if either cowardice or loss might appear, even though safety and gain might be concealed underneath."[78] Thus religion can only be a useful tool of persuasion in so far as it makes things appear to be gain or spirited when

[76] *D* I 12.1
[77] *D* I 53.1
[78] *D* I 53.2

not originally. An example of this is Christianity, which by esteeming values like mercy and humility, makes a "life of idleness" seem like a gain despite harming the regime.[79] Religion requires great men to be used accurately. Thus, a natural question arises. Does religion create great men? If not, it is dubious how useful religion can be to a regime.

Machiavelli does not definitively conclude that religion can create great men, but he believes religion can make people esteem specific individuals. He first elucidates this concept in a chapter aptly named "Very Rarely Do Men Know How to Be Altogether Wicked or Altogether Good."[80] There, Machiavelli tells the tale of a wicked tyrant named Giovampagolo Baglioni. He was being besieged by Pope Julius II. The Pope, due to his rashness, decided to walk into the city unarmed. Giovampagolo, as Machiavelli notes, could and should have attacked and killed his unarmed enemy, but due to the Pope's stature, he surrendered to the unarmed man. It is unlikely that Giovampagolo would have surrendered to anyone else, even if they were a great general. However, because the Pope was the religious figure, he was willing to lie down his arms.

Machiavelli continues to support the power of religion by providing a modern counterpart to Publius Ruberius, who was able to end the tumult of the Terentillian Law. First, he quotes Virgil's Aeneid, who explains how tumultuous masses will quiet if they "look on some man grave with piety and merits."[81] While Ruberius uses an oath to make his order last, he is never described as pious. Machiavelli indicates that piety can provide another way for a man to be considered great. Machiavelli shows this with an example from recent history. He describes how Florence was undergoing tumults with one faction going towards the highly reputed house of Piero Soderini to sack it. "Messer Francesco, his brother, then bishop of Volterra and today

[79] *D* I Preface.2
[80] *D* I 27
[81] *D* I 54.1

cardinal, by fate found himself at home. Having heard the noise and seen the disturbance, he at once put on his most honorable clothes and over them the episcopal rochet, put himself against those who were armed, and with presence and with words stopped them."[82] Machiavelli does not indicate that Francesco was a respected man by the sackers. Rather, the mere wearing of the robes of a Bishop was able to quiet the masses. Machiavelli does state that it was not the presence of Francesco alone that turned the rioters away but also his words. Yet, as already shown, if the masses will not quiet down and listen to you, it does not matter how eloquent one's words are. Religion made Francesco rise to the stature of a great man, and Francesco's words or virtue allowed the great man to end the tumult. This is a key distinction. Religion can make a relative stranger be considered great, but they still need to have the virtue of the great. In other words, religion can only help reputation, which, while being key, is not sufficient. Yet as the example of Pope Julius II showed, the reputation that religion inspires can be used both for and against the best interests of the people.

Having thus explained how religion can be used actively to promote values through great men, Machiavelli concludes by clearly showing the importance of the citizens belief in their religion and how that can strengthen certain values in the citizenry. Machiavelli provides an example of this with the story of the Dictator Camillus and his booty. Camillus had promised to give one-tenth of his spoils from his war with the Veii to the gods. Unfortunately, the spoils had already come into the possession of the plebs with no records saying how much there was. Thus, the Senate then passed an edict stating that each plebian was to take account of the total booty they had acquired and present one-tenth of it in public to fulfill the religious obligation. This shows that the Senate had such great trust in the religious nature of the citizens that they did not

[82] *D* I 54.1

think that any of the plebians would have given less than what was owed. Furthermore, the Senate was not naïve, as even though the plebs were not happy with the requirement, they did not even contemplate the idea of giving less than what they owed.[83] Machiavelli writes, "This example, with many others that have been brought up above, shows how much goodness and how much religion were in that people, and how much good was to be hoped from it."[84] The Roman religion had two advantages here. First, it was so venerated that both the Senate trusted the plebians to fulfill their obligation, and the plebians did not even consider defrauding their faith. Second, the religion itself was motivated toward the common benefit of the regime. The Senate could use religion to impose a demand on the people, and they would oblige. It is dubious that the Christianity of Machiavelli's day with powerful banking families and simony would have acted similarly to protect any Italian states. This is a key distinction that will be further examined in *Chapter 4*, as Machiavelli hints at how even an uncorrupted religion may not be motivated toward the common benefit of the regime.

With this, Machiavelli concludes his descriptions, explicit and otherwise, of the various advantages of religion and how it could be used to instill and protect the regime's values. He shows how religion can promote certain values in a republic to the extent that these values can be used by the political elite, allowing them to achieve objectives that seem impossible in contemporary times. Most importantly, in almost all cases, religion needs great men to know how and when to use it actively. While it may provide the reputation of great men, Machiavelli has not shown that religion can create great men. It is through these great men that religion can actively promote specific values in a regime.

---

[83] *D* I 55.1
[84] *D* I 55.1

Chapter IV: What Makes a Religion Good:

While religion does not have all the answers for Machiavelli, he believes that good religion can create better men and regimes. But what exactly is a good religion? We have discussed corruption, but that is still a relative term. The exact form of this religion has been thoroughly debated, with some believing it to be a form of paganism[85], for others a militant religion resembling Islam,[86] and still others arguing that it would be entirely secular.[87] What is known is that the Roman religion was closer to Machiavelli's ideal view of a good religion then Catholicism. Having thus explored all the specific advantages that Roman religion, religion in general, and Catholicism have to offer we can now evaluate and see what a good contemporary religion might be for Machiavelli. Machiavelli is a founder of new modes and orders and thus he is not arguing, even if it was possible, for Roman Paganism to become the dominant religion of Italy once again. An example he seems to point towards, though not one without flaws, is German Christianity.

Machiavelli stance on the importance of religion seems to shift at the start of Book 2. The preface of Book 1 clarifies that the problems afflicting our time are not due to the flaws in our religion but rather due to a lack of ancient examples.[88] In Book 2, he changes his perspective, writing, "But whoever is born in Italy and in Greece and has not become either an ultramontane in Italy or a Turk in Greece has reason to blame his times and to praise the others, for in the latter there are very many things that make them marvelous, and in the former, there is nothing that

---

[85] Timothy Sean Quinn, "Machiavelli, Christianity, and Civil Religion," in *Civil religion in modern political philosophy : Machiavelli to Tocqueville*, ed. Steven Frankel and Martin D. Yaffe (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020).
[86] Beiner, *Civil religion : a dialogue in the history of political philosophy*.
[87] Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli's Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed* (Cornell University Press, 1996). http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/10.7591/j.ctvpwhfwk.
[88] *D* I Preface.1

recompenses them for extreme misery, infamy, and reproach—there is no observance of religion."[89] Now at first, this might seem preposterous. There is a religion being observed, Christianity. There are two possible interpretations. One, the religion being observed today has been entirely corrupted so that no one observes it, and thus there is no religion. This seems plausible, but it is not accurate. While Machiavelli believes that the Church is corrupt and that the Pope shows the least religion,[90] it is not true that no one observes that religion. We already know of the orders of the Dominicans and Franciscans, as well as those people who, for a time, followed Savonarola. Christianity is still alive, though the Church may be on its last legs. A second more likely interpretation is that "observance of religion" means the observance of a right religion. Or, put another way, religion is being observed and used to promote the good of a state. Thus, even if people observe religion, no regime observes a good religion. It also should be made clear that Machiavelli is only talking about those living in Italy or Greece.

Machiavelli argues that in ancient times people were lovers of freedom, which for Machiavelli when he is speaking in the *Discourses,* implies that people were better in ancient times. They were less corrupt and more aligned with the common benefit. He argues that the fall in "modern" times is not due to outside factors but rather the difference "between our education and the ancient, founded on the difference between our religion and the ancient."[91] Before discussing what he does mention, it is important to highlight what is amiss from his contrast of Roman Catholicism and Roman Paganism. He does not mention the difference between monotheism and paganism at all. For him, that distinction does not seem relevant at all. There is

[89] *D* II Preface.2
[90] *D* I 12.1
[91] *D* II 2.2

almost no mention of specific theological doctrine or beliefs; rather, there is an emphasis on what the different religions value.

The first distinction Machiavelli draws upon is the focus on the world. He writes, "For our religion, having shown the truth and the true way, makes us esteem less the honor of the world, whereas the Gentiles, esteeming it very much and having placed the highest good in it, were more ferocious in their actions." This is an especially peculiar statement, especially when examining the Bible verses that Machiavelli is referencing. Specifically, he is alluding to John 8:32, which states, "and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."[92] Machiavelli is posing a somewhat ironic statement that the belief that "the truth will set you free" has made Christians less free. This explanation can be better understood by understanding that from the Christian perspective, they are already pre-destined to be free. Thus, freedom can be taken for granted, and there is no reason to fight to defend it. Furthermore, because they believe they are free, Christianity seems to have created a sense of obliviousness in Christians to the extent that they cannot tell tyranny from freedom. For if they could, then clearly, they would have understood that truth alone will not set them free. The Christians hold their belief so tightly that even evil staring them in the face cannot shake them. The second Bible verse Machiavelli alludes to is John 14:6: "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.'" Machiavelli holds that Christians are taught that the only thing required for their life is to "know Jesus," Thus, they are completely divorced from the world. Thus, it seems that so far, Machiavelli is not arguing that Gentile religion is doing something well but rather that by not teaching that life is just about religion and that they are already free, it

[92] All Bible quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE)

leads to citizens who are more engaged in the physical world and thus more ferocious in defending what is theirs.

The next line of analysis praises the Roman institution of sacrifices. This is the only time Machiavelli truly discussed Roman sacrifices in the *Discourses*. Until now, while he has consistently praised auguries, he has only spoken of auguries where things remain alive such as the number of birds when deciding if Romulus or Remus should be king or if the chickens ate. He writes, "beginning from the magnificence of their sacrifices against the humility of ours, where there is some pomp more delicate than magnificent but no ferocious or vigorous action. Neither pomp nor magnificence of ceremony was lacking there, but the action of the sacrifice, full of blood and ferocity, was added with a multitude of animals being killed there. This sight, being terrible, rendered men similar to itself."[93] The Christian ritual of sacrifice referenced here is most probably the taking of the Eucharist, by which Christians ingest bread (the body of Christ) and wine (the blood of Christ). In contrast, it can be assumed that the Romans engaged in some level of animal sacrifice, though Machiavelli does not ever mention it. Specifically, Machiavelli shows that the celebration of killing and blood not only desensitizes the Romans but also makes them celebrate it, thus allowing them to be more ferocious in battle. It should also be noted that while Christianity does not have animal sacrifices, Islam, as practiced by the Turks, does. Machiavelli could have, if he wanted, brought up another modern example, as he has previously mentioned and analyzed the Turks, but decides not to. This probably represents that while Islam may be closer to Machiavelli's ideal religion it is not a plausible transition for Italy. As he explained earlier it is necessary when reordering a state to retain at least the shadow of its

[93] *D* II 2.2

ancient modes.[94] Converting the Catholic Italians to Islam would not retain the shadow of Christianity and thus, while possible, could only happen after immense violence and bloodshed, not something that Machiavelli views as ideal. Thus, the good religion must appear to be Christian.

Having already mentioned the importance of examples,[95] Machiavelli now discusses how Christianity has led to the creation of the wrong examples. He writes, "the ancient religion did not beatify men if they were not full of worldly glory, as were captains of armies and princes of republics. Our religion has glorified humble and contemplative more than active men. It has then placed the highest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human; the other placed it in greatness of spirit, strength of body, and all other things capable of making men very strong."[96] Unlike the previously mentioned flaws, this one is not built into doctrine but rather a result of the Catholic Church. The Church could have chosen to venerate other individuals, such as warriors, but instead, they were those who were humble and contemplative. Christianity, though not necessarily by doctrine, has glorified those who not only care more about the other world but abandon the human. Put another way, according to Machiavelli, God's kingdom on Earth does not care about the earth. This causes two problems. First is the lack of great warriors and those who care about freedom. However, the second and more dangerous problem is what happens when an ambitious man arrives in a world filled with the humble. Machiavelli writes, "This mode of life thus seems to have rendered the world weak and given it in prey to criminal men, who can manage it securely seeing that the collectivity of men, so as to go to paradise, think more of enduring their beatings than of avenging them."[97] While in Rome, people (such as

[94] *D* I 25.1
[95] *D* I Preface.1
[96] *D* II 2.2
[97] *D* II 2.2

Cicero or Cato) fought against corruption and tyranny till the very end, Christianity has made the world susceptible to this type of evil.

Machiavelli does not think Christianity is flawed but rather its interpretation. He writes, "And although the world appears to be made effeminate and heaven disarmed, it arises without doubt more from the cowardice of the men who have interpreted our religion according to idleness and not to virtue. For if they considered how it permits us the exaltation and defense of the fatherland, they would see that it wishes us to love and honor it and to prepare ourselves so much that we can defend it."[98] This is a very confusing statement. While the Church could choose to glorify active men, the gospels say that trusting in Jesus is the only way to freedom. The gospels tell Christians not to pay attention to the temporal world. How could one reinterpret this without removing what makes Christianity, Christian? Yet, Machiavelli mentions multiple times that this reordering of Christianity would improve things. He writes, "If such religion had been maintained by the princes of the Christian republic as was ordered by its giver, the Christian states and republic would be more united, much happier than they are."[99] Here it seems like the "interpretation" that has weakened the world is not even the correct understanding of Christianity as was ordered by Christ. But then, what is the correct understanding? Machiavelli does not point to a specific sect or doctrine. However, what he does do is point to Germany.

Before diving into his analysis of Germany, it is important to point out that Germany was still, though on barely, Catholic. Martin Luther posted his theses in 1517, four years after the *Discourses*. Thus, it is fair to say that while they were still Catholic officially, they had already begun to diverge from the teaching and power of the Church in Rome. It should also be

[98] *D* II 2.2
[99] *D* I 12.1

mentioned that Germany was not yet one country but rather, like Italy, a series of small regimes all within one territory. The distinction is that there was the Holy Roman Empire in Germany, and thus all the German states elected an emperor of Germany whenever the previous one died.

Machiavelli first mentions Germany when discussing cities that are not corrupt. He writes that Italy, above all others, has been corrupted, but so had France and Spain. Germany, however, is the one place that remains uncorrupt. Machiavelli himself makes this clear, writing, "in the province of Germany this goodness and this religion are still seen to be great in those people, which makes many republics there live free, and they observe the law so that no one from outside or inside dares to seize them."[100] Machiavelli does not specify anywhere else in this chapter what this religion means. We do know that it is a good thing, but it is left uncertain whether Machiavelli is talking about whether the religion itself is uncorrupted or if it is just wildly believed. Based on how Machiavelli attempts to prove that Germany is not corrupt, we can ascertain that it means Germany uniquely has a religion akin to the ancients. He writes, "To show that it is true that a good part of that ancient goodness reigns them, I wish to give an example such as that given above of the Senate and Roman plebs."[101] He then explains how in the German republics, when they need to acquire funds, they tell each citizen to give some percent of their total wealth. Then each citizen swears that they will and throws into a chest in private what they think they ought to pay. There is no way for the state to hold them accountable. "Hence it can be conjectured how much goodness and how much religion are yet in those men. It should be reckoned that each pays the true amount…such goodness is much more to be admired in these times as it is rarer; indeed, one sees it remaining only in that province."[102] This example

[100] *D* I 55.2
[101] *D* I 55.2
[102] *D* I 55.2

mimics the story mentioned earlier when the Roman Citizens pledged to give 1/10th of their booty to the gods.[103] Yet, in many ways, the Germans are superior to the Romans. While the Romans protested the idea that their wealth would be taxed for the purpose of the state, the Germans accepted this mode and used it regularly.

Machiavelli continues this praise of Germany and its ancient traditions in the same place where he noticed that the lack of religion is what plagued Italy. There he writes, "And if no empire followed after the Roman Empire that might have endured and in which the world might have kept its virtue together, it is seen nonetheless to be scattered in many nations where they lived virtuously, such as was the kingdom of the Franks, the kingdom of the Turks, that of the sultan, and the peoples of Germany today."[104] Despite many kingdoms having lived virtuously since the end of the Roman empire, only the peoples of Germany live virtuously today. It is also worth noting that despite Germany being an empire with an emperor, Machiavelli references them as "the peoples," not as the "kingdom," as he has done the rest. This signifies that Germany is unique, being the only virtuous and free regime[105] and representing a republic where the people are most important and not the prince.

Machiavelli even argues that the Germans are warlike. He writes, "they are very warlike men; they are like a bastion to hold back the Scythians, who border them; so, they do not presume they can conquer them or pass by them."[106] But more than just having a warlike nature, they glorify war and battle like the Romans. They "often glorify themselves, saying that if it were not for their arms, Italy and the church would have often felt the weight of the Tartar

[103] *D* I 55.1
[104] *D* II Preface.2
[105] *D* II 2.1
[106] *D* II 8.4

armies."[107] This glorification of war would suggest that the Germans have a ferocity akin to the Romans. This is especially important as it means that despite being Christians, the Germans are not tainted with only caring about the spiritual and are willing to fight for freedom.

Machiavelli's project is not to renew the Roman Republic but rather to create something better with the ancient Romans as an example. He likens himself to an explorer as a discoverer of new modes and orders.[108] As such, it should be no surprise that Germans have a system that Machiavelli thinks religion could emulate. Specifically, despite a large diversity in ways of life (which was the trait that led Rome to such greatness), there are no civil wars, or if wars do arise, they are likely to be extremely short. Machiavelli argues that this is because "that sign of the emperor, who, should he happen not to have forces, nonetheless has so much reputation among them that he is a conciliator for them, and eliminates every scandal his authority by interposing himself as a mediator."[109] Religion could operate as this conciliator, or rather a religious official could. This idea is not without precedent. We have already seen with Bishop Francesco how a religious individual can calm tumults between factions just due to the reputation of his office. We can also see this through the power of the Pope, who, through his reputation, even when unarmed, can unseat a tyrant. Like all aspects of religion, this could also backfire. The Pope, due to his reputation, is what prevents Italy from being united, but some power, if he acted like the German Holy Roman Emperor, could unite Italy.

Thus, Catholicism has failed by rewarding the humble, preventing Italy from being good and united, being separate from political rule (by having the Church as its own political entity), not being venerated, and prioritizing belief over action. Germany despite being Christian is the

---

[107] *D* II 8.4
[108] *D* I Preface.1
[109] *D* II 19.2

exact opposite. It rewards the fierce and warlike. It is strongly united to such an extent that even civil wars end quickly, something Rome was unable to accomplish. Germany and its Christianity seem like a model.

While this has been a very optimistic picture of Germany as a nation that has Christianity and is still fulfilling Machiavelli's requirement for a good regime, Germany has flaws. First and foremost, Germany does not have acquisitions. "And if this mode of expanding does not please them, one should think that acquisitions made by any other way are the ruin of republics, and should put a check on every ambition, regulate one's city inside with laws and customs, prohibit acquisitions, and think only of defending oneself and of keeping one's defenses well ordered—as do the republics of Germany."[110] Yet for Machiavelli in order for a republic to succeed it must focus on acquiring and not on maintaining. Germany is only able to succeed as it does because of "certain conditions in that country that are not elsewhere, without which they could keep to a like mode of life."[111] Machiavelli later clarifies that this condition is the imperial authority[112] that prevents the individual republics from desiring more, but it does not seem like Machiavelli thinks this imperial authority is something that could be easily reproducible elsewhere. In other words, it is possible for a state to model itself after Germany and German Christianity and not have its acquisitions chained down by the tether of imperial authority.

For Machiavelli, Roman Catholicism has failed Italy. It prioritizes a humble contemplative way of life instead of an active one. It prevents people from guarding their freedom, and worst of all, it allows criminals to take power and lead regimes. Roman Paganism seems like a better alternative in every way, yet one cannot forget that Christianity was able to

[110] *D* II 19.1
[111] *D* II 19.1
[112] *D* II 19.1

replace the Roman religion and almost completely wiped it out.[113] Whether it is because Christianity has some value in its original uncorrupted state or because to reform a state in a free city, one must retain "at least the shadow of its ancient orders," Machiavelli does not hold that Christianity should be removed entirely. He specifically thinks that the Christianity practiced by the Germans shows how one can have a Christian religion and simultaneously have a warlike free state filled with virtue. While Germany is not perfect, it is at least another example and a clue for what a good religion might look like for Machiavelli.

Unfortunately, there are more substantive caveats to the German model. First and foremost, Machiavelli never actually describes what German Christianity is. Thus, while his contemporaries might have been aware of what he was referring to we are limited to what historical records say about Germany and its religion right before the reformation. We do know that Germany benefited from "much religion" and thus Christianity but it is unknown if that means German Christianity is compatible in places that do not have Germany's political structure. If it is not, then the issue is further complicated given how Germany's political structure does not expand its territory - something that Machiavelli viewed as an absolutely necessity. Thus, while Germany might be the only contemporary model that Machiavelli provides us in the *Discourse*, it is neither perfect nor fully fleshed despite being the best we have.

[113] *D* II 5.1

Conclusion:

Machiavelli's view on how religion can be used is complicated, to say the least. Religion has clear advantages when used for political purposes. It primarily has a maintaining power, a reforming power, and a moral power. Yet it is not foolproof. The same power that can be used to advance a regime can also be used to plunge it into corruption and darkness. This is the problem with Catholicism, as it actively prevented Italy and this world from remaining good, united, and well-ordered. Thus, for religion to truly be used for political purposes the state must have an uncorrupt good religion. Though the exact blueprint of Machiavelli's ideal religion are left vague, Machiavelli does provide the model of Germany, showing that a form of Christianity could be the solution even if it is unaligned with the Gospels.

Religion's maintaining power allows oaths or agreements between people to last for far after the orderer has died. Second, religion is not virtue. For a regime to use religion, it must first rely on fortune to get a great man, and even things need specific political or natural circumstances to be used optimally. The Roman religion, by relying on auguries and ceremonies, were able to "schedule" events of fortune to increase religion's power, something that a good religion should imitate. Roman Catholicism has taught us that religion can be used to give a man a great reputation, and thus this trait should remain in Machiavelli's new religion. Yet religion, even as a maintaining power, is limited. It must be constantly venerated and supported by the elite, even if they do not believe it, and even that will be insufficient.

Religion's main unique advantage is in an uncorrupting state. This issue is of special interest to Machiavelli, given that he thinks most of Europe and all of Italy are corrupt. While secular individuals require either total control or a succession of good men to reform the state,

religion enables one man to reform the state. Numa used religion to reform the state by himself and his reforms lived on long after his death. Furthermore, while most reforms require people to "see evil in the eye," religion's rhetorical ability allows one to change the orders of a state without danger. Thus religion, despite it being reliant on fortune to some extent, makes reforming a corrupt state less reliant on fortune. Machiavelli is implying that to reform a state predictably, one must use religion, and thus is advocating for religion to be a key element of the reforms in Italy. This does not mean that Machiavelli's ideal religion will be a renewal of Catholicism as practiced by the Pope, but rather a new interpretation that retains the shadows of its former inferior self.

Yet, it should be noted that all of religion's benefits do not come from having "godly people." While there may be a reference to sacrifice, the political value of religion is completely divorced from questions of the afterlife or theological disputes. This poses the question, must Machiavelli's religion be religious, or can it be secular? Religion's power came from a fear of God. A fear of an all-seeing universal power that one cannot evade or escape like they can the regime. Thus, in Machiavelli's eye, replacing religion by any other "ism" would require people to believe in the instruction's omnipotence. Thus, religion could only be replaced by nationalism or patriotism, if one believed they lived in a *1984* big brother type of totalitarian regime. Putting contemporary alternatives aside, Machiavelli viewed the next religion to be a form of Christianity - a Christianity like the German model, completely divorced from the gospels and the teachings of the Church and instead promoting the pagan values of ferocity, action, and a love of freedom. Nevertheless, it retains the shadows of Christianity even if it keeps nothing else but the name.

Bibliography

Beiner, Ronald. *Civil Religion : A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Dietz, Mary G., and Ilya Winham. "Niccolo Machiavelli." In *Early Modern Philosophy of Religion,* edited by Graham Oppy and N. N. Trakakis. London: [Routledge], 2009.

Livy. "The History of Rome, Books 1-5." edited by Valerie M. Warrior. Indianapolis, IN: [Hackett Pub], 2006.

———. "Rome's Italian Wars : Books Six to Ten." edited by John Yardley and B. D. Hoyos. Oxford

New York: [Oxford University Press], 2013.

Machiavelli, Niccolò. *Discourses on Livy.* Edited by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. and Nathan Tarcov. Chicago: [University of Chicago Press], 1996.

———. *The Prince.* Edited by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. 2nd ed. Chicago, Ill: [University of Chicago Press], 1998.

Mansfield, Harvey Claflin. *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders : A Study of the Discourses on Livy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Quinn, Timothy Sean. "Machiavelli, Christianity, and Civil Religion." In *Civil Religion in Modern Political Philosophy : Machiavelli to Tocqueville,* edited by Steven Frankel and Martin D. Yaffe, viii, 241 pages. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020.

Strauss, Leo. *Thoughts on Machiavelli.* Chicago: [University of Chicago Press], 1978.

Sullivan, Vickie B. *Machiavelli's Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed.* Cornell University Press, 1996. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/10.7591/j.ctvpwhfwk.

Tarcov, Nathan. "Machiavelli's Critique of Religion." *Social Research* 81, no. 1 (2014): 193-216. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26549607.

Van Dam, Raymond. *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Viroli, Maurizio. "Republic and Politics in Machiavelli and Rousseau." *History of Political Thought* 10, no. 3 (1989): 405-20. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/44797142.