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MACHIAVELLI'S CRITIQUE OF CHRISTIANITY

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The question of Machiavelli's relation to religion in general and to Christianity in particular has aroused much discussion. There are scholars who claim that he was a sincere Christian in private life and constantly distressed by the fact that politics appears to operate by rules very different from the ones taught by Christ. Then there are those who claim that he was an atheist who aimed at devastating the whole of Christianity. In previous research, his opposition to Christianity has been often assumed but seldom proved or clarified. This article aims to explore Machiavelli's views on Christianity. Leaving aside the apparently insoluble question of his personal convictions,¹ it will be argued that he nevertheless criticised Christianity for various reasons and thought that politics (or public ethics) is fundamentally incompatible with Christian ethics. His message was that politics (or *arte dello stato*) - when viewed from within the confines of a Christian *Weltanschauung* - is by nature always immoral. Hence, he does not separate politics and morality, but politics and Christian morality. As is commonly known, Machiavelli harked back to ancient Rome and its practices. The same methods were not used in his time, he thought, because Christianity had already carved men into its way of liking and made them effeminate and contemplative rather than virtuous and active. Machiavelli did not claim that it would be better for a society to eradicate religion altogether. Instead, he claimed that Christianity happens to be rather unsuited for a well-ordered state. Christianity contains some effective elements that were unavailable to paganism, and, when interpreted according to *virtù*, it, too, could

allow virtuous action in Machiavelli's sense. Nevertheless, he did not aim at some sort of reinterpretation or reform of Christianity, since it is hardly possible to interpret Christianity in such a way that it would exalt this life over the other. Machiavelli also evaded most, if not all, doctrinal questions when discussing the actions of the Church. In other words, he never went into details over theological issues.²

In the first place, it should be noted that the Renaissance was a thoroughly Christian era. The view, held by earlier scholars, that the Renaissance was primarily pagan, is for the most part a myth. The whole project began as a rebirth of man, not of antiquity. The myth that there was a revival of paganism, supposedly the inevitable result of the study of antiquity, is often deduced from the attacks on scholasticism. Attacking scholasticism is, however, not the same as attacking Christianity. That there was anticlericalism during the Renaissance is undeniable, but this was true also of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The difference is not one of degree or kind, but merely one of form and expression (cf. Ullmann 1977, 3). The humanists were able to present their views more subtly than the anti-Gregorians or the Ghibellines or any heretics, and their works are much better preserved. What would have been more effective would have been either silence, a polemical ignorance of Christianity, or a full-fledged frontal assault (ibid.). This did not happen, at least not before Machiavelli's time. There were "probably few real atheists and barely a few pantheists during the Renaissance", as Kristeller (1979, 67) has noted. Indeed, the artistic and literary productions of the period reveal no animosity against Christianity. On the contrary, most of the artists were inspired by religious motives, and when pagan themes did enter the paintings, the result was a strange mixture of Christian and pagan motives. Moreover, the interest in pagan literary productions was partly justified with the rather obscure notion of *theologia poetarum*, which allowed the recognition of Christian themes from pre-Christian authors. The real core of Renaissance paganism, if it must be called paganism, is "the steady and irresistible growth of nonreligious intellectual interests which were not so much opposed to the content of religious doctrine as competing with it for individual and public attention" (ibid.). This was, of course, nothing new, but during the Renaissance nonreligious thought attained a kind of equilibrium with religious thought. Christian convictions were either retained or transformed, but never really challenged. That is, at least, before Machiavelli's time. The humanists who led the movement known as the Renaissance were, for the most part, sincere Christians and en-

dorsed the wedding of reason and faith. They attacked ecclesiastics not for their religion but for their lack of it. When Aquinas "baptized" Aristotelian philosophy, reason was made the handmaiden of faith. Not surprisingly, men like Dante were deeply interested in the question of the proper relation between the two. As the humanistic movement of the Renaissance developed, it became increasingly evident that it was reason that played the dominant role (Haydn 1950, xii). Ultimately the trend moved toward the rational or natural theology of the seventeenth century. It is clear, however, that for Machiavelli reason alone can suffice. His political theory simply lacks Christian explanations. It is not free from supernatural or metaphysical forces, but it is relatively free from Christian imagery - excluding, of course, the rhetorical level of exhortations etc. And, of course, Machiavelli never abandons Christian morality totally, since he recalls traditional moral and social norms by stressing the need to violate them.

Machiavelli and Christianity in Previous Research

Anthony Parel (1992) is among the most notable defenders of Machiavelli's paganism. He says, that "taking all available data into consideration, then, one is obliged to conclude that Machiavelli is a neopagan whose aim is to paganize rather than to secularise Christianity", (ibid., 62). Given Machiavelli's astrological assumptions, he cannot eliminate the heavens and Fortune from his analysis of religion. Parel criticises most of all Leo Strauss' and Sebastian de Grazia's ways of reading Machiavelli. According to him, Strauss attributes to Machiavelli what appears to be the principles of biblical criticism of a much later date, i.e. that the Bible is a collection of historical writings without any divine inspiration, and that any accuracy it may contain can be verified only in reference to other non-biblical sources³ (ibid., 60). Parel argues that "what Machiavelli really wants to do is to attack Christianity on the basis of the principles of sixteenth-century astrological historiography, not on the basis of those assumed by nineteenth-century higher criticism" (ibid., 61). In Parel's view, Sebastian de Grazia (1989) conflates Machiavelli's paganism and Christian theology when he tries to accommodate the whole of Machiavelli's way of thought within the Christian fold. Christianity is not sufficient in explaining Machiavelli's views, because a Christian conception of God cannot support the view that Machiavellian new princes are God's favourites, but a pagan view of God definitely can. Similarly,

a pagan view of religion can hold that *virtù* in Machiavelli's sense is the highest fulfilment of religion, whereas the Christian view of religion cannot (ibid., 61). The God of Christianity does not depend on the heavens, Fortune and other astral forces, but since Machiavelli clearly believes in such forces, there is no real place for God in his cosmology. Another emphatic argument on behalf of Machiavelli's paganism is Mark Hulliung's (1983) *Citizen Machiavelli*. According to him, Machiavelli, by stressing the need to conquer, divorced himself not only from the humanistic hype of the mirror-for-princes literature, but also from the republican tradition. Hulliung's Machiavelli pictured a rigorous (pagan) morality of public life joined to a slack morality of private life. According to Hulliung, Machiavelli saw private life as a continuation of politics, not as an alternative to it (ibid., 104). He believed in the ubiquity of politics and that the same rules more or less apply in both private and public spheres. His comedies contain a didactic function for politicians, since e.g. seduction and conspiracy, womanizing and politicking, can be seen as related phenomena that operate on the same maxims.

I think it is relatively unquestionable that Machiavelli was not attempting to replace Christianity with pagan morality. Like Rousseau, he was totally confident that once Christianity and the present way of living had already transformed men, it was not possible to go back to the state *ante* Christianity. But just because the fact that his sentiment on a given subject agrees with the sentiment of a classical author, does not follow that Machiavelli was guided in that point by the classics. The agreement may be a coincidence (cf. Strauss 1970, 7), or it can follow necessarily from certain axiomatic assumptions. By the same token, it is also relatively unquestionable that he did admire pagan morality in contrast to Christianity. Admiring and yearning to resurrect are, however, two different things.⁴ Machiavelli clearly also discussed the possibilities of using Christianity to political advantage. Timothy Lukes (1984) is among those who have understood the importance of this. "Clearly", writes Lukes, "for Machiavelli, the value of religion as a political tool is in its ability to arouse extra-political sanctions for wholly political operations" (ibid., 268). In this sense, Christianity is even better than its pagan counterparts, since it lays somewhat more emphasis on the post-mortem punishments. It is clear that the religion he is longing for is not purely pagan. He thought that religion should be used like the ancients used it, but he does not demand that the religion in question should be the same as the ancients had. Resurrecting pagan practices is doomed to fail since

Christianity has already carved men into its way of liking. After all, Machiavelli himself writes that anyone who "wishes to build a state will find it easier among mountaineers, where there is no culture, than among those who are used to living in cities, where culture is corrupt" (*Discorsi*, I/11). Numa succeeded with the Roman populace, because men were untaught and he could easily "stamp on them any new form whatever". In a similar fashion "a sculptor will more easily get a beautiful statue out of a rough piece of marble than from one badly blocked out by someone else". Nevertheless, Machiavelli says in the same chapter that "though rude men are more easily won over to a new order or opinion", it is still not impossible "to win over to it also cultured men and those who assume they are not rude", since Savonarola persuaded the populace of Florence to follow him even though many had not seen anything extraordinary to make them believe him. Commenting on this passage, Lukes (1984, 270) argues that Machiavelli discovers in Christianity a facility to reshape deformed marble, a facility that is unavailable to paganism. The Florentines were neither untaught nor rude, but still it was possible to persuade them to believe that Savonarola spoke with God. Yet, it is also clear that the religion Machiavelli is longing for is not totally Christian either. Christianity may contain some effective elements, but its basic tenets are unsuited for a well-ordered republic.

Many scholars have argued that Machiavelli's political thought is based on morality and stressed that this morality differs essentially from the Christian one (e.g. Berlin 1980). In the words of Quentin Skinner, "the difference between Machiavelli and his contemporaries cannot adequately be characterised as a difference between a moral view of politics and a view of politics divorced from morality. The essential contrast is rather between two different moralities – two rival and incompatible accounts of what ought ultimately to be done" (Skinner 1978 I, 135). Indeed, sometimes counting the corpses produced by alternative modes of action and resorting to pre-emptive strikes is very much a moral decision, if not a very Christian one. Detachment from Christian morality is not the same as having no morality at all. Skinner (2000) has also emphasised Machiavelli's divorce from classical and contemporary humanism. Skinner's Machiavelli argues that, if a ruler wishes to reach his highest goals, he will not always find it rational to be moral. He will find that any consistent attempt to cultivate the princely virtues, especially *honestum*, will prove to be a ruinously irrational policy. For Skinner, the crucial difference between Machiavelli and his more conventional contem-

poraries lies not in the goals which princes ought to pursue but in the nature of the methods they took to be appropriate for the attainment of these ends (Skinner 1978 I, 134). Machiavelli agreed with earlier writers that the proper goals of a prince are to achieve great things, to seek glory, fame and honour, and to maintain his state. Whereas others assumed that the prince must ensure that he follows the dictates of Christian morality and cultivate all the Christian cardinal virtues, Machiavelli claimed that this would inevitably lead to the prince's devastation among so many who are not virtuous. The only way out of this dilemma, if the prince is interested in maintaining his state, is to accept unflinchingly that "he will have to shake off the demands of Christian virtue, wholeheartedly embracing the very different morality which his situation dictates" (ibid., 134-135). The prince must be able to counterfeit the Christian virtues, to pretend to possess them, without actually resorting to them. Thus, for Machiavelli, *virtù* denotes precisely the requisite quality of moral flexibility in a prince.

The most lucid argument on behalf of Machiavelli's distinctively un-Christian thought is to be found in Giuseppe Prezzolini's *Machiavelli anticristo*, translated into English as *Machiavelli* (Prezzolini 1967). It contains very short fragments on various topics and, in general, it assumes rather than proves Machiavelli's opposition to Christianity. Even though it contains a section dedicated to Machiavelli's works, it fails to even mention *Esortazione alla penitenza*, a crucial text in this respect. Perhaps Prezzolini left it out intentionally, since the text is rather discomfiting for those who think that Machiavelli was always very clearly opposed to Christianity. His blindness for certain texts leads Prezzolini to conclude that in Machiavelli's writings "there is no trace of a sense of sin, or of charity, or of love of neighbor. His motivations are always practical, realistic, earthy" (ibid., 26). Machiavelli does, however, say something about these themes, especially in *Esortazione*. Besides, Machiavelli's treatment of these themes is not opposed to his "realistic" or "earthy" motivations – charity and love of neighbour are very important also from a more mundane perspective.

Leaving aside its minor deficiencies, Prezzolini's book includes a section called "The Doctrine", which, in my opinion, is among the best introductions on the core of Machiavelli's thought. For Prezzolini, Machiavelli is a profoundly pessimistic thinker who repudiates the relevance of Christian morality. Machiavelli's complete honesty in this matter is one of the reasons why he is not popular: "People are generally afraid of the truth, whether revealed by Christ or Ma-

chiavelli" (ibid., 5). Prezzolini's Machiavelli is the "founder of political science" who upset the attempts to define an ideal state in order to discover the real nature of states and how they functioned, and in this respect he can be compared to Galileo: they both taught that the universe, solar system for Galileo and history for Machiavelli, is indifferent to the desires and destinies of the individual (ibid., 6-7). In Machiavelli's political theory, the force opposing the malignity of supernatural powers is *virtù*, which exalts the Renaissance idea of man who is capable of carving his own destiny, as opposed to the Greek concept of destiny that crushes mankind, and the medieval idea of the will of God. Machiavelli's *virtù* does not correspond to the virtues of Plato and of the Stoics which became the cardinal virtues of Christianity. Instead, he uses the word more in the sense of *dynamis* (virtue of power) than in the sense of *areté* (ethical virtue). Machiavelli's virtue, according to Prezzolini, is opposed to *dolce vita* - that is, lasciviousness, sloth etc. - and neither an effeminate or contemplative attitude towards life nor simple barbaric *furor* are ever called virtuous by Machiavelli (ibid., 23). Machiavelli's "studies are based on the inapplicability of Christian morality to political life" (ibid., 26) because he believes that recourse to evil in politics is necessary. Elsewhere Prezzolini (1970, 27) propounds: "Machiavelli's message is simply this: A stable social order among men cannot be maintained without resort to conduct which is condemned by Christian morality". In my opinion, this is precisely what Machiavelli wanted to say, even though he failed to express it as lucidly.

Machiavelli's Critique of Christianity

Machiavelli criticised Christianity as a whole, not any particular sect, nor any specific individuals. He was not criticising only the clergy or the Roman Catholic Church, but the whole philosophy of Christianity. His attack is directed towards "nostra religione", "educazione debole" or "questo modo di vivere" (*Discorsi*, II/2) - that is to say, towards Christian education or the Christian way of living in general. He does not specify his attack any more precisely than that. For some reason, it has been assumed that Machiavelli criticised Christianity primarily because the Church was keeping Italy politically disunited. That was one and very important reason, but absolutely not the only one. He discusses the matter in his *Discorsi*:

Abbiamo, adunque, con la Chiesa e con i preti noi Italiani questo primo obbligo, di essere diventati senza religione e cattivi: ma ne abbiamo ancora uno maggiore, il quale è la seconda cagione della rovina nostra. Questo è che la Chiesa ha tenuto e tiene questa provincia divisa. E veramente, alcuna provincia non fu mai unita o felice, se la non viene tutta alla ubbidienza d'una repubblica o d'uno principe, come è avvenuto alla Francia ed alla Spagna. E la cagione che la Italia non sia in quel medesimo termine, nè abbia anch'ella o una repubblica o uno principe che la governi, e solamente la Chiesa: perchè, avendovi quella abitato e tenuto imperio temporale, non è stata sì potente né di tanta virtù l'abbia potuto occupare la tirannide d'Italia e farsene principe; e non è stata, dall'altra parte, sì debole, che, per paura di non perdere il dominio delle sue cose temporali, la non abbia potuto convocare uno potente che la difenda contro a quello che in Italia fusse diventato troppo potente (*Discorsi*, I/12).

Clearly, then, according to Machiavelli, Italy does not enjoy the same happiness of being united like France and Spain because of the Church. She has been too weak to grasp the sole authority in Italy, but also powerful enough to keep anyone else from gaining that position. Machiavelli is actually, ironically, proposing that anyone who wishes to test the ruinous effects the Church has, would have to be so powerful that he could send the Roman court to Switzerland.⁵ After a "short time the evil habits of that court would do more to break down law and order in that region than any other event which at any time could occur there" (*ibid.*). In his *Istorie fiorentine* (I/5), Machiavelli continues his attack on the same grounds. After the division of the Roman Empire, Italy was in the hands of the barbarians. The provinces suffered because they had to change everything, from their names to their religion:

Ma, intra tante variazioni, non fu di minore momento il variare della religione, perchè, combattendo la consuetudine della antica fede con i miracoli della nuova, si generavano tumulti e discordie gravissime intra gli uomini; e se pure la cristiana religione fusse stata unita, ne sarebbe sequiti minori disordini; ma, combattendo la chiesa greca, la romana e la ravennate insieme, e di più le sette eretiche con le cattoliche, in molti modi contristavano il mondo (*Istorie fiorentine*, I/5).

According to Machiavelli, most damaging has been the change in religion, because Christianity has created tumults in the world by combating old religion with new miracles. These tumults might have been rarer if Christianity itself would not have been disunited and divided into the Greek, Catholic and Ravenna Churches and numer-

ous heretical sects. Unlike Dante who opposed the Roman pontiffs on moral and evangelical grounds, Machiavelli opposed them because they had made Italians unbelievers and therefore incapable of forming a state. He reproved them because their temporal power interfered with the establishment of the national state (Prezzolini 1967, 33). Dante's main point, the fact that this temporal power is contrary to the spirit of Christ, is secondary or even irrelevant for Machiavelli.

We must also note how unenthusiastic Machiavelli was to engage in theological debates. When he speaks of the Council of Florence (1439), he says: "In those times, there were differences between the Roman and the Greek churches, so that in divine worship they did not agree in every respect" (*Istorie fiorentine*, V/16). It is probably impossible to put it more laconically. When he continues his account of the Council, where temporary agreement between the East and the West was reached, he says that the "Greeks were hard pressed by the Turks and judged that they could not by themselves make a defence, in order that with more assurance they could ask aid from the others, they decided to yield" and attended the Council. As the result of "many long debates", the Greeks yielded and made an agreement with the Roman Church (*ibid.*). Thus, Machiavelli detects the political interests behind the theological union which was more apparent than real,⁶ and evades the doctrinal disputes involved. Similarly, Machiavelli never made a single reference in any of his writings to Luther and the Reformation. It was only his younger contemporary, Francesco Guicciardini, who in his maxims said: "the position I have enjoyed with several popes has forced me to love their greatness for my own self-interest. If it weren't for this consideration, I would have loved Martin Luther as much as I love myself - not to be released from the laws taught by the Christian religion as it is normally interpreted and understood, but to see this band of ruffians reduced within their correct bounds, that is, living without vices or without authority" (Guicciardini 1994, 171).

It has also been argued that Machiavelli's primary target was the clergy. Criticism of the clergy is one of the distinctive features of the whole literature of the Renaissance and Machiavelli surely made his contribution to the genre. Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, to take one example, contains an ardent criticism of the clergymen who are depicted as hypocrites and seekers of personal gain.⁷ Machiavelli knew his Boccaccio and he actually refers to him when he discusses the selection of a new Lenten preacher for Florence:

Vero è che io so che io sono contrario, come in molte altre cose, all'opinione di quelli cittadini: eglino vorrieno un predicatore che insegnasse loro la via del Paradiso, et io vorrei trovarne uno che insegnassi loro la via di andare a casa il diavolo; vorrebbero appresso che fosse huomo prudente, intero, reale, et ion e vorrei trovare uno più pazzo che il Ponzo, più versuto che fra Girolamo, più ippocrito che frate Alberto, perché mi parrebbe una bella cosa, et degna della bontà di questi tempi, che tutto quello che noi habbiamo sperimentato in molti frati, si esperimentasse in uno (Letter to Guicciardini, 17.5.1521)

Machiavelli was probably smiling ironically in the spring of 1521 when he was sent by the Eight of the Pratica (the council in charge of Florence's foreign affairs) to a monastery in Carpi to attend a general meeting of the Franciscans to negotiate about matters concerning their monasteries on Florentine territory. In Carpi, there was a letter waiting for him. The Florentine Wool Guild entrusted him with an even more bizarre task: he was asked to persuade one friar called Rovaio to preach in the Duomo during the next Lent. This is strange, since Machiavelli was not very religious and in his plays he mocked friars in true Renaissance fashion. In his letter to Vettori, he tells us that he does not listen to sermons.⁸ Yet the Guild asked him to choose a preacher. It is no wonder that he first admits being contrary to the opinion of others in this matter: the people would like a preacher that would show them the road to Paradise, and he would like a preacher that would show the people the road to Hell in order to avoid it. The people would like the preacher to be a prudent and true man, but Machiavelli says he would like to find a man crazier than Ponzo, craftier than Girolamo and more of a hypocrite than Frate Alberto. Domenico da Ponzo is a Florentine preacher, Girolamo means Savonarola, and Frate Alberto is a character in Boccaccio's *Decamerone* (4/2).

According to Timothy Lukes (1984, 268), Machiavelli's most ardent criticism of the ecclesiastics of his time regards their blatant politicisation and the unavoidable loss of popular support, which such hypocrisy necessarily engenders. The Christian leaders, in order to maintain their religious legitimacy, are forced by the tenets of Christianity itself to remain aloof from political matters. Machiavelli's ancient heroes, on the other hand, had little cause to worry about such hypocrisy since their religion did not comprise any fundamental opposition between the earthly and heavenly cities. For religion to remain a useful political tool, its integrity should not be doubted. In the case of Christianity, with its disclaimer of earthly pursuits,

an outward association with secular politics is intolerable. Thus it is inevitable that those responsible for the security of states that insist upon being regarded as Christians must be hypocrites (cf. Prezzolini 1970, 28). It is embedded in the nature of the state that they cannot be run by true Christians. In politics, there is no viable alternative to hypocrisy, and to condemn hypocrisy would be to condemn politics altogether (cf. Grant 1997).

Machiavelli's 'realism', his famous *verità effettuale della cosa*, as opposed to fantasies and imaginations is put forth in the XV chapter of *Il Principe*:

Ma sendo l'intenzione mia stata scrivere cosa che sia utile a chi la intende, mi è parso più conveniente andare dritto alla verità effettuale della cosa che alla immaginazione di essa. E molti si sono immaginati repubbliche e principati che non si sono mai visti né conosciuti in vero essere. Perché gli è tanto discosto da come si vive a come si doverrebbe vivere, che colui che lascia quello che si fa, per quello che si doverrebbe fare, impara più presto la ruina che la preservazione sua: perché uno uomo che voglia fare in tutte le parte professione di buono, conviene che ruini in fra tanti che non sono buoni. (*Il Principe*, XV)

This passage has often been interpreted as a critique of idealistic political philosophies, such as Plato's *Republic*. Clearly, this is also a critique of the kingdom of God (since it, too, is imagined and does not exist in reality, and thus belongs to the category of "mai visti") and Christian morality in general. Loving one's neighbour brings ruin if the neighbours do not express similar love – and according to Machiavelli, this seems to be the case in the real world. The wise prince, in order to hold his position, must be capable of not being good when it is necessary (*ibid.*). In Machiavelli's view, Christian virtues may sometimes be useful, but more often in dealing with other people they are a hindrance. The reason for this, however, is not that the virtues in themselves are a hindrance. Instead, it is due to the crookedness of others that the cultivation of Christian virtues seldom brings renown. Whoever wishes to prevail against the bad intentions of others must be ready to outfox them beforehand.

Furthermore, Machiavelli advises the prince to *appear* religious. According to him, it is not necessary to actually have all the qualities that are considered good, but it is very necessary to appear to have them (*Il Principe*, XVIII). In order to keep his position, the prince is sometimes forced to act contrary to truth and religion. He should hold to what is right when he can, but it is essential that he know

“how to do wrong when he must” (ibid.). The value of appearances derives from the fact that the multitude judges with the eye, not with the hand. “Everybody sees what you appear to be; few perceive what you are” (ibid.). Those who can look from a closer distance or touch, see even the “devil with smaller horns and less black” (*Canti carnascialeschi*, De’ romiti, lines 32-33). The epistemological point here is that those who can only see but cannot touch, are looking only at the results. Therefore, if a prince succeeds in holding his state, “his means are always judged honourable” (*Il Principe*, XVIII). The mob (meaning the fools, not the lower classes) judges by appearances, whereas wise men want to touch by their hands.⁹

In Machiavelli’s examples, one contemporary ruler rises above others in his use of religion as a political tool. That ruler is Ferdinand of Aragon, king of Spain. However, Machiavelli’s treatment of Ferdinand is ambiguous. From the many references to Ferdinand in Machiavelli’s writings, we can infer that occasionally Machiavelli found his actions “all very great and some of them extraordinary” (*Il Principe*, XXI) and, on another occasion, he is “more crafty and fortunate than wise and prudent” (Letter to Vettori, 29.4.1513). In Machiavelli’s view, Ferdinand initiated many campaigns but “saw the end of none of these; indeed, his end is not a particular gain or a particular victory but to give himself reputation among his people and to keep them uncertain among the great number of his affairs”. He is, therefore, “animoso datore di principii”, spirited maker of beginnings, “to which he later gives the particular end that is placed before him by chance and that necessity teaches him, and up to now he has not been able to complain of his luck or of his courage” (ibid.). What makes Ferdinand especially interesting is his use of religion as a cloak of his acquisitions. In *Il Principe* (XVIII) Machiavelli refers to him without actually mentioning his name:

Alcuno principe de’ presenti tempi, il quale non è bene nominare, non predica mai altro che pace e fede, e dell’una e dell’altra è inimicissimo: e l’una e l’altra, quando e’ l’avessi osservata, gli avrebbe più volte tolto e la riputazione e lo stato.

Ferdinand preaches nothing but peace and faith, but is utterly opposed to both. If he hadn’t been opposed to these, he would have lost his reputation and his state many times, says Machiavelli. Ferdinand was truly very crafty in using religion to assist his endeavours. To examine the sincerity of converts from Judaism (called *Marranos*)

and Mohammedanism (called *Moriscos*), Ferdinand and his wife, empowered by Sixtus IV, established the Spanish Inquisition in 1478. In 1492 he expelled the Moors from Spain and annexed Granada to his kingdom. Three months after the conquest, Ferdinand expelled the Jews from Spain and Sicily. These acts, however, were motivated less by religious concerns than economic and political ones. Ferdinand himself was probably not as intolerant as his clerical advisors, but what inspired him was the wealth of the Jews: the Marranos were often wealthy and occupied the highest levels of the Castilian and Aragonese nobility and of the clergy as well (Andrew 1990). The Inquisition was self-financing as the property of the victims went into its coffers, and Pope Sixtus IV had to acknowledge soon afterwards that it was not moved by zeal for faith but by lust for wealth, and that many people were imprisoned, tortured and condemned as heretics without any proof (*ibid.*). For some reason, Machiavelli does not accept these methods:

Oltre a questo, per potere intraprendere maggiore imprese, servendosi sempre della religione, si volse a una pietosa crudelta cacciando, e spogliando, del suo regno e' marrani: né può essere questo esempio più miserabile né più raro. (*Il Principe*, XXI)

Ferdinand's hunt of the Marranos is depicted as "pious cruelty", of which there cannot be a more miserable or rare example. Why would Machiavelli consider this as a "miserable" example? In fact, early translators of Machiavelli translated the passage so that the example was "admirable" or "woonderful" and rare, not miserable (cf. Andrew 1990, 413), and some of the modern translations I have consulted say that the example was "admirable".¹⁰ The passage would certainly make much more sense if the word in question would be "mirabile" instead of "miserabile". On the other hand, the chapter ends with a description of the wise prince's methods, and Machiavelli's wise prince encourages citizens to carry on their businesses, and governs so that a citizen "is not afraid to increase his possessions because of dread that they will be taken away". This is precisely what Ferdinand did for the Moors and the Marranos, and in this respect his pious cruelty could be considered miserable in Machiavelli's view. Perhaps Machiavelli does not appreciate Ferdinand because the king was motivated not by the common good but by his personal gain. It would seem plausible that Machiavelli opposes the crafty use of religion when it is done in order to gain wealth or other personal

advantages (which is what most of the priests did according to him and many other Renaissance writers), but not when it is done for the glory of the *patria*. After all, he says in the *Discorsi* (III/41) that “la patria è bene difesa in qualunque modo la si difende, o con ignominia o con gloria”, i.e. that the fatherland is well defended in whatever way she is defended, whether with disgrace or with glory.

In Machiavelli's view the function of religion is primarily social unification of a people or a military unit (see e.g. *L' Asino d' Oro*, 5, lines 118-122; *Discorsi*, III/33; *Arte della guerra*, IV). Religion is useful to lawgivers, founders, and army generals, but also acts as a cloak for bad men (Letter to Guicciardini, 17.5.1521) who can with the assistance of religion “deceive more easily” (*Istorie fiorentine*, III/5). Using ancient Rome as an example he describes the wise use of religion in government: “Thus he who examines Roman history well sees how helpful religion was in controlling the armies, in inspiring the people, in keeping men good, in making the wicked ashamed” (*Discorsi*, I/11). According to Machiavelli, it is irrelevant whether religion is true or not – as long as the leaders keep it up: “It is the duty, then, of the rulers of a republic or of a kingdom to preserve the foundations of the religion they hold. If they do this, it will be an easy thing for them to keep their state religious, and consequently good and united. Also whatever comes up in favour of religion, even if they think it false, they are to accept and magnify” (*Discorsi*, I/12). His recommendation for the political use of religion goes even further. He instructs the leaders to interpret religion according to circumstances, i.e. for their own benefit (cf. e.g. *Discorsi*, I/14&15; Najemy 1999). In a similar fashion, he tells how the ancient generals interpreted the bad signs of the augurs as well as using accidents to their own advantage: “Caesar, falling in Africa as he left his ship, said: ‘Africa, I seize you’” (*Arte della Guerra*, VI). Because soldiers were superstitious, the falling of their leader might have been interpreted as a bad omen, which, in turn, might have decreased the morale. Thus, it was necessary for Caesar to act as if he fell on his knees deliberately. According to Machiavelli, religion should not be disparaged even if false, since the “truth” of a religion has no viable connection with its power, with its effect on men. He never speaks of true and false prophets, only of the armed and the unarmed, the successful and the unsuccessful.

For Machiavelli, religion could also instil love of liberty in a people. Where the fear of God is missing, he argued, it is sometimes possible to replace it with the fear of a prince (*Discorsi*, I/11; Strauss 1986, 226), but in republics, fear of God is indispensable. Nevertheless, it

does not follow that religion alone could suffice: "there should be no one with so small a brain that he will believe, if his house is falling, that God will save it without any other prop, because he will die beneath that ruin" (*L' Asino d'Oro*, ch. 5, lines 124-127). For Machiavelli religion demanded scrupulous attention, but its importance was due to the effect it has on men, not to its metaphysical or extra-political "truths".

This is the right use of religion in Machiavelli's view, but the rulers, or the Holy See, were not using religion as wisely. In contrast to ancient religion, Christianity favours contemplation, withdrawal, humility, and other such apolitical virtues. Christian doctrine exhorts people to live this life as if it were only a preparation for the next one, meaning eternal life after death (John 12:25). In his *Discorsi* Machiavelli writes:

Pensando dunque donde possa nascere, che, in quegli tempi antichi, i popoli fossero più amatori della libertà che in questi; credo nasca da quella medesima cagione che fa ora gli uomini manco forti: la quale credo sia la diversità della educazione nostra dall'antica, fondata nella diversità della religione nostra dall'antica. Perché, avendoci la nostra religione mostro la verità e la vera via, ci fa stimare meno l'onore del mondo: onde i Gentili, stimandolo assai, ed avendo posto in quello il sommo bene, erano nelle azioni loro più feroci. (*Discorsi*, II/2)

Machiavelli blames Christianity, or its false interpretations, for glorification of contemplative life instead of the active one. This glorification of cloistered metaphysicians instead of virtuous political leaders has some severe implications concerning the republican ideal:

Questo modo di vivere, adunque, pare che abbi renduto il mondo debole, e datolo in preda agli uomini scelerati; i quali sicuramente lo possono maneggiare, veggendo come l'università degli uomini, per andarne in Paradiso, pensa più a sopportare le sue battiture che a vendicarle. E benché paia che si sia effeminato il mondo, e disarmato il Cielo, nasce più senza dubbio dalla viltà degli uomini, che hanno interpretato la nostra religione secondo l'ozio, e non secondo la virtù. (*Discorsi*, II/2)

Because men are more interested in going to Paradise than avenging their injuries, the world has grown effeminate and "Heaven has laid aside her arms". This, in turn, is the fault of those who have interpreted Christianity according to sloth and not according to *virtù*.

What, then, would be Christianity interpreted correctly, *secondo la virtù*? As Counter-Reformation and anti-Machiavellism gathered im-

petus, various adversaries of Machiavelli took some effort in proving that Christianity can indeed be interpreted also vigorously and that it is not incompatible with military valour. Some of them pointed to Charlemagne and his empire, or to Emperor Constantine. If we think about the political history of Christendom, we surely can find at least one example when the whole *Respublica cristiana* has been united in doing something vigorous – namely the Crusades. Is Machiavelli’s ideal Christianity to be found in the religious fervour of the Crusaders? If we look at his comments on the Crusades, this seems to be the case. One of his carnival songs (*Degli spiriti beati*) discusses the issue directly and exhorts Christians to forget their internal contests and to gather forces against “Il signor di Turchia”. In *Istorie fiorentine* (I/17), he gives a general account of the Crusades, concluding that “many kings and many states joined in contributing money for it, and many individuals without pay served as soldiers – so powerful then in the minds of men was religion, when they were moved by the examples of her leaders”. Boniface VIII’s proclamation of a Crusade against the Colonna family, according to Machiavelli, injured the Church because that weapon, after it was turned through the Pope’s personal ambition against Christians, began to stop cutting (*Istorie fiorentine*, I/25).¹¹ Religion used effectively is one that moves men, one that makes them act and wage war on infidels. Religion well-used and the fear of divine punishments made “every sort of undertaking easy for the ancient generals, and always will make them so, where religion is feared and observed” (*Arte della Guerra*, IV). It is easy to make men believe in victory if leaders pretend that God has promised them one. “In the time of our fathers”, writes Machiavelli, “Charles VII, King of France, in the war that he made against the English, said that he took counsel with a girl sent by God, who was called everywhere the Maid of France; and this was the cause of his victory” (ibid.). This is Christianity *secondo la virtù*. In Joan of Arc and the Crusades, Machiavelli finds an armed prophet and Christianity used effectively. Whatever the truth-value of Joan’s visions, she nevertheless inspired others to act according to *virtù*.

Dante and Machiavelli, two great Florentines, both feel strange approval towards Averroist doctrines. In the *Commedia*, Dante places Averroes in Limbo (*Inf.*, canto IV) and Sieger of Brabant in Paradise (*Par.*, canto X) even though both were clearly condemned by the Church. Besides, since Dante puts his eulogy to Sieger in the mouth of his main enemy (i.e. Aquinas) one can infer that Dante was intentionally being polemic with the Church and ironic in regard to the

Dominican intellectual tradition (Forte 2000, 17).¹² Machiavelli, on the other hand, made a curious leap into philosophy in the middle of *Discorsi*, when he suddenly seems to defend the eternity of the world and the periodical alteration of religions:

A queqli filosofi che hanno voluto che il mondo sia stato eterno, credo che si potesse replicare che, se tanta antichità fusse vera, e' sarebbe ragionevole che ci fussi memoria di più che cinquemila anni; quando e' non si vedesse come queste memorie de' tempi per diverse cagioni si spengano: delle quali, parte vengono dagli uomini, parte al cielo. (*Discorsi*, II/5)

The passage begins with an attack on those philosophers who have held that the world is eternal. This means the Averroists, and behind them, Aristotle. To them Machiavelli poses an objection, but as Mansfield (1979, 203) notes, "as soon as it has left his mouth he calls it back with a counterobjection, which actually constitutes a reply to those who deny the world is eternal". He says that if the world would be eternal, there would be records dating back more than five thousand years, but immediately afterwards he repudiates this by saying that these records disappear at regular intervals partly because of men and partly because of heaven. The matter discussed here is of no little importance. Machiavelli's position undermines the creationist doctrine, as well as the pretended speciality of Christianity in contrast to other sects. Should the world be eternal, there would be no efficient cause of the world. In fact, the Averroists claimed that God is not the efficient but the final cause of the world. Does Machiavelli sloppily repudiate the whole teaching of Christianity in one sentence, or is there something else to this passage? Forte thinks that he was also (or even primarily) exposing his assumptions that the arguments against the doctrine of the eternity of the world were not convincing. He might have been thinking of the objections to the eternity of the world put forth in Lucretius' *De rerum naturam*, St. Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, Petrarch's *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*, or even Savonarola's *Triumphus crucis* (Forte 2000, 17). Yet, he might have just felt sympathy for the Averroists. The fundamental tenets of Averroism were as well known to intelligent men of Machiavelli's age as the fundamental tenets of Marxism are in the present age, as Strauss (1958, 202-203) has noted. For Machiavelli, all religions are of human, not heavenly, origin. He often uses the term 'sect' for religion, in which usage he treads the paths of the Averroists, who as philosophers refused to make any concessions to revealed religion (Strauss 1986, 226). Ma-

chiavelli's passage continues with another very unorthodox theory regarding the alteration of religious sects:

Quelle che vengono dagli uomini sono le variazioni delle sette e delle lingue. Perché, quando e' surge una setta nuova, cioè una religione nuova, il primo studio suo è, per darsi riputazione, estinguere la vecchia ... È da credere, pertanto, che quello che ha voluto fare la setta Cristiana contro alla setta Gentile, la Gentile abbia fatto contro a quella che era innanzi a lei. E perché queste sette in cinque o in seimila anni variano due o tre volte, si perde la memoria delle cose fatte innanzi a quel tempo. (Discorsi, II/5)

According to him, new religions try to extinguish the memory of the old, as Christianity has done to Paganism and Paganism probably did to the ones preceding it. We have lost records of those older alterations because these sects have changed two or three times in 5000 or 6000 years. Every sect, then, has the life-span of between 1666 and 3000 years. Thus, Machiavelli believed that Christianity could come to an end about 150 years after he wrote these sentences, as Strauss (1986, 226) has noted.¹³ We know that he was not alone in anticipating the fall of Christianity. Machiavelli's argument is based on astrological assumptions shared by many contemporaries. The air of Florence of his time was heavy with apocalyptic visions, and the coming of the counter-Christian religion was anticipated, as well as the coming scourge and reform of Christianity itself. The fall of Christianity was predicted to happen at least in 1444 (Haabraz) and 1460 (Abu Ma'shar), and even Gemistos Plethon¹⁴ was reported to have said that Christianity would soon be replaced by a new astral religion not very different from paganism (Parel 1992, 50). The growing influence of the Turks who conquered Constantinople in 1453 was also undoubtedly acting as a catalysing factor in this respect. Fear of the Turks' invasion into Italy is a recurrent theme in Machiavelli's writings, and we can be sure that he was not ignorant of the sayings of the astrologers, for he speaks of the anticipated devastation in his carnival songs (*Canti carnascialeschi*, De' romiti). In *Discorsi* (I/12) he is even more explicit on the matter, concluding that: "he who considers its [i.e. Christianity's] foundations and sees how different its present habit is from them, will conclude that near at hand, beyond doubt, is its fall or its punishment".

The age-old method of reforming the church has been to found new orders or reconstruct the old ones. Machiavelli speaks of these

reforms in *Discorsi* and concludes that it is necessary to bring religions and republics occasionally back towards their beginnings:

Ma quanto alle sette, si vede ancora queste rinnovazioni essere necessarie, per lo esempio della nostra religione; la quale, se non fossi stata ritirata verso il suo principio da Santo Francesco e da Santo Domenico, sarebbe al tutto spenta. Perché questi, con la povertà e con lo esempio della vita di Cristo, la ridussono nella mente degli uomini, che già vi era spenta (*Discorsi*, III/1).

Machiavelli admires Saints Francis and Dominic because they lived in poverty through the example of Christ. The immanent critique is directed towards those prelates that have forgotten the teachings of Christ and wallow in the wealth they have earned through hypocritical behaviour. Without the example of these men, the improbity of the prelates and the heads of the Christian religion would have ruined it (*ibid.*). Machiavelli's sympathy for these mendicant orders may perhaps be understood as a part of his crusade against the ruinous effects of wealth and luxury. He may also have been thinking of the eulogy to Saint Francis and Saint Dominic and their poverty in Dante's *Commedia* (*Pur.*, cantos XI-XII). In his *Esortazione alla Penitenza*, Machiavelli again refers to the simplicity of Saint Francis and Saint Jerome.

Penitence, War and Soul

Machiavelli's *Esortazione alla penitenza* is a difficult text for those who think that he was a pagan or an atheist. The text has convinced many scholars to think that he was a devout Catholic in private life. For Roberto Ridolfi (1963, 253), "the sad and pious phrases" of the text form the "climax" of Machiavelli's Christian thought. According to Reborn, along with Machiavelli's pious phrases in private letters, it indicates a "general orthodoxy, if not a fervent faith" (Reborn 1988, 128). Others have interpreted Machiavelli's sermon as satirical. Pasquale Villari saw "veiled irony" in the text, while Benedetto Croce concluded that the whole sermon was "una scherzosa cicalata" (cf. Cutinelli-Rèndina 1998, 280). If we, however, think that Machiavelli's sermon is written without irony, we have to explain why he wrote all the other works that are less Christian. If he, in his older days, started to take Christian teaching seriously, why didn't he try to destroy his

previous anti-Christian writings? There is no evidence that he ever attempted any such action.

The text, which is written in the form of a sermon, was probably written upon request and delivered in a meeting of a confraternity composed of lay members.¹⁵ This context alone could be an explanation for the Christian tone of the text. Machiavelli's exhortation singles out two grave sins: ingratitude to God and being unfriendly to one's neighbours. "Because into these two vices we often fall", writes Machiavelli, "God, the gracious creator has showed us the way for raising ourselves up, which is penitence". Since God forgave David his adultery and murder and Peter his offence of having denied him three times, "what sin will God not forgive you, my brothers, if you sincerely resort to penitence", Machiavelli asks his audience. This is the central message of the text: there are no sins that God will not forgive if you resort to repentance, since it is not sin but persistence in sin that makes God unforgiving. It is not possible to go into details here, but the text definitely does not resolve the case of Machiavelli's piety.¹⁶ While *Esortazione* is seemingly Christian, its message may very well be that one can easily sin since God forgives those sins if one repents. After all, one has to sin before one is able to repent.

For Machiavelli, religion is a *sine qua non* of a well-ordered community. Not just any religion, but a religion that is likewise well-ordered and has no disclaimer of earthly pursuits like Christianity. Commenting on Machiavelli's analysis of Roman religion, J. Patrick Coby (1999, 66) tells us that for Machiavelli 1) religion is the glue of society and is important to national success, 2) religion is untrue but politically useful to the extent that the rulers feign belief and manipulate the rites, 3) the primary use of religion is the control of the plebeian population, and that 4) religion used militarily is helpful but of less certain value. Rome did benefit from religion not because it civilised men through the arts of peace, but because religion made Romans obedient to authority (*ibid.*, 68).

Although Machiavelli claims that religion has often acted as a cloak for bad men who can in security control others with it, it is hard to believe Sullivan's (1996, 7) assertion that "Machiavelli opens up the possibility that the better alternative for a city would be to dispense with religious appeals altogether, thereby eliminating a powerful weapon of potential tyrants". According to Sullivan, in "Machiavelli's universe the political triumphs over the religious" and the "religious is not only pernicious, it is wholly superfluous" (*ibid.*). But from the fact that in his universe politics triumphs over religion it

does not follow that religion would be useless. It is precisely the very fact that politics triumphs over religion that makes religion useful.

In Machiavelli's view, Christianity, apart from being politically devastating, has also changed the way men behave in war. In the *Arte della Guerra*, Machiavelli argues that this comes about because the Christian way of living does not impose the same necessity for defending oneself as antiquity did:

...perché, allora, gli uomini vinti in guerra o s'ammazzavano o rimanevano in perpetuo schiavi, dove menavano la loro vita miseramente; le terre vinte o si desolavano o ne erano cacciati gli abitatori, tolti loro i beni, mandati dispersi per il mondo; tanto che i superati in guerra pativano ogni ultima miseria. Da questo timore spaventati, gli uomini tenevano gli esercizi militari vivi e onoravano chi era eccellente in quegli. Ma oggi questa paura in maggior parte è perduta; de' vinti, pochi se ne ammazzano; niuno se ne tiene lungamento prigioniero, perché con facilità si liberano. Le città, ancora ch'esse si sieno mille volte ribellate, non si disfanno; lasciansi gli uomini ne' beni loro, in modo che il maggior male che si tema è una taglia; talmente che gli uomini non vogliono sottomettersi agli ordini militari e stentare tuttavia sotto quegli, per fuggire quegli pericoli de' quali temono poco. (*Arte della guerra*, II).

The charitable mechanisms of Christianity that celebrate cloistered metaphysicians more than active men are part of the same ethos that Machiavelli is criticising here. Even though, Machiavelli marvels, "civil laws are nothing else than opinions given by the ancient jurists, which, brought into order, teach our present jurists to judge" and "medicine too is nothing other than the experiments made by the ancient physicians, on which present physicians base their judgments", not a single prince or republic resorts to the example of the ancients in "setting up states, in maintaining governments, in ruling kingdoms, in organising armies and managing war, in executing laws among subjects, in expanding an empire" This, says Machiavelli, results from nothing else than the present religion and education, or "from the harm done to many Christian provinces and cities by a conceited laziness, as much as from not having a true understanding of books on history, so that as we read we do not draw from them that sense or taste that flavour which they really have". (*Discorsi*, preface).

"Above all", writes Machiavelli, "one should avoid any half-way measure" (*tutto la via del mezzo*) in treating conquered cities or prisoners of war (*Discorsi*, II/23). As concerns rebelling cities, "it is necessary either to wipe them out or to treat them with kindness".

Prisoners should be allowed to go away with honour or they should be killed. Adopting any other course is dangerous, because the conquered immediately think of revenge. Machiavelli's advice for consolidating a divided city is the killing of the leaders of the disorders (*Discorsi*, III/27). Such "decisive actions have in them something great and noble", but "men's feebleness in our day, caused by their feeble education (*debole educazione*) and their slight knowledge of affairs, makes them judge ancient punishments partly inhumane, partly impossible". Feeble education in Machiavelli's vocabulary is a synonym for Christian education. The original "*debole educazione*" refers specifically to "weak education" which he identifies with Christianity (e.g. in *Discorsi*, II/2).

Machiavelli's comments on warfare aim to establish that Christian ethics prohibits the use of effective means in war and thus brings ruin rather than victory. In his poem *Dell'Ambizione* (lines 166-168) he writes that San Marco, "to his cost, and perhaps in vain, discovers late that he needs to hold the sword and not the book in his hand". St. Mark is the patron saint of Venice and the lion, his symbol, is normally depicted holding a book in its hand. In times of war, however, the lion is depicted as holding a sword instead of the Bible. This change in imagery could characterise the need to abandon Christian ethics in times of war. In a letter from Verona (7.12.1509) he refers to the same change concluding that the Venetians have found out to their cost that, for holding states, studies and books are not enough. According to Machiavelli, Cosimo de Medici was accustomed to saying that "*gli stati non si tenevono co' paternostri in mano*", i.e. that states cannot be run with paternosters (*Istorie fiorentine*, VII/6). This and other sayings gave ammunition to Cosimo's enemies to enable them to say that he loved "*più questo mondo che quell'altro*" (ibid.). The fact that Christianity is not based on the best possible public ethics was undoubtedly known among rulers as well.

In his famous letter to Francesco Vettori (16.4.1527) Machiavelli writes: "I love my native city more than my soul". Another similar idea can be found in his *Arte della Guerra*. Praising Cosimo Rucellai, the opening words say: "I do not know what possession was so much his (not excepting, to go no further, his soul) that for his friends he would not willingly have spent it; I do not know of any undertaking that would have frightened him, if in it he had perceived the good of his native land" (*Arte della Guerra*, I). The third passage with a similar flavour is in his *Istorie fiorentine*, where Machiavelli praises the heroes of the so-called War of the Eight Saints (1376-1378). He

writes: "So much higher did those citizens then value their city than their souls!" (*Istorie fiorentine*, III/7). There is a contradiction between the demands of Christianity and of politics, and consequently it is not possible to act politically and to be saved. It is of the highest importance to note that Machiavelli's adage of the incompatibility of Christian conviction and political action has its predecessor in the bishop of Hippo. His central message is almost identical to the one St. Augustine was purporting a thousand years earlier. According to Augustine, the foundation of politics is not justice but domination by force or the threat of its use. And here, in respect to the foundation of politics, Machiavelli agrees with Augustine,¹⁷ but his solution is not resignation but *virtù*. For Augustine, Christians are to use (*uti*), not to love (*frui*, literally 'to enjoy'), the state on their pilgrimage towards salvation. The Christian does obey the state and its laws, not least because he would not set himself up against the inscrutable ways of God's working in history. Loving the temporal state, however, is another thing. This is where Machiavelli adopts another course. Some have claimed that Machiavelli aimed at some sort of reinterpretation of Christianity, but it is very hard to interpret Christianity so that it would exalt temporal states over the heavenly kingdom.

Concluding Postscript

Markus Fischer (2000, 204-205) has suggested that the chasm Machiavelli believed he had discovered between the necessities of politics and traditional morality is more apparent than real. In fact, it could be claimed that political life has always digested all the elements of truth contained in Machiavelli, since many "Machiavellian" practices are in fact ethically grounded. Torturing terrorists who are known to have intentionally risked innocent lives by placing a bomb whose whereabouts they refuse to reveal can be ethical, since it aims to save a large number of innocent lives. Similarly it may be "right" to bribe already corrupt public officials if by doing so one can make justice prevail. However, according to Fischer, Machiavelli overestimated the effectiveness of unjust means, and since "attaining political goals without doing harm is often more difficult than resorting to straightforward violence and deception, the truly prudent man needs to be a good deal smarter than a Machiavellian prince".

Fischer may be right about the permanent Machiavellism of political life, but Machiavelli never claimed that all of this was his inven-

tion. Political actors have always understood the harsh necessities of extreme situations, but Christianity has not. This is what Machiavelli was trying to say. Nor did Machiavelli ever claim that it would not be smarter to attain goals without resorting to “immoral” means. What he did claim was that one cannot always avoid the employment of such methods, and that such means are often more efficient and expedient. Machiavelli’s ideal ruler aims not so much to maximise his power as to minimise his dependence. There should be no principle or character trait that constrains his ability to respond to his circumstances (cf. Grant 1997, 55). Religion, and especially Christianity, is certainly a hindrance in prince’s quest for autonomy.

In a sense, Machiavelli occupies a position in the history of practical reason roughly analogous to that of Descartes in the realm of theoretical reason (cf. Garver 1987, 3). Descartes initiated a story of progress from ignorance to knowledge whose success and costs have only recently been questioned. Machiavelli initiated a similar process, but whereas Descartes liberated theoretical reason from the traditional restraints of custom and belief, Machiavelli’s innovative treatment of prudence seemed to remove the restraints that tradition had placed on immoral, selfish and corrupt behaviour. Unlike the prudence of Aristotle, Machiavelli’s practical reason does not entail intrinsic directedness towards virtuous ends. While the autonomy of theoretical reason at least initially seemed to be an advance from darkness to light, from doubt to certainty, the autonomy of practical reason has always been felt to be a mixed blessing. The Machiavellian practical reason is not guided by morality, or by the *recta ratio*, and as such it is more of an instrumental nature and capable of calculating on the brinks of appropriate behaviour. Machiavelli’s prudence is also situational; what is reasonable and necessary in one situation is not so in another. Thus, for him, prudence oxymoronically consists in knowing when it is necessary to break even prudential rules. At the same time, he seems to reduce human freedom to the sheer anticipation of necessity. It is not hard to see why this has disquieted many moralists ever since.

Machiavelli’s “new” practical reason changed also the role of rhetoric in political life. As Victoria Kahn (1994, 9) has argued, Machiavelli’s rhetorical politics dramatised a tension between a technical and prudential conception of rhetoric that is at the heart of Renaissance humanist culture. Rhetoric in this period was conceived of either being an ethically and ideologically neutral technique of argumentation or as the embodiment of a faculty of practical rea-

soning or prudential deliberation that is tied to ethical norms. If the first conception of rhetoric as a neutral tool gave rise to considerable anxiety concerning the immoral ends to which rhetoric might be put, the second prudential conception offered the response that the good rhetorician is of necessity a good man. Though Renaissance humanists regularly acknowledged the possible abuse of rhetoric, they just as often attempted to define rhetoric in such a way that it would preclude such immorality. Machiavelli borrowed from the humanist notion of prudential rhetoric, even though he criticised such rhetoric for its subordination to ethics, that is, for not being practical enough. Focusing on practical reasoning and action that is not constrained by ethical norms, Machiavelli attempted to make rhetoric and prudential deliberation generate a new set of priorities in the domain of politics. Yet, in taking the generative possibilities of a practical conception of rhetoric more seriously than did the humanists themselves, Machiavelli paradoxically appeared to realise the humanists' worst fears about a technical or instrumental conception of rhetoric: its ethical indeterminacy, its concern with success, its use for the purpose of force and fraud, violence and misrepresentation (ibid.). According to Kahn, Machiavelli's Renaissance readers saw that his rhetorical politics engaged a constellation of topics that epitomised the tensions within humanist rhetoric: the relation of imitation to misrepresentation, persuasion to coercion, means to ends, intention to effect, demonic flexibility to allegorical stability, and virtue or *virtù* to success. These topics amounted to a questioning of the Ciceronian ideal of harmony between the *honestum* and the *utile* - they registered a tension between these terms, and an anxiety that the good might be sacrificed to the expedient or that rhetoric might become an instrument of force and fraud.

Some of Machiavelli's near-contemporaries were perhaps aware that the art of the politician is not the most Christian of professions. Nevertheless, some of them, especially those under the influence of Renaissance neo-Platonism, responded to this problem very differently. Marsilio Ficino, the leading Platonist of the era, held according to Guicciardini's *Dialogo*, that "when cities are well instituted and are governed well, good men should as far as possible avoid getting involved in politics and public affairs" (Guicciardini 1994, 51). This Platonic otherworldliness and insistence on supererogation as the ruling political value found no favour with Machiavelli. His critique of Christianity rests mainly on its disclaimer of earthly pursuits. The proud indolence (*ozio*) of Christianity, derivative of the Stoic *otio* and

even the Platonic and Aristotelian *scholē*, which permitted the life of ataraxia and contemplation (cf. Springborg 1992, 213), has in Machiavelli's view turned the world effeminate and left it over as prey for wicked men who can in security control it.¹⁸

The thought that Christianity and politics do not fit together without some damage to either the one or the other is actually genuinely Christian. It is a central theme in the writings of Augustine, but it was abandoned when, during the subsequent centuries, the Church made a shift from pessimism to optimism (with the exception of Luther, a deep student of Augustine, of course). In essence, then, Machiavelli remained within the framework of Christianity when he maintained that Christians should not meddle with stately affairs and statesmen should not worry about the fate of their souls in the afterlife. Politics is a game played by the damned. Both Augustine and Machiavelli knew that very well. We can conclude with the words of Max Weber:

Wer das Heil seiner Seele und die Rettung anderer Seelen sucht, der sucht das nicht auf dem Wege der Politik, die ganz andere Aufgaben hat, solche, die nur mit Gewalt zu lösen sind.

This passage from Weber's *Politik als Beruf* (1992, 248) says it all. Whoever seeks the salvation of his soul stays, and should stay, aloof from political matters. This is precisely what Machiavelli was trying to say.

NOTES

1. Whether Machiavelli was an atheist, a devout Catholic, or whatever, is irrelevant in terms of the effect his writings had. That he criticised Christianity is a fact - why he did so, is another question. If something must be said of his personal religious life, I agree with Anthony Parel when he says that Machiavelli was, without doubt, a cultural Christian (Parel 1992, 62). He used Christian expressions in his private letters and he certainly considered Christianity as "*nostra religione*", but his cultural commitment to Christianity does not involve any other commitments, namely doctrinal ones.

2. Excluding, of course, his *Esortazione alla penitenza*.

3. But if we look at the way Machiavelli says he wants to read the Bible, we notice that Strauss might not be so mistaken after all (in this matter). Machiavelli alludes to the instance of Moses and the Israelites when discussing how a reformer gets rid of the envious, in chapter XXX of the third book of the *Discorsi*, and writes that: "He who reads the Bible intelligently sees that if Moses was to put his laws and regulations into effect, he was forced to kill countless men who, moved by nothing else than envy, were opposed to his plans". His strategy is to read the Bible "intelligently" - *sensatamente*. John Geerken has suggested that this means presumably not reading it in a devotional,

liturgical, or exegetical manner, but in effect politically (Geerken 1999, 580). According to Geerken, the references to biblical figures in the works of Machiavelli indicate that for him the Bible was not exempt from a political way of reading - it, too, could yield the reasons for human actions and causes of hatred and factionalism etc, which was, for Machiavelli, the whole idea of writing histories.

4. As Hans Baron (1968) has argued, many a Renaissance man was so convinced of his own inferiority compared to the ancients that their self-confidence and productivity were weakened as a result of their militant classicism. Some, like Niccolò Niccoli, were so deeply convinced of the futility of any attempt to equal the perfection of the classical models which they admired, that during their entire life they never published a single line. In other words, they were perfectly aware of the impossibility of strict imitation - instead of *imitatio* the battle-cry of the humanists was *aemulatio*.

5. Machiavelli chose Switzerland because according to him the Swiss "oggi sono, solo, popoli che vivono, e quanto alla religione e quanto agli ordini militari, secondo gli antichi" (ibid.).

6. The main debate concerned the double Procession of the Holy Ghost. When, at the request of the Greek emperor John Palaeologus, Eugene IV promised the Greeks the military and financial help as a consequence of the projected reconciliation, the Greeks declared that they recognized the procession of the Holy Ghost from the Father *and* the Son as from one principle and from *one* cause. The Latin teaching respecting the azymes and purgatory was also accepted by the Greeks. As to the primacy of the Pope, they declared that they would grant the pope all the privileges he had before the schism. Many eastern princes, however, refused to abide by the decrees of the Council of Florence and deserted the position.

7. Renaissance literature often treated friars as examples of the confidence men or *beffatori* who pursue various ends, mainly food, sex, political and religious power, wealth and authority (cf. Rebhorn 1988, 9).

8. "La predica io non la udi', perché io non uso simile pratiche" (Letter to Vettori, 19.12.1513).

9. Note that even Messer Nicia, who is a fool, tells in Mandragola (V.2) how he wanted "to touch with my hands how the thing was going, for I am not used to being made to take fireflies for lanterns" (an expression meaning to make what does not exist appear to exist).

10. The only exception is Gilbert's Chief Works and Others, which uses the word "miserable".

11. He does not say anything of the fourth crusade, which was directed towards Constantinople in 1204 by Enrico Dandolo, the doge of Venice. The pillage of Christian Constantinople is one of the major causes why it later (1453) fell to the Turks.

12. Some, like Foster (1965, 51), believe that Dante never renounced Christianity or was a heretic. His sympathy for Averroist doctrines can perhaps be explained by the tension he felt between faith and reason. In Western thought philosophy was made ancillary to theology but Averroes, who started from the authority of the Koran instead of the Bible, subordinated religion to philosophy. The compromise between the two extremes was associated with the so-called Latin Averroists (most famous of whom was Sieger), who taught that reason can lead the philosopher even to the point of speculative unorthodoxy, providing that he be prepared to admit in practice that his rational conclusions might be false from the theologian's point of view (ibid., 50).

13. The calculation is, however, inaccurate. Machiavelli does not say that the changes would occur in regular intervals. Thus, it would be possible for a religion to change e.g. three times in ten years, if the next change would occur after 4990 years.

14. Plethon (1355-1452) was a Neoplatonist of Greek origin, who essentially introduced Plato to the Western world while attending the Council of Florence in 1438-1439.

15. These kinds of confraternities were common in Florence and they were divided broadly into five categories (cf. Henderson 1994, 33-37). The *laudesi* and the *disciplinati* formed the two main types of devotional company in central Italy in the later Middle Ages. The main activity of the former was singing of lauds for Virgin Mary and the saints. Its significance was that the lauds were written and performed in Italian, thus providing the laity the opportunity to understand religious hymns. The latter companies were composed of voluntary flagellants imitating the suffering of Christ and stressing the need to repent one's sins and to resort to penitence. The third main category was constituted by the large charitable societies, which provided relief to the poor in the city. The names varied across Europe, as well as the aim of the institutions. In Florence, for instance, there emerged more specialised confraternities helping e.g. condemned criminals (company of the Tempio, founded in 1354) or the *poveri vergognosi*, the respectable poor too proud to beg (Buonomini di S. Martino, founded in 1442). The fifteenth century saw the growth in importance of two other types of lay fraternities: the *fanciulli*, or the "boys", imitating the adult flagellant societies to which the boys could graduate at a certain age, and the artisan companies, providing devotional and social services for their members. The latter were opposed by Florentine regimes because they were suspicious that the disenfranchised workers (*sottoposti*) might use these as a front for trade union activities to improve their salaries and working conditions. Machiavelli, as his father before him, had been a member of one or more of these devotional companies (*ibid.*, 437). Similarly, his sermon is meant to be delivered at a meeting of the *disciplinati*.

16. For a deeper analysis of the text, see Ciliotta-Rubery (1997).

17. Augustine and Machiavelli also have in common the pessimistic view of human beings (cf. Prezzolini 1970; Qviller 1996). According to the Renaissance astrology, some planets are benign and some are malignant. One would expect them to produce an equal amount of good and bad people. Yet Machiavelli's people are without exception bad. As Qviller maintains, the easiest way is to accept that Machiavelli's negative anthropology does not follow from astrology or the theory of bodily humours related to it. The nearest parallel to Machiavelli's anthropology is to be found in Manichaeism and its Christian counterpart, the Augustinian doctrine of original sin. On Machiavelli's anthropology, see also Huovinen 1951.

18. Like Machiavelli, some Renaissance thinkers contested Christian morality in stately matters. Guicciardini (1994, 158-159) juxtaposes his "ragione e uso degli stati", reason and practice of states, with Christian morality and concludes that "it is impossible to control governments and states, if one wants to hold them as they are held today, according to the precepts of Christian law". Therefore, "one would need always to murder all the Pisans captured in the war, to decrease the number of our enemies and make the rest more timid" (*ibid.*, 157). In 1499, the Florentine government decided to behead condottiere Paolo Vitelli without any proof of his alleged treasonable negotiations with Florence's enemies, mainly because he would never have forgiven the Florentines his imprisonment and would have been a powerful enemy. The pre-emptive strike was thought to be fit for the situation, because one cannot use the usual standards of fairness in affairs of state (cf. Gilbert 1965, 43). In the case of Vitelli, the worldly wisdom of Renaissance political thought celebrated its greatest triumph. Generally, however, the Florentines were not inclined to take an exclusively religious or mundane attitude towards political decisions - they delighted in the use of human *ragione*, but the first advice was always to turn to God (*ibid.*).

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