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The Concept of Religion in Machiavelli: Political Methodology, Propaganda and Ideological Enlightenment

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Abstract: This study explores Machiavelli's perspective on the interplay between religion and political rule. Rather than being an enemy of religion itself, we argue that the Florentine thinker was critical of its particular interpretations and applications. Specifically, Machiavelli highlights the detrimental effects of certain religions and denominations (particularly Catholic Christianity) on virtue and political engagement, which (in his perspective) foster passivity and fatalism. On the other hand, Machiavelli sees religion as a tool for rulers to serve and defend their power. By dissecting Machiavelli's views, we unveil his nuanced approach to the political value of religion. In short, we will argue that Machiavelli diverged from classical Greek and Roman philosophical systems; his view of Christianity as a tool for civil obedience marks an important shift towards modern political thought.

Keywords: Machiavelli; modernity; state; rule; religion; modernism



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'[W]hoever is wise enough to understand the necessity of the times and the physiognomy of human affairs, but also to adapt himself to all these facts, he would always have good fortune, or at least be protected from evil, and come true that the wise man could master the motion of the stars and the changes of Fate. But as such wise men hardly ever appear, firstly the great majority of men are short-sighted and secondly unable to control their natures, it follows that Fortune shows many changes and dominates men, and holds them captive under her yoke' (Machiavelli to Soderini, January 1512, Florence).

1. Introduction

'Hardly had God made the stars, the heavens, the light, the elements, and man—master over so many things of beauty' (Machiavelli 2013, *Tercets on Ambition* 16–18).

Is there a God in Machiavelli? This question is rather peculiar as it prompts another query: is there a God where there is no human soul? Machiavelli deliberately avoids using the term 'soul' when he discusses human nature (Brown 2010, p. 165), which he relates to bliss and virtue (Namazi 2017). This is because human beings are overwhelmingly imperfect and incomplete. In Machiavelli's mind, most humans are inclined towards passion rather than reason (Fischer 1997). They are overwhelmed by corporal desires and material happiness (Vavouras 2023); their deep yearning for material pleasure is constant and insatiable (Machiavelli 1998, *The Prince* XVII). Therefore, human beings have no spiritual or rational soul. Many ancient Greek philosophers viewed happiness as the ultimate pursuit of the human soul. In contrast, Machiavelli contended that happiness is unattainable since human beings are imperfect. In simple terms, they lack a soul that could

be perfected. Moreover, they do not deserve a soul since they are inherently weak. Hence, why God should bestow His providence upon such imperfect and greedy beings?

Apart from the word ‘soul’, Machiavelli avoids the word ‘God’. When he speaks of the mysterious and unknown realm situated beyond the material world, he often refers to it as the ‘heavens’ (Machiavelli 1996, *Discourses* II, Preface; II, 2).¹ Fortune ‘is the arbiter of half of our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern’ (Machiavelli, *The Prince* XXV).² In the human world, Fortune either brings success or becomes the source of great misery and disasters (*Discourses* II). The Palace of Fortune has no entrance gate; it is accessible to everyone³. However, very few of those who enter can escape. Fortune laughs as she endlessly spins the wheel⁴ to which every human being is tethered (Machiavelli, *Tercets on Fortune*; 109).

Most humans, especially ‘[i]n quiet times . . . do not take account of the storm to come’ (*The Prince* XXV); they ignore Fortune’s potentially disastrous appetites (ibid.). For example, Caesar Borgia designed and executed all his plans flawlessly, but they were ultimately overturned by Fortune herself (*The Prince* VII). Hence, human beings, blinded by rapacity and ignorance, remain slaves to her unpredictable appetites. Their ability to control their nature, and therefore to tame chance, would turn them into omnipotent Gods in the place of God (Viroli 1998, pp. 22–23). By ruling over Fortune, human beings would become perfect arbiters of their own history. Thus, the problem of God’s absence in Machiavelli is solved by the ‘deification’ of humanity. We understand, then, that in Machiavelli’s thought, the absolute standard of measure of everything is not an abstract transcendent force but ‘man’ as such. There is no providence; no concrete divine plan (akin to the Christian Second Coming) determines the future of the human world. Human behaviour is strongly influenced by the inevitable constraints imposed by natural laws. Nature is the only space within which all beings interact. Gaining a proper understanding of this nature can empower individuals with virtù, allowing them to navigate and shape political circumstances effectively (Hankins 2014).⁵ In Machiavelli’s view, those who have acquired knowledge about nature and the human world are just a small minority of ‘virtuous’ human beings (Viroli 2007). These ‘deified’ men can control their destiny, changing the course of human history. The majority of human beings will always remain imperfect and, hence, susceptible to the urges of Fortuna.

This study aims to explore the philosophical meaning of the term ‘religion’ in Machiavelli’s thought. In general terms, the scholarship on Machiavelli’s views of Christianity has resulted in at least three tendencies that have been brought to our attention by Parsons (2021): ‘The first group of scholars argues that Machiavelli’s writings are diametrically opposed to Christian teachings and that his long-term project is the destruction of the Church and the transformation of political life as defined by Christianity’ (p. 6). Parsons cites Machiavelli’s emphasis on the acquisition of power, riches, and commodities as ‘the foundation of his new political science’ (p. 18). While Christianity considers acquisition as inherently ‘sinful,’ in the mind of the Florentine thinker, it simply constitutes the principal safeguard for the survival and prosperity of principalities and republics (pp. 17–18). More importantly, Machiavelli takes issues with the Christian moral teachings; Christianity promotes an erroneous tendency that deprives human agency *in toto*; it encourages passivity and leads to the loss of virtù.⁶ This assumption is not entirely wrong; aspects of Machiavelli’s thought highlight the contribution of religion in preventing human beings from unleashing their potential to sway over Fortune. Christian doctrines focus exclusively on otherworldliness; by considering human beings impotent against their fate, they openly prompt them to endure endless hardship (Machiavelli, *Discourses* II, 2). Political freedom cannot rest on such flimsy foundations of passivity (ibid.). The second group of scholars (such as Vickie Sullivan and Mark Hulliung) ‘maintains that while Machiavelli is indeed hostile to many features of Christianity and Christian politics, his plan is to reform Christianity by appropriating its language—and its name—for the sake of his broader project’ (Parsons 2021, p. 6). The third group of scholars, which is the largest, as it includes much of the Cambridge school (such as Pocock and Skinner), maintains that ‘Machiavelli’s critique of the Church is consistent

with late-Renaissance opinion and that his departures from Church teachings are reflective of the Italian humanism' (Parsons 2021, p. 7). Moving beyond these established approaches, the present study argues that Machiavelli, despite his general hostility toward Christianity, does not question the political utility of the Christian religion as such. More specifically, he accuses the Catholic Church of being a corrupting influence on Italian and French politics thanks to its participation in secular affairs (Arendt 1998, p. 77; Tarcov 2014, p. 200; Parsons 2021, pp. 14, 24). It was not 'the individual corruptness of bishops and prelates' (Arendt 1998, p. 77) but the influence of the ideology of the religious body in the political realm. Machiavelli assumed that Christian politics were hostile to human flourishing. On the other hand, he viewed the world 'as a twentieth-century realist might', that is, as a *par excellence* modern political thinker (Parsons 2021, p. 17). '[T]he acquisition and application of political power', he argued, 'is decisive to his political science' (ibid.). As paradoxical as it may sound, he suggested that Christian doctrines can play a decisive role in defending civil laws. Religion is a great tool for statesmen and rulers who strive to fulfil their ultimate objectives: to defend their power. At the same time, Machiavelli seeks to emulate one of history's most successful unarmed prophets, Jesus Christ. Although he does not adhere to Christ's moral teachings (as previously noted), he attempts to gain a comparable reputation. In other words, what Christ was in the realm of religion, Machiavelli aspired to become in the realm of political thought. Like Christ, he attempts to create an immediate rupture with the tradition of classical political philosophy, opening up the door to modernity. In the next sections, we will attempt to analyze the practices Machiavelli has appropriated from the Christian religion. Mainly, we are referring to methods of public manipulation, such as propaganda and ideology. Propaganda excites irrational passions, prompting obedience to secular and ecclesiastical institutions or prominent authority figures. All statesmen must rely upon these methods in their pursuit of hegemony.

2. The Ecclesiastical Hegemonies

'Besides this, in order to undertake greater enterprises (Ferdinand of Aragon), always making use of religion, he turned to an act of pious cruelty, expelling the Marranos from his kingdom and despoiling it of them; nor could there be an example more wretched and rarer than this' (Machiavelli, *The Prince* II, 2).

'I am deeply aware of how loyal humans are to an evil man hiding under the cloak of religion' (Machiavelli to Guicciardini, 17 May 1521).

In chapter XI of *The Prince*, Machiavelli speaks of the ecclesiastical states as being different from secular principalities. Apparently, he has in mind the papal state of Rome. However, these states are political states, properly speaking. Although they justify their authority on religious grounds, operating under the guise of divine right, they still function as entities that exercise political sovereignty. They emerge in the same way secular governments come into existence; that is, 'they are acquired either by virtue or by fortune' (*The Prince* XI). However, they 'are maintained without the one or the other, for they are sustained by orders that have grown old with religion, which have been so powerful and of such a kind that they keep their princes in the state however they proceed and live' (ibid.). Machiavelli likens the ecclesiastical principalities to secular states that have lax laws and, for this reason, those who are subjected to them express no discontent (ibid.). Such authorities are never challenged or threatened by rebellions or violent usurpations (Strauss 1958, p. 58). These (papal) states are defenceless, without a strong and stable army. These, 'though ungoverned, do not care, and they neither think of becoming estranged from such princes nor can they. Thus, only these principalities are secure and prosperous' (Machiavelli, *The Prince* XI). Additionally, '[a]mong all men praised, the most praised are those who have been heads and orderers of religions. Next, then, are those who have founded either republics or kingdoms' (*Discourses* I, 10). However, the power of these men does not stem from virtue or Fortuna but from the 'great spiritual authority', which 'cannot be so easily understood in terms of money and arms' (Tarcov 2014, p. 204), nor in terms

of rational persuasion and eloquence; this authority, as we will further explain later on, exploits irrational human passions.

As the Florentine thinker argued, greed is a natural and insatiable human desire; human beings have a propensity to desire more constantly, and they are never truly content with what they already possess. '[I]t does not appear to men that they possess securely what a man has unless he acquires something else new' (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 3). '[H]uman appetites are insatiable, for since from nature they have the abidity and the wish to desire all things and from fortune the abidity to achieve few of them, there continually results from this a discontent in human minds and a disgust with the things they possess' (*Discourses* II, Preface). Thanks to this irrational greed, 'human things are always in motion, either they ascend or they descend' (*Discourses* II, Preface); that is, human beings live in a state of perpetual instability. This inability to tame their natural predispositions is attributed to the Christian religion, which (in Machiavelli's mind) generates inhuman misery and lamblike oppression (Parsons 2021, p. 107). More importantly, political power, which relies on religious doctrines to justify extreme coercion, absolves itself of any responsibility for the perpetuation of oppression and keeps the entire body politic under its absolute control. Religion urges the oppressed to avoid taking action, ultimately leading them to a state of blind subjection: God is responsible for everything; God governs the destiny of each person and the fate of the world as a whole; and thus, no further action is needed (*Discourses* I, 11). In the next section, we will further discuss the impact of the Christian faith on virtù; Christianity (in Machiavelli's mindset) contributes to fatalism, passivity and withdrawal from public life.

3. The Christian Religion and the Corruption of Virtue

'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 according to virtue' (Machiavelli, *Discourses* II, 2).

As noted earlier, Machiavelli's critique of Christianity is based on the belief that it is chiefly oriented towards otherworldly concerns. As he explained, '[o]ur religion has glorified humble and contemplative more than active men' (*Discourses* II, 2). It encourages human beings to focus exclusively on the afterlife instead of fully engaging with the affairs of the secular world. 'The Christian religion makes us esteem less the honor of the world', as opposed to ancient religions, which 'placed the highest good in it' (*Discourses* II, 2). Hence, the Christian religion encourages human beings to yield to the whims of Fortuna; their freedom and agency are taken away. In contrast, the people of ancient times 'were more lovers of freedom', and what makes men 'less strong now . . . is the difference between our education and the ancient, founded on the difference between our religion and the ancient' (ibid.). In addition, 'the ancient religion did not beatify men if they were not full of worldly glory, as were captains of armies and princes of republics' (ibid.). Also, the Christian religion teaches how to silently endure pain and hardship instead of eliminating their causes. 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. And if our religion asks that you have strength in yourself, it wishes you to be capable more of suffering than of doing something strong' (ibid.). Thus, it devalues human excellence, specifically the recognition of an individual's distinctiveness through his/her inherent qualities. More importantly, it deprives determination (*Discourses* I, Preface; *Discourses* I, 12), promoting hostility toward the republican ethos of self-government (Tarcov 2014, pp. 9, 197–98). More particularly, the false interpretations of the Christian religion 'bring it about that not as many republics are seen in the world as were seen in antiquity; nor, as a consequence, is as much love of freedom seen in peoples as was then' (Machiavelli, *Discourses* II, 2). There can be no republican spirit or action for the common good when religion focuses exclusively on otherworldliness and when it propagates the idea that human beings are not responsible

for their own destinies, prompting them to silently and passively endure misfortunes (*ibid.*). People abdicating responsibility for their fate become susceptible to manipulation; in effect, they end up enslaved puppets in the hands of exploitative leaders. In contrast, virtuous people exploit the right opportunity (presented by Fortuna), taking on a protagonist role in the course of human history (*Discourses*, II, Preface; Skinner 2000).

The rules of ancient religion differ in the following aspects: their ultimate concern was to prepare persons to face the present and the future with valour and fortitude (Mansfield and Tarcov 1996, p. XXXIII); ancient religious traditions were striving to address and alleviate the causes of suffering, instead of teaching men and women to tolerate adversity. Even the blood-staining rites of the sacrifices were in this direction. It is precisely for this reason that in ancient times (according to Machiavelli), men were excellent in virtù (Plamenatz 2012, p. 14); they possessed a fervent resolve to shape their own destinies instead of entrusting them to God or Fortune. The worth and value of human beings were determined by their practical contribution to military victories and political offices. Furthermore, ancient religions used to deify the rational spirit as well as the strong and beautiful human body. As we see, Machiavelli does not question the political usefulness of religion as long as it contributes to the development of human fortitude and determination. He only challenges the incorrect interpretation and application of religious doctrines that dominate the public realm. Religion can function as a conduit for human improvement, inspiring and cultivating excellence in individuals, governments, and states (Pocock 2003, p. 225; Rees 2004, p. 6). Religion is—and should be—an integral part of human education (Del Lucchese 2015, p. 61).

4. Religion as an Instrument of Political Ideology

‘For it (religion) caused good orders; good orders make good fortune; and from good fortune arose the happy successes of enterprises’ (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 11).

Machiavelli directly implicates religion with maintaining the institutions of the state (Hörnqvist 2004, p. 83). He thinks that human beings are more obedient to religious oaths that unite them with the will of gods than to the laws that bind them to the state. All the founders of great cities use religion as a veil for the structures of the state. They know that ideological adherence to religion maintains order and security within the state to a greater extent than civil laws or arms. Numa, the great Roman lawgiver, ‘found a very ferocious people and wished to reduce it to civil obedience with the arts of peace’ (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 11). Therefore, ‘he turned to religion as a thing altogether necessary if he wished to maintain a civilization; and he constituted it so 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’ (*ibid.*). Numa pretended to receive advice on the drafting of legislation from a Nymph, that is, from a source far superior in might and intelligence to human beings;⁷ his ultimate goal was to imbue the authority of the law with a divine status (Benner 2009, p. 393). Thus, by assuming they were serving an all-powerful divine entity, the *populus* served and obeyed the state (Forde 1992).

While Christ exhorts us to a godly, universal and self-sacrificial love or brotherhood, Machiavelli assumes that this type of love is nothing but a groundless illusion (Machiavelli, *Prince* III; XV; Parsons 2021, pp. 19–20): when ‘your friends realize—as they must—that you cannot possibly benefit them in the way they expected, they will become your enemies’ (Parsons 2021, p. 19). However, it is fear, rather than friendship, the ultimate instrument through which religion can instil obedience to secular power. Sovereign power exploits (and capitalizes on) the greatest irrational passion, the fear of the power of the gods (Machiavelli 2013, *The Art of War Preface*), and, more importantly, the fear of the unknown afterlife. By doing so, it aligns irrational behaviours with the purpose of the state (*Discourses* II, 7). Everyone who subscribes to religion anticipates eternal salvation, but in reality, this goal remains unconfirmed and unverifiable. Conversely, those who propagate religious rhetoric achieve their objective of controlling and tempering human nature (*The Art of War*, VI). After all, it was Apostle Paul who recommended the Romans ‘submission to governing

authorities' for the following reasons: 'their placement is ordained by God, and, in any case, the salvation of believers is near' (Parsons 2021, p. 17).

It was assumed that 'Christ's appearance on earth binds his believers to a law that transcends any claim earthly powers might make' (ibid.). But since civil laws are given by God, the good Christian must submit to earthly government 'while awaiting patiently the hour of redemption' (ibid.). Another example is Moses, one of the most excellent leaders, who became a 'prince' by relying on his virtue (rather than on Fortune) (Machiavelli, *The Prince* VI). He found the people of Israel in Egypt, 'enslaved and oppressed by the Egyptians' (ibid.). To be disposed to follow him so that they would get out of their slavery, he presented himself as 'a mere executor of things that had been ordered for him by God' (ibid.). Hence, by assuming that they were serving a divine plan, the people of Israel were serving a cause planned and directed by Moses himself. According to Tarcov (2014), in Chapter VI of Machiavelli's *Prince*, the Florentine thinker 'refers to the constitutions Moses made his people observe as Moses's own orders, no longer as ones ordered by God' (p. 201). However, in Machiavelli's text, we read that 'Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus would not have been able to make their peoples observe their constitutions for long if they had been *unarmed*, as happened in our times to Brother Girolamo Savonarola' (Machiavelli, *The Prince* VI; *emphasis ours*). What the Florentine thinker conveys in these passages is not that Moses ceased relying on soft power (specifically, religious propaganda) but that in certain cases the use of hard power is necessary to achieve meaningful results. As we read in the *Exodus*, Moses after receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, returned to find the Israelites worshipping a golden calf. In his anger, he breaks the tablets (The Bible, *Exodus* 32:19) and called for the Levites to arm themselves. He ordered them to go through the camp and assassinate those who participated in the idolatry. As a result, about three thousand men are killed (*Exodus* 32:27–28). We understand, then, that Moses compelled his people to adhere to his commands as though they were his own, but only when he deemed it necessary to ensure their enforcement through extreme means of hard power. However, Machiavelli's general argument is that, in most cases, soft power through religious propaganda is considered more effective in convincing multitudes of the leader's legitimacy than hard power itself.

As we see, religion can be weaponized by leaders and civil institutions. For Machiavelli, this religion-institution alignment is of utmost significance; it is the guarantor of civilized life and social stability (Donaldson 1988, p. 9). Every attempt to foster cultural development under the political authority of the state must involve ideological manipulation. Law is the personification of order and rationality; civil laws preserve political society and civility (Pocock 2010). On the contrary, religion exploits the irrational passions of human nature and promises pre-mortal or post-mortal rewards or punishments (Theodosiadis and Vavouras 2023), becoming the ideal tool for the consolidation of political power (Ardito 2015, p. 122; Zuckert 2017, pp. 19–20; Brown 2010, p. 169; Hörnqvist 2004, p. 283). Put otherwise, the state is not protected simply because every citizen respects civil institutions; it requires devotion to immaterial spirits that instil fear about the consequences of breaking divine injunctions that uphold principles of high moral conduct (Machiavelli, *The Art of War* IV). Religions establish moral standards, through which one can distinguish between good from evil and right from wrong. By harnessing fear and emotions, they transform abstract concepts into concrete ideas, something that political authorities or scientific methods cannot always achieve (Zuckert 2017, pp. 19–20; Brown 2010, p. 169; Hörnqvist 2004, p. 283).

Thomas Hobbes bases his social contract theory on the view that primary political conventions are the matrix of all truth and science (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan*, XIII). However, long before Hobbes, Machiavelli highlighted the role of religion in such endeavours (Theodosiadis and Vavouras 2023). While in Hobbes's mindset, a rational social order is created when human beings agree to transfer their liberties to an all-powerful state (*Leviathan* XIII; Cf., Vavouras 2016), Machiavelli had already warned that such an agreement requires irrational beliefs to interfere in the process of submission. The state is maintained not so

much by the institutions and the rational diagnosis of the laws of nature; ideologies that capitalise on irrational human passions must also play their role. This was best understood by Plato, who considers the conformity of the three political classes impossible without the ideological tool of the brave lie (Plato 2000, *Republic* 414e–415e). To experience felicity, citizens had to remain faithful to an irrational lie perpetually propagated by the institutions of the state. Additionally, in his *Laws* (Plato 1996, 625b), Plato contends that a lawgiver must receive his legislation from the sacred confines of a cave, the very site where Zeus is said to have been born. For the ideal laws to take hold, it is necessary to disseminate the belief that the same law, to some extent, is bestowed upon us by a divine entity. Throughout all twelve volumes of the *Laws*, Plato illustrates the necessity for all civic statutes to adhere to a coherent framework. The *rationale* behind the implementation of each law should be clearly explained to every member of society. However, without religious guidance, all rational underpinnings would collapse into chaos and nihilism. Hence, the fear of the unknown afterlife is essential for sustaining the perceived necessity and legitimacy of state institutions (*The Art of War* VI). In this way, religion becomes a safeguard for all good civil institutions (Vatter 2000, p. 70; Benner 2013, p. 81); in turn, such institutions guarantee good fortune (McCormick 2015). ‘For where the fear of God fails, it must be either that the kingdom comes to ruin or that it is sustained by the fear of a prince, which supplies the defects of religion’ (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 11). As we see, religion secures the enduring authority of institutions (Plamenatz 2012, pp. 2–3), while the virtue of a meritorious ruler is transient. To further validate his claim, Machiavelli uses the example of Jeronimo Savonarola; he underscores the process whereby Savonarola manipulated the people of Florence according to his own desires by citing unverified divine miracles (Benner 2009, p. 392). The citizens of Florence, though not unlearned and uncivilized, were exceedingly credulous in the religious absurdities of such a ‘shrewd’ man (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 11).

Therefore, a correct application of religion could be an important asset in the hands of laudable statesmen. For this reason, constant vigilance and regulation of religious doctrines are necessary. Political structures must be safeguarded to prevent them from straying from their original intent: to establish a civil society. When this continuous ideological progression towards the state’s objectives is monitored, the state itself thrives; order and stability are guaranteed, while the risks of upheaval are reduced. The supreme irrationality that prevails under the rule of raw passions, encouraging violence and havoc, in certain cases guarantees the establishment of order and security, allowing political institutions to pursue their ultimate objectives.

5. Religion as Propaganda

‘To the people of Florence, it does not appear that they are either ignorant or coarse; nonetheless, they were persuaded by Friar Girolamo Savonarola that he spoke with God. I do not wish to judge whether It is true or not, because one should speak with reverence of such a man; but I do say that an infinite number believed him With out having seen anything extraordinary to make them believe him. For his life, learning, and the subject he took up were sufficient to make them lend faith. No one, therefore, should be terrified that he cannot carry out what has been carried out by others, for as was said in our preface, men are born, live, and die always in one and the same order’ (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 11).

Machiavelli attempts to separate human nature from human purpose; knowledge about human nature is necessary for its perfection. In his perspective, understanding its immutable essence philosophically is the only way to govern human conduct (Ramsey 2000). It is here where we identify a significant departure from classical political thought (Gunnell 1978). In classical political philosophy, the exploration of human nature and the scientific belief in its immutable character does not necessarily lead to a definitive moral objective. Instead, they are utilized to justify subjective assumptions. Consequently, the ethical principles of religion or classical philosophy must be completely separated from the

new political methodology suggested by Machiavelli (Vavouras and Ganas 2023). For a political proposal to succeed, it must be feasible and practical, not objectively or scientifically correct. The rightness of a political move is determined by its practical execution, not by its scientific or philosophical validity. Classical political philosophy strives for the integration of humans within society. However, Machiavelli's philosophy assumes that knowledge of human nature leads to the conclusion that human beings can be perfected; that is, human rationality will someday firmly prevail over passions (Balot 2015). This type of human virtue can also be applied to the realm of society, aiming to establish a state in which sound reason prevails in every institution.

There is, in fact, a great similarity between Machiavelli and classical political philosophy; as Arendt (1998) put it, 'Machiavelli's criterion for political action was glory, the same as in classical antiquity, and badness can no more shine in glory than goodness' (77). Likewise, religion converges with classical philosophy in their shared emphasis on integrating various aspects of human existence (such as morality and intellect) into a cohesive view of what human nature actually is. However, it has been already made clear that the nature of most human beings cannot be perfected. 'As all those demonstrate who reason on a Civil way of life, and as every history is full of examples, it is necessary to whoever disposes a republic and orders laws in it to presuppose that all men are bad and that they always have to use the malignity of their spirit whenever they have a free opportunity for It' (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 3). This leads us to the following assumption: the objectives of classical political philosophy are nothing but utopian aspirations. Clearly, a political strategy that demands certainty in its execution cannot hinge on uncertain moral principles. Instead, it must aim at complete control of human behaviour. However, to say that the majority of human beings cannot be perfected implies that they will be perpetually swayed by profoundly irrational passions. Hence, they must be controlled and surveilled. Glory is bestowed upon those who excel in manipulating the masses to ensure adherence to manmade civil laws. We have observed that in this endeavour, religion introduces a unique and powerful dynamic.

Religious doctrines posit a threat only when they focus exclusively on otherworldliness. In fact, the view that religion exploits the irrational passion of fear to safeguard civil obedience is much closer to Machiavelli's political thought than views shared by classical political philosophy, which underscore the role of religious doctrines in promoting virtue and vigor. The ideological propaganda of religion ensures far greater results than the 'rational truths' of classical political philosophy (Strauss 1958, p. 12); it creates a powerful, persuasive ideology,⁸ irrespective of the factual unverifiability of its teachings. As Machiavelli argued, 'there was never any orderer of extraordinary laws for a people who did not have recourse to God, because otherwise they would not have been accepted' (*Discourses* I, 11). For example, Numa doubted his authority would suffice to implement new laws; the authority of God was necessary to 'persuade those lacking the ability to perceive the reasons known to the prudent' (Tarcov 2014, p. 195). 'For a prudent individual knows many goods that do not have in themselves evident reasons with which one can persuade others. Thus wise men who wish to take away this difficulty have recourse to God. So did Lycurgus; so did Solon; so did many others who have had the same end as they. Marvelling, thus, at his goodness and prudence, the Roman people yielded to his every decision' (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 11).

6. The Unarmed Prophet: Christian Propaganda as a Model of Machiavellian Methodology

'All things that arise in favor of that religion they should favor and 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. Because this mode has been observed by wise men. the belief has arisen in miracles, which are celebrated even in false religions; for the prudent enlarge upon them from

whatever beginning they arise and their authority then gives them credit with anyone whatever' (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 12)

All the prophets who achieved their purpose aspired to dominate politically through arms, Machiavelli claimed (*The Prince* VI); they imposed their will on history. However, Machiavelli prefers to 'imitate' Jesus Christ, an unarmed prophet (Strauss 1958, p. 84). It has been assumed that in politics, one can achieve more with ideological propaganda (Strauss 1989c, p. 45) than with arms and weapons. This begs the following question: what are the characteristics of the ideological propaganda of the Christian religion that the Machiavellian political philosophy and methodology embody?

(1) First (as stated earlier), Machiavelli's political methodology focuses on how one could control his/her human nature by capitalizing on irrational passions and knowing when to prioritize these over rationality to effectively control and influence others in the political realm. Just as religion targets the passion of fear (Benner 2009, p. 394), political objectives, narratives and policies must target other human passions.

(2) The Machiavellian methodology promotes ideological persuasive propaganda over unattainable truths. 'For the generality of men feed on what appears as much as on what is; indeed, many times they are moved more by things that appear than by things that are' (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 25). Similar to how religion persuades human beings to follow spiritual doctrines by promising eternal salvation, Machiavelli's political method convinces subjects to obey civil institutions. Here, the potential benefits to individuals are of minimal concern; what is paramount is that the widespread acceptance of the prevailing ideology fulfils the objectives of the state (Rees 2004, p. xi) in the same way as the submission of believers to the doctrine of postmortem salvation fulfils the goals of the Christian church in the present becoming.

(3) All unarmed prophets successfully persuade the vast majority of the people about their objectives (Del Lucchese 2015, p. 17). The effectiveness of an ideology in persuasion yields more lasting effects than coercion through arms. While the soft power of ideology is more effective than the hard power of state violence, this does not mean 'arms and force do not have to be put to work (Machiavelli, *Discourses* II, 21), as we have seen in our discussion of Moses' case. However, 'they should be reserved for the last place, where and when other modes are not enough' (ibid.). Hard power is an indisputable weapon in politics and government: 'The principal foundations of all states . . . are good laws and good armies' (*The Prince* XII). In addition, 'good laws cannot exist where there are no good armies, and where good armies exist there must be good laws' (ibid.). However, 'force alone is ever found to be enough' (*Discourses* II, 13). In fact, Machiavelli admired the absolute adherence of the subjects of papal states to laws and orders of ecclesiastical authorities without the existence of violent means of subjugation (Theodosiadis and Vavouras 2023). As Nye (2008) also claimed, 'the use of soft power is rarely sufficient' for political leaders, who often need to rely on coercive measures, unlike religious leaders who can command influence through ideology and belief systems (p. 42).

(4) Both the Machiavellian methodology and the Christian ideology rejected the ancient view of the human world. While classical thought saw human nature as a dynamic field of evolution and improvement under the development of virtue, i.e., under the dominance of the rational human character over the irrational part of the passions, the Machiavellian and Christian systems of thought disconnect human nature from the ultimate goal or purpose of humanity as a whole. For Christianity, human nature is inherently sinful; its flaws and weaknesses could be tamed only through asceticism. Furthermore, a person's value is not determined by how well they have aligned different aspects of their nature—such as rationality, emotions, and virtues—toward personal growth; rather, all human beings are treated as equals. They share an equal degree of subjugation and obedience to God. Particularly in Catholic Christianity, the inferiority and the guilt of man are described through the notion of original sin; humans are fallen; they are imprisoned into an earthly life; their nature is flawed and, therefore, imperfect (Theodosiadis 2021, p. 40, p. 73). As, for instance, Christian (mainly Augustinian) theologians argue, 'unless man can be

sinless’—that is, incapable of violating the moral Christian principles—‘he cannot be perfect’ (Passmore 2000, p. 17). The only purpose of understanding human nature lies in its need to regulate its excesses, namely, its inherent weaknesses and passionate inclinations. The similarity with the Machiavellian philosophy is very obvious: human beings are evil; they can only be controlled through the exploitation of their irrational passions. Instead of striving for the historical realisation of an ideal utopian state (as classical philosophers sought), he focuses on regulating the passions of the masses. Thus, Machiavelli considered his political proposals more feasible and achievable than those pushed forward by ancient Greek philosophers.

7. Christianity as a Form of ‘Enlightenment’

‘For when a new sect—that is a new religion—emerges, its first concern is to extinguish the old to give itself reputation; and when it occurs that the orderers of the new sect are of a different language, they easily eliminate it’ (Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II, 5).

In Machiavelli’s thought, Christian propaganda plays a crucial role in enlightening the general population. Classical philosophy does not address the masses; it addresses the nobles who can understand and apply the complex meanings it conveys. Only a few can be virtuous and truly wise. Virtue is a reflection of the supreme, yet very rare, quality of wisdom. Moreover, the truly virtuous city is a theoretical assumption, a mere utopia; such a city presupposes virtuous individuals. This is an impossible target, considering the inherent incapacity for virtue in the vast majority of human beings. ‘For as many are not capable of ordering a thing because they do not know its good, which is because of the diverse opinions among them, so when they have come to know it, they do not agree to abandon it’ (*Discourses* I, 9). However, the goal of classical thought is to integrate human nature, that is, to align or harmonize its inherent characteristics (such as rationality, emotions, virtues, and so on) with the standards upon which the ideal city is founded. Even if only one or a few individuals become truly virtuous, this would certainly be an ultimate success. Essentially, ancient political philosophy assumes that all humans can integrate their nature. In contrast, Machiavelli assumed that only a small minority is capable of accomplishing this task. This was the main reason Socrates left no written texts. In his mind, the true message of his philosophical views should be protected from misinterpretation; thus, the ‘ignorant masses’ should never come into contact with his philosophical ideas (Plato 2022, *Phaedrus* 274c–277b). Philosophers and thinkers like Plato and Isocrates, who embraced Socrates’ concerns, employed a writing style rich with hidden philosophical nuances, conveying messages that go beyond a surface-level understanding. This method of writing is shared by Machiavelli, who is a good connoisseur of ancient wisdom; he seeks to reveal to broad audiences ideas and concepts that most ancient philosophers would have deliberately concealed from the public (Drury 1985). Machiavelli takes on the task of exposing the harsh realities that most ancient thinkers kept from public view;⁹ the essence of Machiavellian propaganda lies in the provocative and simultaneously alluring nature of its revelations; the Florentine thinker garners considerable attention by unsettling his audience with the content he articulates (Germino 1991). To a degree, this existed in many ancient texts. However, it was well understood by very few educated nobles. The Machiavellian methodology, under the guise of philosophical instruction, seeks to enlighten the youthful and resolute, who were driven by fervour and audacity (Machiavelli, *Discourses* II, Preface; Cf. Baluch 2018; Mansfield 2023, p. xii); this methodology relies on historicism; it interprets concept and ideas by considering the historical context to which they correspond, instead of focusing on their universal or eternal truths (McShea 1963).

The Machiavellian Enlightenment possesses a distinct object of study, and through a profound understanding of the essence of this object, fulfils a specific and purposeful aim. Political philosophy or science has as its cognitive object the knowledge of human nature and the ideal state; its main purpose is the improvement of the conditions that lead to a precise end: individual and political happiness (Femia 2015). The Machiavel-

lian objective has a similar cognitive object; it begins with an understanding of human nature or political societies, yet its aim is subjective and arbitrary; it is separated from the essence of its cognitive object. This distinction disqualifies it from being classified as science or philosophy in the fullest sense, relegating it to the realm of methodology, as its purpose aligns with the individual goals of those who engage with it. Machiavelli prescribes a political methodology that could be used by everyone, by ordinary people and rulers alike; its success is based on historical justification. The Machiavellian political method achieves its effectiveness through the application of subjective interpretations of history; by prioritizing individual perspectives and biases over objective truths, it enables a more flexible and pragmatic approach to politics (Coady 2000). However, many struggle to grasp the full extent of Machiavelli's insights, leading to confusion regarding several terms used in his texts. Hence, interpretations of key concepts, such as 'human', 'citizen', 'state', 'nature', 'happiness', and 'soul', can vary significantly among readers. These terms are permeated with ideological biases. On the contrary, ancient philosophy attempted to universally define these concepts, ascribing to them an objective and supra-historical meaning. Machiavelli, in his attempt to enlighten the masses, shares the Socratic concern regarding the 'vulgarization of wisdom' and the illusion of knowledge, wherein individuals believe they understand concepts while, in reality, they remain ignorant of their actual meaning.

Likewise, the Christian religion condemns the elitism of ancient philosophy, promising salvation to all. One does not need the sophisticated knowledge of human nature and the elusive skill of perfecting it to gain worldly happiness. This limited knowledge is sufficient for individuals to obey the rules of the Church in order to attain the promised salvation in the afterlife. This salvation is more attainable for a broader group of people than the abstract or intellectual form of 'salvation' of philosophical contemplation. The vast majority of men and women can hardly understand deep philosophical meanings; however, they can easily follow religious practices. In addition, the Christian religion redefined the terms of ancient philosophy to align them with its own ideology.

For this reason, some of the leaders of the Church attempted to destroy texts of the ancient Greek authors so that they would disappear along with the standards of ancient virtue (Machiavelli, *Discourses* II, 5; Del Lucchese 2015, p. 16). 'Whoever reads of the modes taken by Saint Gregory and by the other heads of the Christian religion will see with how much obstinacy they persecuted all the ancient memories, burning the works of the poets and the historians, mining images, and spoiling every other thing that might convey some sign of antiquity. So if they had added a new language to this persecution, in a very brief time everything would be seen to be forgotten' (*Discourses* II, 5). However, 'if they had been able to write with a new language, considering the other persecutions they made, we would not have any record of things past' (*ibid.*). In other words, the main concern of a new religion (or ideology) is to redefine the meanings of terms from preceding systems, realigning all established norms and concepts to serve its ideological objectives (Viroli 2016, p. 36). 'A new sect—that is, a new religion—to prevail, must first extinguish the old order, and when it occurs that the orderers of the new sect are of a different language, they easily eliminate it. This thing is known from considering the modes that the Christian sect took against the Gentile. It suppressed all its orders and all its ceremonies and eliminated every memory of that ancient theology' (Machiavelli, *Discourses* II, 5). As Nietzsche also claimed, Christianity changed the meanings of terms associated with ancient forms of virtue to establish its ideological foundations (Nietzsche 2006, pp. 13–16).

The Latin language employed by Christians was identical to that of the Romans. However, over time, the meaning of certain words was adjusted to the objectives of the emerging Christian ideology. Concepts such as reason, virtue, goodness, measure, and so on, in the Christian mindset are different from those of ancient philosophers. Hence, the enlightenment of 'the many' begins with the Christian religion, which replaces scientific or philosophical truth with its own ideological plausibility. Religion is not a science with an object of knowledge and a purpose determined by it, but a belief. In other words,

it is a coherent set of ideas. Machiavelli's form of enlightenment mirrors the spiritual enlightenment of 'the many', prioritizing not the scientific validation of human truths but rather persuasive dominance and ideological control over humanity. Machiavelli's imitation of the unarmed prophet, Jesus, involves prioritizing ideological faith over truth, employing a methodology that prevails over 'the many' by appealing to passion; it is not a political science and philosophy (Strauss 1989c, p. 47).

8. Christianity as the Beginning of Modernity

'Jesus failed insofar as he was crucified. He did not fail insofar as the new modes and orders found by him have become accepted by many generations of many nations. This victory of Christianity was due to propaganda: the unarmed prophet conquered posthumously by virtue of propaganda. Machiavelli, being himself an unarmed prophet, has no other hope of conquest except through propaganda. The only element of Christianity which Machiavelli took over was the idea of propaganda. This idea is the only link between his thought and Christianity' (Strauss 1989c, p. 45).

'Mass enlightenment' not only begins with Christianity; the Christian tradition also significantly shapes modernity. Machiavelli clearly establishes a break with tradition (Strauss 1963, p. 297), but as we have seen, this break began earlier, during the spread of the Christian religion in Western Europe. There are specific characteristics of modernity that can be found in Machiavelli. These characteristics are also present in Christianity:

(1) The removal of humans from nature and their integration into this world. Both in Christianity and in Machiavelli's political thought, human essence is separated from human purpose; human nature does not anymore determine the purpose of human life. More specifically, in Christianity, nature and rational thought are considered inferior or subordinate to spiritual beliefs. In this regard, individuals should detach themselves from the natural world; reason should not hold dominion over belief in immaterial spirits. Instead, emphasis should be paid on asceticism. According to Machiavelli, an understanding of human nature serves as a tool for powerholders to exert control over individuals (Holler 2011).

(2) The profound decline in philosophical standards during the process of 'mass enlightenment' is clearly apparent from both viewpoints. Machiavelli endeavoured to establish a new political approach that would be accessible to all. Thus, he seeks to disseminate the concealed message of the ancient philosophers to the general populace. He aims to popularize the philosophical perspectives of the ancient thinkers in a manner that makes them accessible to the majority of human beings. Many Christians thought that philosophy was inaccessible to the flock, arguing that believers do not need to reach higher levels of reason to be saved; they must apply universally understood religious rules; they must shape their attitudes according to codes and morals that the Scripture considers appropriate (e.g., Thomas Aquinas 1946, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 1, Article 8). The openness of virtue to all is the main reason for the superiority of Christianity over classical philosophical tradition.

(3) In Machiavelli's view, the state's or the sovereign's purpose provides a justification for employing any concept or idea that could advance this paramount objective. It does not matter if one thinks that he/she is a citizen when, in fact, he/she is a subject, nor if one thinks that security is synonymous with freedom (Machiavelli, *The Prince* V; *Discourses* I, 16; Cf. Skinner 1983). The point here is to advance the subjective goals of the state's official ideology. In Christianity, the meaning of concepts change to serve faith, that is, ideology. Concepts that reflect the objective interpretation of humans are forcibly falsified with ideological expediency.

(4) The dominance of ideology over truth is a direct consequence of this unbridled relativism, which defines everything according to ideology, degrading the objectivity of science or philosophy. Modernity is the age of ideologies, the triumph of subjectivity over truth. Christian faith and Machiavelli's political thought have contributed to

this shift, reinforcing the idea that personal or ideological perspectives must supplant objective standards.

(5) The equality of humans, based on the widespread flaws in their nature, is a reality in the modern landscape. Human beings ‘are more prone to evil than to good’ (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 9); they are ‘ungrateful’ and eager for endless gain (*The Prince* XVII). Wickedness derives exclusively from the nature of human beings (Passmore 2000, p. 258), who remain slaves to their most frantic passions (Machiavelli suggested); in the Christian mindset, evil is a permanent feature of the human condition, stemming from the original sin.¹⁰ Therefore, human beings are unlikely to exhibit moral conduct unless influenced by the ideology of the state or by religious doctrines.

(6) The predominance of humble passions over rationality is an element that signals the beginning of this new age. This natural inclination is incurable; humanity is inherently bound to sin; imperfection is *sine qua non* of its existence. Human beings ‘never work any good unless through necessity, but where choice abounds and one can make use of license, at once everything is full of confusion and disorder’ (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 3).

(7) Deification of faith through propaganda is the path to political or religious excellence. Emulating the unarmed prophet Jesus and imposing soft power on human affairs through submission to ideology is the ideal objective (Pocock 1975). The good citizen or the good believer is the one who fully submits to the ideology to which they subscribe. State or religious propaganda, as an element of soft power (Nye 2008, pp. 29–32, 38–44), is deemed effective when it secures the unquestioning obedience of the populace. To use Machiavelli’s own words, ‘it is necessary for a prince who wishes to do great things to learn to deceive’ (*Discourses* II, 13).

(8) In modern thought, humans are viewed as having dominance or control over nature rather than being subject to or defined by the natural laws that govern all things (Strauss 1989b, p. 85); the only measure of things here is the practical outcome of the use of human skill and knowledge (Yannaras 1984). Machiavelli perceives human nature and the broader world as inherently uncertain. Human beings must become sovereign; they must assert their personal beliefs, values, and perspectives in a way that leaves a lasting impact on history and politics (Vavouras 2022). In other words, everything is judged based on the principles of ‘use-value’; nature, life, and the relationship of a human being with the ‘other’ are means leading to the constant gratification of selfish passions and desires for material gain. In ancient Greek philosophy, virtue was viewed as a steadfast aspect of the character of a person; virtue required effort; it was a matter of personal and interpersonal interactions of great worldly impact. In Christianity, it is believed that regardless of the sins one commits or the harm caused to others, salvation can be attained through repentance; the sudden transformation from wickedness to goodness can lead to the salvation of the soul. The parable of the prodigal son exemplifies how those who return to faith from a state of waywardness are highly valued, perhaps even more so than those who have always been faithful. This provides a stronger foundation for human subjectivism, as a simple shift in will toward accepting a desired ideology can lead to the forgiveness of any past sins. One, for example, can be a pagan and, thus, be considered exiled from Heaven. However, upon becoming a Christian, the same person opens the way to securing a place in the Kingdom of Heaven. Essentially, this is an ideological conversion rather than an objective discovery of truth and rightness. Therefore, the repentant prodigal son represents a significant contribution to the narrative formation that resonates with the majority.

9. Conclusions

‘Machiavelli is the first philosopher who attempted to force chance, to control the future by embarking on a campaign, a campaign of propaganda. This propaganda is at the opposite pole of what is now called propaganda, high-pressure salesmanship and holdup of captive audiences. Machiavelli desires to convince, not merely to persuade or to bully. He was the first of a long series of modern thinkers who hoped to bring about the establishment of new modes and orders by

means of enlightenment. The enlightenment—*lucus a non lucendo* (dark grove from which no light emerges)—begins with Machiavelli' (Strauss 1989c, p. 47).

We have seen that the idea of God as a superior being who exercises absolute control over the world does not exist in Machiavelli's thought. God is identified with the concept of chance and the uncontrollable natural factor that imposes its necessity on human affairs (Rees 2004, p. 30). The stronger the human determination, the weaker the concept of God or nature. In addition, Machiavelli's pessimistic anthropology perceives humans as greedy, selfish, and quarrelsome beings; they cannot be morally perfected; ultimately they are driven by self-interest and lust for acquisition. Human happiness or salvation ceases to be a matter of the soul. He even doubts whether humans can (or even deserve to) have a soul.

The paradox in Machiavelli's thought arises from his rejection of God as the supreme regulator of all things while still accepting religion as a tool for controlling humans. In Machiavelli's practical realism, religion is a necessary instrument for political obedience; religion persuades subjects to submit to the dominant ideology of the state (Theodosiadis and Vavouras 2023). Thus, while the people think they are serving God, they only defend the power of the ruler. Every gifted legislator and every powerful state considers religion as a crucial tool for civil obedience. Machiavelli incorporates the persuasive influence of the Christian religion into his political methodology. Therefore, religious propaganda is a key factor in the exercise of soft power (Vatter 2000, p. 32). No state institution could stand firm without the ideological armour of religion.

However, Machiavelli goes further; he borrows elements from the Christian religion to craft his own political method. With this in mind, he assumed that religious propaganda must become a dominant ideology capable of persuading the majority of the masses. To do so, Machiavelli brings to light the unspoken viewpoints of the ancient philosophers; he unveils the hidden meaning they convey. This revelation and this portrayal of hideous and immoral messages shock the reader, particularly evoking a profound and intellectually provocative allure. Furthermore, he chooses to simplify philosophical concepts, making them accessible to everyone (Strauss 1963). Thus, philosophical terms are stripped of their complex meaning; they are rendered susceptible to interpretation by any ideology that caters to subjective motives.

With Machiavelli, the first wave of modernity began in the field of political thought (Strauss 1989a). Human nature is forcibly divorced from its inherent purpose; human beings are left adrift in a landscape of harsh subjectivism and historicism, devoid of their intrinsic sense of belonging (Vavouras 2021). Human happiness is associated with instrumentalism, employed against nature, which symbolizes the uncontrollable factor of Fortuna. However, a thorough investigation of the Machiavellian text on the function of religion shows that the roots of modernity can be identified in the dominance of Western Christianity (over classical Greek and Roman tradition). Christianity initially overturned the concept of nature as a normative agent of human happiness. Nature was initially considered the ultimate point of reference, the objective point of rightness for every human intellect or action; in Christianity—and even more so in Machiavelli—everything is turned upside down. Nature becomes the enemy we must defeat by any means possible; nature restricts our absolute subjective freedom. Who, then, is truly freer: those who recklessly pursue their desires or those who act under necessity (particularly natural necessity)? Western Christianity, Machiavelli and modernity, driven by a rebellion against nature, remain largely unconcerned about such inquiries. This indifference stems from their ideological—essentially subjective—foundations, where truth finds no safe haven, let alone the enduring principles of nature.

Consequently, political philosophy descends into the realm of political ideology and attempts to reshape scientific terminology by imposing new meanings on established terms. The success of Western Christianity and Machiavelli's method proves that political science cannot be employed anymore to tell right from wrong. Political philosophy was once the only art that could offer clear guidance about power and ethics (Plato 1995, *Statesman* 260e, 267a–b; Aristotle 1926, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a). Classical political philosophy offered

clear advice on what human beings and human societies should do in their pursuit of happiness (or *eudaimonia*) by adjusting human behaviour to the demands of nature. Modern political science serves primarily as a tool for advancing subjectivity (masked as objectivity), whether through the rule of an absolute leader or the ‘will of the people’. Beneath this modern façade of enlightenment and freedom lies a hideous mechanism of control and sheer manipulation.

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Notes

- ¹ For example, ‘if heaven were so kind that it did not have to make war’ (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 6); ‘the heavens judged that the orders of Romulus would not suffice for such an empire’ (*Discourses* I, 11); ‘someone of them more loved by heaven may be able to work it’ (*Discourses* II, Preface).
- ² ‘By many this goddess is called omnipotent, because whoever comes into this life either late or early feels her power’ (Machiavelli, *Tercets on Fortune* 25).
- ³ ‘Over a palace open on every side she reigns, and she deprives no one of entering, but the getting out is not sure’ (Machiavelli, *Tercets on Fortune* 46).
- ⁴ And ‘while you are whirled about by the rim of a wheel that for the moment is lucky and good, she is wont to reverse its course in midcircle’ (Machiavelli, *Tercets on Fortune* 109).
- ⁵ The natural world offers human beings the necessary resources to create and determine their own future. There is, perhaps, not a divine creator who holds the universe in order. Thus, human beings are the creators of their destiny; they can become the masters of circumstances and impose their subjectivity upon history (Brown 2010, p. 159).
- ⁶ To avoid misunderstandings, we squarely acknowledge that Machiavelli’s view of the Christian religion as a mechanism that encourages passivity and withdrawal from the public/political realm remains a subject of debate (yet inconclusive). For example, Arendt (1998)—contra Machiavelli—claimed, ‘[t]he otherworldliness of religious experience, in so far as it is truly the experience of love in the sense of an activity, and not the much more frequent one of beholding passively a revealed truth, manifests itself within the world itself’ (pp. 76–77). For Yannaras (1984), a human being (in Orthodox Christianity) is ‘a person, *πρόσωπον*, which signifies, both etymologically and in practice, that he has his face (*ὤψ*) towards (*πρός*) someone or something: that he is opposite (in relation to or in connection with) someone or something (p. 20). Hence, believers engage in public interactions. However, such interactions are directed toward objectives that extend beyond mere material interests; their ultimate concern is ‘otherworldly’ happiness. As we can see, the public and religious realms maintain a reciprocal relationship, with neither prevailing over the other, allowing both to preserve a degree of autonomy. However, what matters here is not whether Machiavelli was correct in assuming that Christianity eliminated public action *in toto*, emphasising private happiness at the expense of political engagement. In the following sections, we delve into Machiavelli’s view of religion as a mechanism that exploits irrational human fears in pursuit of political conformity. This serves as the primary concern of the present study.
- ⁷ ‘Whoever considers well the Roman histories sees how much religion served to command armies, to animate the plebs, to keep men good, to bring shame to the wicked. So, if one had to dispute over which prince Rome was more obligated to, Romulus or Numa, I believe rather that Numa would obtain the first rank; for where there is religion, arms can easily be introduced, and where there are arms and not religion, the latter can be introduced only with difficulty. One sees that for Romulus to order the Senate and to make other civil and military orders, the authority of God was not necessary; but it was quite necessary to Numa, who pretended to be intimate with a nymph who counseled him on what he had to counsel the people. It all arose because he wished to put new and unaccustomed orders in the city and doubted that his authority would suffice’ (*Discourses* I, 11).
- ⁸ Cf. Plutarch 1914, *Lycurgus* 5; Solon 14.
- ⁹ The shocking and provocative things presented by Machiavelli are also present in the ancient texts, but not explicitly. Viewpoints related to ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ power are not unique to Machiavelli (*The Prince* VIII). They are also present in Plato’s and Aristotle’s works, but also in Isocrates (1945, *Letter To Philip* III, 2). The *nocturnal club* in Plato’s *Laws* (961c, 962b, 965b–d, 966b) serves as the essential regulator of political legislation, operating under the dictates of science. In addition, the scientist/governor in the *Statesman* (293b) has the inalienable right, as the sole regulator of his science, to exile, confiscate and annihilate parts of civil society to achieve his virtuous purpose. For Aristotle, a mixed constitution could best incorporate the moral virtue of *phronesis* (as a reflection of wisdom) (Aristotle 1932, *Politics* 1293b–1294b). But if a perfect, integrated human was about to assume political

power, every concept of law would be catalyzed, and every political action would be justified by his virtue (*Politics*, 1284a 9–15). Behind the texts of ancient philosophy exists a ‘Machiavellian’ methodology that the authors avoid disclosing openly, in order to prevent challenging the moral codes and norms of their time and to protect their philosophical views from being misinterpreted by the ‘ignorant majority’.

- 10 To suggest that the notion of original sin is central in Christianity does not imply that there have never existed Christian thinkers who called this notion into question. Consider, for example, the case of Pelagius, for whom ‘[s]in is not inherent in man’s nature’ and only begins ‘to grow upon us in childhood’ corrupting us ‘little by little’ (Passmore 2000, p. 139). Moreover, the Eastern Orthodox Father never built a theology by placing central emphasis on this notion (Theodosiadis 2021, pp. 40–41). Instead, they speak of the ‘ancestral sin’ (Hughes 2004). The Augustinian point of view (claims Hughes) associates the ‘original sin’ with the ‘original guilt’ for Adam and Eve’s transgression, in which humanity continuously participates (ibid.). In the Orthodox mindset, sin has been transmigrated to Adam and Eve from Satan and, thereupon, from Adam and Eve to successive generations (ibid.). In this respect, the (Greek) Orthodox Fathers, much like Augustine, accept the ancestral inheritance of sin, which (in their view) constitutes an essential aspect of the nature of men and women. For the latter, however, humanity does not perpetually partake in the transgression of Adam and Eve, and thus, sin and evil are not evident in every human action (ibid.).

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