CHAPTER FOUR

MARSILIUS OF PADUA’S PRINCIPLES
OF SECULAR POLITICS

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Few political writings have generated as much controversy and garnered as much attention as Marsilius of Padua’s Defensor pacis. But the reasons for the notoriety of this text and its author have varied with the centuries. As several chapters in this volume demonstrate, its reputation in the later medieval and early modern period was mainly a function of the views expressed there about ecclesiology and, in particular, papal power. At the center of Marsilius’ political project was his stalwart opposition to the political pretensions of the priesthood and especially the papacy. He constructed his argument along several distinct lines, leading to the organization of the Defensor pacis into three discourses. Discourse I discusses the origins and nature of earthly political authority; the second discourse severely criticizes claims made on behalf of the rights of the Church and, particularly, the papacy to exercise temporal power and defends an alternate conciliar ecclesiology; a brief third section summarizes those conclusions derived from the preceding discussions that Marsilius regards to be especially useful or worthy of emphasis. The structural division between the substance of Discourse I and of Discourse II was unusual for its time, inasmuch as it implies a distinction between the treatment of temporal government and ecclesiastical affairs.

It should be noted that the Defensor pacis is by no means formed of two separate, self-subsistent and internally coherent treatises. Rather, a single central theme binds together the tract as a whole: the danger posed to human happiness (as experienced in the peaceful and self-sufficient community) by the interference of papal rule in secular life. The entire force of the argument in the Defensor pacis is directed toward demonstrating the disruptive effects of the papacy’s attempts to regulate temporal affairs. Approached from this perspective, Discourse I stipulates the arrangements necessary to bolster the stability and unity of secular communities so as to repulse papal interference,
while Discourse II substitutes the principles of papal monarchy with those of a conciliar ecclesiology.

Where earlier generations of readers focused, with few exceptions, on the second discourse, modern scholarly literature has devoted perhaps the larger share of effort to examining Discourse I, which contains Marsilius’ secular political theory. Despite occasional charges that this represents an anachronistic exercise, the fact that Marsilius himself divided the *Defensor pacis* in this fashion—quite a novel structure for the early fourteenth century—invites us to conclude that he upheld a strict separation between the temporal and the spiritual ends of human existence and constructed his conception of the secular community (as well as the Church) accordingly. In the present chapter, we propose to expose and analyze the basic principles underlying the Marsilian idea of earthly social and political order. In particular, we will demonstrate how Marsilius moves the common medieval view of divine ordination of communal association into the background, without, however, surrendering completely to a more extreme secularism. In our view, his primary lesson is that God-given natural inclinations and reason stood behind the creation of human society, so that the human mind and its ability to will, while given to human beings by God, constitute the immediate basis of government and law. Hence, Marsilius remains broadly within the medieval Christian world-view yet is able to articulate a secular political theory that resonates in more modern contexts. Much like classical authors such as Plato and Aristotle, whose metaphysics are generally suspect but whose political and moral philosophies continue to have purchase in the twenty-first century, Marsilius offers the contemporary reader a teaching that is worthy of consideration.

Our interpretation of Marsilian theory should be mapped, first of all, against the background of the leading lines of scholarship during the last half-century or so. One central thesis holds Marsilius to be either a modernizing or even a radical thinker. This outlook is perhaps best represented in Alan Gewirth’s *Marsilius of Padua and Medieval Political Philosophy*. Gewirth suggested that while Marsilius’ work

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