Machiavelli and the Republican Conception of Providence

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Given the Luciferine reputation of his political ideas, it was not long before readers of Machiavelli began to ask themselves what were his own religious beliefs.¹ Was he a radical epicurean, an atheist or a libertine; or was he a tormented Christian, all too aware, like Augustine, that the harsh realities of politics correspond to the fallen nature of human beings?² Recent historiography has moved Machiavelli’s concern with religion back into the heart of his political thought, restating the central political significance of the question of God in his theory.³ Traditionally, this conjunction of God and politics in Machiavelli has been explained in terms of an instrumental conception of religion, associated with the idea of a civil religion.⁴ But does this hypothesis exhaust the role of religion in Machiavelli’s political thought? Could Machiavelli also be employing a non-instrumental understanding of religion that explains why some parts of his political theory make sense only in light of certain theological premises? In this case, one has left behind the hypothesis of civil religion and moved on to ask about Machiavelli’s ‘political theology’.⁵

¹ This article was originally published in *Review of Politics* (2013), 75: 605–23. I thank the editors for permission to reprint. A shorter version of this paper is forthcoming in Italian under the title ‘Politica plebea e provvidenza in Machiavelli’, in *Machiavelli: Tempo e conflitto*, edited by Riccardo Caporali, Vittorio Morfino, and Stefano Visentin.
² For Machiavelli’s relation to Christianity and his personal religious beliefs, see de Grazia 1994; and Viroli 1998.
³ For overviews of the current debate on Machiavelli and religion, see Cutinelli-Rendina 1998; Colish 1999, pp. 597–616.
⁴ For discussions of civil religion in Machiavelli, see Preus 1979, pp. 171–90; Sullivan 1996; Rahe 2008; and Brown 2010a. As Brown observes, ‘Machiavelli’s attitude to religion presents two quite different faces, one valuing it as a form of political control, the other following Lucretius in describing religion anthropologically as the expression of deeply rooted beliefs and fears of ordinary people’ (Brown 2010b, p. 79).
⁵ For the distinction between civil religion and political theology, see my introduction to Vatter 2010.
The relatively new claim that Machiavelli is not merely recovering an ancient conception of religion as an instrument of political rule, but is putting forth a political theology of his own has been forcefully made by Maurizio Viroli in *Machiavelli’s God*. According to Viroli, Machiavelli was neither an atheist nor a pagan. ‘Machiavelli’s God is the God of Florentine republican Christianity’. He adhered to the political theology of what Viroli calls ‘republican Christianity’, whose first principle is ‘that a true Christian is a good citizen who serves the common good and liberty in order to implement the divine plan on earth. God participates in human history, […] created men in his own image and wishes them to become like him with their virtue, working to make the earthly city comparable to the heavenly city’. Viroli argues that thinkers as diverse as Thomas of Aquinas and Ficino, Savonarola and Leonardo Bruni, Giles of Rome and Matteo Palmieri advocate one and the same ‘republican Christianity’. For reasons that I outline below, I doubt that Machiavelli drew inspiration for his experiments with political theology from this ‘tradition’. However, Viroli does raise the interesting question of what conception of ‘divine glory’ and ‘divine nature’ Machiavelli could have held that would serve as a foundation of his novel way of understanding love of country and republicanism.

I shall not engage the old question of Machiavelli’s personal morality or the significance of his *Exhortation to Penitence*. It is clear that for him the real dimensions of the problem of religion in politics only emerge once the belief in a divinity is posed directly in relation to the most ‘ferocious’ and pitiless aspects of politics as illustrated by Roman historians and by the Hebrew Bible. In order properly to pose the question ‘Who is Machiavelli’s God?’ one would have to find a conception of God whose ‘divine nature’ is such that human ‘imitation’ of this nature would give rise to ferocious political actions, and, furthermore, such an ‘imitation’ would make a ‘saint’ out of whoever obeys these ‘extraordinary commands’ (D 111.22). In order to find such a God in Machiavelli’s writings it is better to reconsider his other, less pious ‘exhortation to seize Italy, and to set her free from the barbarians’ that closes *The Prince*.

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6 Viroli 2010, p. 61.
7 Viroli 2010, p. 2.
8 These aspects are treated at length by Machiavelli in D 1.11–15 as well as throughout D 111; see also the advice given in P 18.
9 Quotations from Machiavelli 1996, unless otherwise noted.
10 In what follows I shall employ the following translation of *The Prince*: Machiavelli 2005. For the original, I employ Inglese’s edition: Machiavelli 1995.