

Machiavelli's Democratic Civil Religion in the *Discourses on Livy*

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This article argues that religion is an important democratic institution in Machiavelli's republicanism. For Machiavelli, religion is not simply imposed by an elite class—or a prophetic founder—on the people. Rather, it is a source of power both the people and the elite can deploy. This makes religion important for Machiavelli's republicanism, which features persistent “disunion” and “tumults” between “the people” and “the great.”¹ Religion, then, is a conflictual democratic institution because it empowers both classes to force their adversaries to abide by their oaths, respect the laws, and contain their disputes within public channels. This makes religion particularly useful for the relatively less powerful and therefore particularly important for the people,² for it is a source of power that does not rely on the threat of immediate physical force or other sources of privately held power like wealth or personal reputation.³ As a result, contrary to its usual presentation, religion can be seen as a democratic institution in Machiavelli's republicanism. It is an institution that aids the people in their efforts to exercise political power.⁴

While religion is one of the most contested themes in Machiavelli's writings, almost every major interpretation presents it as either an explicitly elitist institution or an elite-driven source of

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stability and unity.⁵ Leo Strauss argued that the central project of Machiavelli's corpus is a radical critique of religion. Strauss's Machiavelli nevertheless embraces religion as a limited tool for manipulating credulous masses.⁶ In contrast, Emanuele Cutinelli-Rèdina argued that Machiavelli has a positive assessment of religion, but solely as a source of political authority and stability.⁷ Alternatively, Quentin Skinner, Sebastian De Grazia, and Maurizio Viroli have argued that Christianity is essential to Machiavelli's republicanism because it encourages the people to put the common good ahead of their private interests.⁸ In each case, whether or not they read Machiavelli as Christian or anti-Christian, whether or not they present religion as a mere tool of authority or a moralizing force, religion is consistently presented as an elite-driven phenomenon and a check against conflictual politics.⁹

As a result, Machiavelli's treatment of religion poses a unique challenge to conflictual or democratic interpretations of his political thought.¹⁰ These interpretations depend on his praise of class conflict,¹¹ his arguments for socioeconomic equality,¹² or his critique of teleological politics,¹³ all of which are in tension with the prominent accounts of his treatment of religion. This is more than a mere interpretive dilemma for these democratic readings. These scholars are marshaling Machiavelli's thought as a resource for critiques of contemporary liberal democracy and an aid in thinking about possible alternatives.¹⁴ If an authoritarian vision of religion is vital to his politics, then their entire projects are suspect.¹⁵ The institutions or theories of popular politics they rescue from Machiavelli's work may well require a form of religion that is neither possible nor desirable.¹⁶

Given this, these scholars have attempted to account for his treatment of religion in three ways. Some have argued that his overt praise of religion hides a deeper critique.¹⁷ Others minimize religion, arguing that it is one of several useful devices for creating fear and is thus only contingently useful.¹⁸ However, neither of these approaches overcomes the elitist character of the traditional interpretations. The first, while offering intriguing readings, merely rejects the praise of religion because it is inconsistent with their

democratic premises. The second fails to reconcile the elitist use of religion with Machiavelli's broader democratic sympathies. His praise of religion is treated as merely a limit on his anti-elite sensibilities.

Alternatively, several scholars have turned to Machiavelli's treatment of religious figures like Moses, Savonarola, and Caesar Borgia in *The Prince*. Using one or more of these figures, they argue that Machiavelli sees a place for religion to help establish more democratic forms of government. In Machiavelli's account, Moses used a form of civic religion to create a new people.¹⁹ Savonarola used his prophetic voice to help reopen the Grand Assembly in Florence, establishing the most participatory republic in Florence's history.²⁰ And Borgia used the power of the church and religious imagery to eliminate petty feudal lords, satisfy the people, and begin establishing a civic principality rooted in the support of the people.²¹ However, the turn to *The Prince* and these princely or prophetic figures has a significant limitation as a democratic reading. In each case, religion— though put to democratic ends— remains a tool used on the people, not by them.

In contrast, this article argues that religion has an important place in the most democratic aspect of Machiavelli's republicanism: his praise of civil conflict.²² In this context, his account of civic religion emerges as a resource for thinking about the relationship between authority and popular power in republican politics in our own day.²³ From a scholarly perspective, this will show that Machiavelli's treatment of civic religion is not only compatible with his democratic commitments, but that attention to those democratic commitments can help us gain a greater understanding of his thoughts on religion. In making these arguments, this article focuses on the *Discourses on Livy*. While *The Prince* has a prominent place in Machiavelli's writings on religion, the scholarly focus on prophetic founders in that book has obscured the conflictual and democratic aspects of religion. The *Discourses* develops an account of religion as a democratic institution: a source of authority the people can use against the elite.

We begin with D I.11–I.15, the longest-sustained treatment of religion in Machiavelli's corpus, to develop an account of

his understanding of civic religion through his account of Rome's religion. While religion in these chapters is often interpreted to be a tool for controlling the people,²⁴ I show how Machiavelli's account brings out the limits religion's use imposes on elites, the ways the people use religion against elites, and how this makes religion a particularly helpful institution for the people. Then, with the help of D I.55, we turn to a clearer example of the democratic uses of religion, which addresses the question of Machiavelli's treatment of Christianity. Specifically, we will see that religion has an important role to play in preventing corruption and preserving productive conflict. I conclude this article by considering the implications of Machiavelli's account of religion for contemporary efforts to make use of his philosophy.

Roman Religion

To see religion's important democratic purpose in Machiavelli's republicanism, we begin by excavating his account of religion's role in Rome, Machiavelli's model popular republic.²⁵ However, this account appears to begin in a strikingly elitist and even authoritarian manner. He begins by staging a contest between the first two kings of Rome, Romulus and Numa, to determine whether military virtue or religion was more important for Rome's success. Although this comparison provides significant support for many of the anti-democratic accounts of Machiavelli's treatment of religion and deals with Roman kings rather than the republic, a democratic side to Machiavelli's account of religion emerges in this apparently anti-democratic beginning.

Although Romulus was Rome's founder, Machiavelli gives higher praise to Numa for instituting the religion that inspired an unparalleled fear of God, "which," he writes, "made easier whatever enterprise the Senate or great men of Rome might plan."²⁶ As the chapter continues, he provides two examples from republican Rome to illustrate how religion empowered elites and helped them quell civil unrest. In the first example, after the loss at Cannae, many citizens gathered and decided to abandon Rome out of fear of Hannibal. Hearing this, Scipio met them and with "[n]aked steel

in hand constrained them to swear they would not abandon the fatherland." In the second example, by holding a knife to his throat Lucius Manlius forced the tribune Marcus Pomponius to swear to drop the accusation Pomponius was planning to lodge against Manlius's father. In both perplexing examples, elites used threats of violence to procure religious oaths that were then held to by the people or their tribune. "So," Machiavelli concludes,

those citizens whom love of the fatherland and its laws did not keep in Italy were kept there by an oath that they were forced to take; and the tribune put aside the hatred he had for the father, the injury that the son had done him, and his own honor to obey the oath he had taken. This arose from nothing other than that religion Numa had introduced to the city.²⁷

In both cases, oaths extracted by threats of violence were honored because of the Roman's religiosity.²⁸ These examples connect religion, oaths, and civil conflict. The religion Machiavelli praises is one that enabled elites to transform violent threats, even illegal and sacrilegious ones,²⁹ into inviolable religious oaths.³⁰

It is a wonder how Machiavelli could think that these two examples make Roman religion appear worthy of imitation. Mere pages earlier he not only praised the tribune's power of accusation and critiqued the use of private remedies (like threats of violence) but also claimed that disputes in Rome were settled with "very little blood."³¹ However, in D I.11 he praises the use of violent threats to quash an accusation. In almost the same breath in which he praises religion, Machiavelli draws his readers' attention to its connection to elite violence.³² Having presented these two odd examples, Machiavelli turns back to the comparison of Numa and Romulus. To make sense of these stories and what they tell us about the relationship between religion and republican politics, we must look closely at the comparison he draws between the two kings.

The first things to note about the comparison are the departures from Livy. In making the comparison, Machiavelli enhances

Numa's religiosity while minimizing that of Romulus.³³ In Livy's account, Romulus founded his kingship on religious ceremonies, used religion to inspire his armies, built the first temple to Jupiter, and was deified after his death.³⁴ Machiavelli makes no mention of Romulus's religiosity. Instead, he says Romulus founded his kingship on two murders and presided over a "ferocious people."³⁵ As for Numa, Livy presents his ascension to the throne in primarily political terms. After Romulus died, the people grew restless under the Roman Senate's rule. In response, the Senate decided to allow the people an elected monarch. Moved by the Senate's goodwill, the people offered to let them choose the king.³⁶ The Senate then picked Numa because he was known for being just and religious, which they thought would make him difficult to object to. After insisting on being confirmed as king by a religious rite, Numa instituted additional religious ceremonies because he was concerned the warlike Romans would not accept his new laws and because he was afraid that without religion the Roman people would become weak in the absence of constant war.³⁷

In Machiavelli's account of Numa's ascension, religion plays a more prominent role. Numa is chosen by the Senate not for political reasons but because of a heavenly inspiration that had the express purpose of amending Romulus's orders with religion.³⁸ However, in both accounts, Numa relied on religion to govern and civilize the Roman people, he falsely claimed he consorted with a divine entity to fool the credulous Romans into accepting his reforms, and his efforts resulted in the Romans becoming more pious and especially concerned with keeping oaths.³⁹

Machiavelli keeps the basic outline of Livy's story intact—Romulus was the warlike founder, Numa the religious pacifier—while simplifying it to facilitate comparison and isolate the value of religion. In Machiavelli's narrative, religion emerges as a technology of authority replacing Romulus's sword with a more peaceful—though hardly less coercive—power. Machiavelli explains that "as he [Numa] found a very ferocious people and wished to reduce it to civil obedience with the arts of peace, he turned to religion as a

thing altogether necessary if he wished to maintain a civilization."⁴⁰ When placed head-to-head, then, Machiavelli seems to confirm what is implied: Numa is superior to Romulus. He writes,

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.⁴¹

This comparison, however, immediately runs into a problem. While Machiavelli claims to compare Romulus and Numa, he fails to set up a consistent comparison. He praises Numa over Romulus because he says it is easier to arm a religious people than give religion to an armed people. However, according to his account, Romulus did not arm a religious people and indeed did not need religious authority at all. The problem with this comparison arises because unlike Livy, Machiavelli presents Romulus and his soldiers as areligious. Machiavelli thus casts doubt on his own comparison in a way that Livy's history did not require.

In D I.19 he revisits the comparison when considering the issue of succession in monarchies and the problem the variability of princes' *virtù* poses for cities. He argues that weak princes can maintain their position and city if they succeed strong princes, but that if one succeeds a weak prince, strength is necessary. To illustrate this point, he discusses the first three Roman kings. Romulus, he says, was strong, Numa weak, and Tullus strong. He explains, "The virtue of Romulus was so much that it could give space to Numa Pompilius to enable him to rule Rome for many years with the art of peace. But after him succeeded Tullus, who by his ferocity regained the reputation of Romulus."⁴² Numa's religious authority, far from superseding Romulus's violent authority, appears here to be parasitic on that authority.

Read together, these two accounts of Romulus and Numa leave us without a clear verdict between either the kings or the value of their chosen methods: religion or arms. Numa was weak and dependent on Romulus's virtue and the virtue of his successors, but the fear of God that Numa instilled was necessary for Rome's civilization. Revisiting Machiavelli's praise of Numa sheds some light on this difficulty. Machiavelli describes Numa's initial decision to turn to religion in this way: "As he found a very ferocious people and wished to reduce it to civil obedience *with the arts of peace, he* turned to religion as a thing altogether necessary if *he* wished to maintain a civilization" (emphasis added).⁴³ Machiavelli does not say here that religion is necessary to maintain civilization but that religion was altogether necessary *for Numa* to maintain civilization with the "arts of peace." Later in the chapter, when comparing Romulus and Numa, he repeats this formula: "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* . . . [for] it all arose because *he* wished to put new and unaccustomed orders in the city and doubted that *his authority* would suffice" (emphasis added).⁴⁴ Numa needed the authority of God to impose these orders because Numa lacked authority. Romulus, a virtuous violent king, had no such problem. Religion thus appears to be a tool for weak rulers to enhance their authority.

However, despite Numa's weakness, Machiavelli maintains that the religion he introduced was vital to Rome's success. It was because Numa was personally weak and needed to rely on something other than his virtue that the orders he instituted proved as important as they did. By introducing religious orders, Numa provided an additional source of authority, one that was available to the less-than-virtuous. Near the end of D I.11, Machiavelli compares the relative strength of states that depend on the fear of God with ones that depend on the fear of virtuous princes. He writes,

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. Because princes are of a short life, it must be that the kingdom will fail soon, as his virtue fails. Hence it arises that kingdoms that depend solely on the virtue of one man are hardly durable . . . [and] thus it is the safety of a republic or a kingdom to have not one prince who governs prudently while he lives, but one individual who orders it so that it is also maintained when he dies.⁴⁵

Where Romulus relied on virtue, Numa established orders that could instill fear in the Romans in a sustainable way. Machiavelli's praise of religion and Numa is then related to his general preference for founding political life on sustainable orders rather than an individual's virtue. Religion is, in essence, a constitutional solution to the problem of weak rulers; it is a way to institutionalize *virtù*.⁴⁶

Now we can turn back to the original problem that Machiavelli's examples of Rome's virtuous religion posed. The examples of Scipio and Manlius both involved an elite Roman in a dangerous situation relying on religion to supplement threats when confronted with powerful obstacles. Both illustrate the amount of coercive power Numa's institutions bequeathed to future Romans. Breaking an oath was more frightening than Hannibal's armies to the assembled people or the wrath of the plebs to their tribune.⁴⁷ And while the oaths appear extralegal or even illegal, they were not an extraordinary violation of Roman political order because they were within Rome's religious orders. Rather, they were a part of what was in essence Rome's constitution. By invoking the power of those orders, Scipio and Manlius employed a legitimate and publicly sanctioned form of power.⁴⁸ Although they were in relatively weak positions, Scipio moved the plebs and Manlius overcame the tribune.

Even more important for our purpose is that in portraying religion as a constitutional institution that aids the weak, Machiavelli intimates its substantial role in aiding the people in their struggle against the elite. While D I.19 deals with strong and weak rulers, in general it is the people, especially when they are struggling

against the great, whom Machiavelli portrays as congenitally prone to weakness. Machiavelli often describes such struggles as taking place between “the people” and “the powerful.”⁴⁹ Indeed, the people’s relative weakness is critical to Machiavelli’s justification for placing the vital republican office, the “guard of liberty,” in their hands.⁵⁰

This association casts new light on the contrast Machiavelli draws between the *virtù* of a prince in a kingdom with that of the institution of religion. We initially supposed that the argument was simply that religion was a constitutional solution to the problem of weak rulers. However, the connection between weakness and the people suggests an additional interpretation. Before the section quoted in the foregoing, Machiavelli contrasts the role of religion in kingdoms and republics: “As the observance of the divine cult is the cause of the greatness of republics (*republiche*), so disdain for it is the cause of their ruin. For where the fear of God fails, it must be either that the kingdom (*regno*^[51]) comes to ruin, or that it is sustained by the fear of a prince.”⁵² While religion is necessary in a republic, in a kingdom the fear of a prince can suffice, at least for a while. This seems to imply that monarchs can inspire fear in a way republican leaders cannot.⁵³ However, in D I.20 Machiavelli makes the opposite argument. He claims that elections ensure republics do not face the succession problem described in D I.11 and D I.19. Instead, he argues, “through the mode of electing,” a republic “has not only two in succession but infinite most virtuous princes who are successors to one another.”⁵⁴ If elections solve the problem of succession, why would republics need religion more than kingdoms?

Perhaps it is because the problem of weakness appears differently, and more deeply, in republics than in kingdoms. Whereas in a kingdom only the relative virtue or weakness of a single person matters, in a republic the weakness of ordinary citizens matters too. Take for example Machiavelli’s account of Scipio’s actions in D I.11. In the story, the people are weak. They vacillate in the face of successive violent threats.⁵⁵ Hannibal’s armies scare them into abandoning Rome, and then Scipio frightens them into changing

their minds. However, once they take the religious oath, they become resolute. They do not change their minds once Scipio's sword is sheathed and Hannibal again becomes the more imminent threat. On the surface, then, religion appears to be an aid to Scipio. However, religion has a much greater impact on the people's strength than Scipio's. Before their oath, they are unable to resist threats from even a single man. After their oath, they hold fast and resist the much more significant violent threat of Hannibal's armies.⁵⁶

In presenting religion as a tool that helps the people bind themselves together, Machiavelli suggests it can help solve a major problem the people have as a political actor in confrontations with the elite. As he explains in D I.57, "All together are mighty, and when each begins later to think of his own danger, he becomes cowardly and weak." This is because "the multitude is often bold in speaking against the decisions of their prince; then when they look the penalty in the face, not trusting one another, they run to obey." He suggests that the people can overcome this tendency if they "make from among itself a head to correct it, to hold it united, and to think about its defense, as did the Roman plebs . . . when it made twenty tribunes among them to save themselves."⁵⁷ In D III.1, Machiavelli explains that creating tribunes with this power required a religious rite, which when ignored brought about military defeat.⁵⁸ Religion, then, can be a powerful tool for the people when they need to bind themselves together.

In D I.12, Machiavelli turns to explain how religion can provide this additional power. He argues that its power depends on maintaining its ceremonies "uncorrupt."⁵⁹ Ceremonies form the foundation of religions. When they are neglected, the religion loses its credibility. The Roman religion's essential ceremony was the taking of oracles, "[f]or they easily believed that the god that could predict your future good or your future ill for you could also grant it for you."⁶⁰ For Machiavelli, then, religion's power is tied to the people's belief in god's power. The implication being that the invocation of god entailed a substantial worldly power that was not to be trifled with. As a result, the people could believe that a violated oath

would have serious and immediate consequences. However, the power of this belief depended on religion's status as a public institution. Once, Machiavelli explains, the oracles "began to speak in the mode of the powerful, and as that falsity was exposed among peoples, men became incredulous and apt to disturb every good order."⁶¹ Religion falters not because of theology but when it ceases to be an independent source of power available to the people and becomes a tool of the powerful. This suggests that religion, far from being merely a tool for manipulating the people, could function only when the people could put it to use.

In D I.13, Machiavelli provides two examples of how Rome's religion could be used in the conflict between the people and the elite. In the chapter, he discusses two examples of elites using religion to slow or briefly reverse the plebians' political gains and how the people and their tribunes fought back. He draws these examples from the conflicts over the Terentillian law, which sought to abolish the consulship to prevent the patricians from abusing the people when on military campaigns,⁶² threatening one of the patricians' powers.⁶³ The first example narrates how the patricians used religion to manage the law after it had been enacted, while in the second example, Machiavelli looks further into the past and describes how the patricians attempted to use religion to stop the law from being enacted. In the first example, invocations of divine wrath help secure a short-term victory. However, in the second example, the crisis escalates until a consul secures an oath from the people to drop the matter for long enough to fight a looming enemy.⁶⁴ And even though that consul died during that battle, which the tribunes argued nullified the oath, the people, Machiavelli explains, "for fear of religion . . . wished rather to obey the consul than to believe the tribunes." Because of the people's steadfastness, the tribunes and the new consul had to come to a new accord. The tribunes agreed to table the proposal for a year, and the new consul agreed not to lead an army out of Rome in the meantime.⁶⁵

In these examples religion structures the conflict between the patricians and the people. The religious oath prevented the people

from abandoning the consul, and their belief in the gods allowed the patricians to temporarily halt the people's ambitions. However, the patricians were unable to prevent the people from ultimately achieving their political goals. Moreover, the tribunes prevented the consuls from using their military authority to exploit the people in the short term and ultimately succeeded in passing the law in the long term. Religion helped determine the contours of the conflict, but it neither prevented it nor resolved it. Instead, religion facilitated a negotiated settlement between the previously intransigent consuls and tribunes—a settlement in which the people won more than they lost.⁶⁶

After the discussion of the Terentillian law, Machiavelli turns to the relationship between military orders and religion. In these final chapters of this section devoted to religion, we begin to get examples of the people using religion against the elite. While examples drawn from military orders may seem to take us beyond our focus, there is a close relationship in Machiavelli's thought between the citizen-armies of Rome and the plebians as a class, and the commanders of those armies and the patricians as a class. When Machiavelli writes about generals or soldiers making use of religion, he is writing about patricians or the people making use of religion.⁶⁷

In D I.14, Machiavelli tells two stories about how Roman consuls managed the augurs' oracular rituals, which determined the army's auspices before battles. In the first example, the head augur falsified the auspices to favor a Roman victory because he thought that the military circumstances were fortuitous and did not want to prevent the army from attacking. Unfortunately for him, other augurs told soldiers about this fraud, sowing doubt about their potential success. The consul Spurius Papirius, realizing the difficult situation, responded to the rumors and said, that "for him and the army the auspices were good; and if the chicken-man had told lies, they would return to his prejudice." To ensure the truth of this new prophecy, he placed the liar at the front of the army's lines, where he was promptly killed by an errant Roman javelin. The consul then declared that the gods had taken their revenge

and that the army was faultless. Buoyed by this religious sign, the army easily defeated the enemy.⁶⁸

In the second example, a consul wished to fight despite bad auspices and had the chickens drowned. The army fought and was defeated. On the basis of these stories, Machiavelli concludes, “For this [drowning the chickens] he was condemned at Rome and Papirius honored, not so much because one had won and the other lost as because one had acted against the auspices prudently and the other rashly.”⁶⁹ On their face, these examples demonstrate how Machiavelli thinks elites should use religion. Machiavelli appears to argue that elites must not be too religious themselves but instead cleverly manipulate religious ceremonies to inspire and control the people.⁷⁰

However, the examples also illustrate how the people, when under arms, can use religion against their elite commanders. In the first example, soldiers question the orders of their superiors in a way they would not be able to outside of this religious context. This resistance forces the consul to take drastic action against a religious authority. In the second example, religion provided an avenue for the people to punish a leader who failed them. Machiavelli warns against punishing commanders for simple military failure,⁷¹ but he has high praise for punishing leaders who betray their duty and abuse their power.⁷² By using religion to punish this failed captain, the people can provoke salutatory fear in others who might abuse their power.⁷³

In the final chapter in this section of chapters on religion, Machiavelli turns from praising religion to discussing its limitations, particularly in the face of a superior source of power, by narrating a battle between the Samnites and the Romans. In the comparison, he suggests that when the people fight religiously sanctioned authority, they prevail. At the beginning of D I.15, Machiavelli describes religious rituals the Samnites used to inspire their armies to fight Rome. He begins by praising the Samnites, describing with detail the grand religious ritual they used—alongside threats and executions—to force every soldier and commander to take an oath to fight the Romans. While these

rituals inspired the Samnites, he tells us, the inspiration was insufficient. To demonstrate this, he recounts the speech the Roman consul gave when his troops saw the Samnites' religious garb and became concerned. "Crests do not make wounds," the consul says, "and the Roman javelin goes through painted and gilded shields." He concludes, "The oath [the Samnites] had taken represented their fear and not their strength, for they had to have fear of citizens, gods, and enemies at the same time."⁷⁴

In battle, "the Samnites were overcome, because Roman virtue and the fear conceived out of past defeats overcame whatever obstinacy they were able to assume by virtue of religion and of the oath they had taken." With this example, Machiavelli establishes the priority of force over religion. Religion is not of a different nature than any other tool that a virtuous commander, prince, or the people might wield. It can add strength, but when religion comes head-to-head with a superior force, it does not overcome it.⁷⁵ More importantly, Machiavelli credits the force of the assembled people with overcoming the force of religion. Although religion may aid the people, when religion and the people are on opposite sides, he suggests, the power of an organized and armed people can overcome religion's power to move the people.

The Christian Religion

To this point, this discussion of the democratic aspect of Machiavelli's civic religion has relied entirely on his examples drawn from Rome's pagan religion. However, it is in his discussion of Christianity where the more ideological, moral, or theological issues become prominent. Indeed, his account of Christianity is the aspect of his writings on religion that most interpretive approaches emphasize. Whether he is presented as a pagan of some sort,⁷⁶ as someone opposed to religion,⁷⁷ or as an adherent to the patriotic Christianity common to Florentine civic humanists,⁷⁸ his account of Christianity, not of Roman religion, is the central issue. To sustain this democratic interpretation of Machiavelli's treatment of religion, we must address Christianity.

Machiavelli first treats Christianity in the second half of D I.12 as an extension of his discussion of the corruption of Roman religion. He criticizes Catholicism because the church fails to maintain its ceremonies and because it acts as a political party serving its own interest rather than as an order within a city. However, he also criticizes its focus on the afterlife and its emphasis on contemplation rather than worldly glory.⁷⁹ The second criticism seems to point to the importance of religion beyond the political confines presented here. If Christianity is bad because it teaches bad values, and paganism is good because it teaches good values, then it stands to reason that the teachings of a religion matter. If this is the case, then religion is not merely a source of power that can be used by both the people and the elite.⁸⁰

However, there are many good reasons to doubt that placed in its proper context, this educative function of religion is as important as it may appear. First, Machiavelli routinely denies that the Christianization of Rome caused its downfall, pointing instead to rising inequality, the prolongation of military commands, and the problem of corruption.⁸¹ He also denies that Christian beliefs are what prevented new republics from emerging, instead blaming Rome's conquest,⁸² weakness in Italian arms,⁸³ and the political behavior of the church.⁸⁴ The last reason this educative function of religion appears to be relatively less significant is that Machiavelli routinely suggests that Christianity could be reformed to teach worldly values.⁸⁵ This implies that the otherworldly values of Christianity are not so deeply held that they could not be extirpated by clever preaching. The ideological content of a religion cannot be its defining feature if it can be altered as needed.⁸⁶ While religion may play some educative function, that function, contra the anti-Christian readings of Machiavelli, is secondary to its more immediate political use as a source of public authority that both the people and the great can use.⁸⁷

In addition to noting these arguments, Christian interpretations of Machiavelli point to the connection he makes between "goodness" and religion to substantiate their claims about religion.⁸⁸ When Machiavelli claims in D I.11 that religion serves to "keep

men good" and that goodness is vital for republican government, he sounds most like his civic humanist predecessors. For these interpreters, the goodness of the people includes their willing obedience, their moral virtue, and their willingness to put the common good above their private interests.⁸⁹ This form of goodness is in tension with the conflictual picture of Machiavelli's politics emphasized here in which religion is a tool the people use to resist the elite and pursue their particular good.⁹⁰ Machiavelli addresses the question of what goodness entails in D I.55 in a chapter in which the discussion of religion, corruption, and equality in the first book of the *Discourses* comes to a head. He considers two examples, one Roman and one Christian from his own time, that clarify the relationship between goodness, religion, and his republicanism.

In the Roman example, Machiavelli recounts the story of Camillus's vow to give Apollo a tenth of the booty taken from the Veientes. He explains that before a full accounting of the loot could be made, the plebian soldiers had already divided it among themselves. To resolve this religious problem, the Roman Senate passed a law requiring the plebians to give back a tenth of what each had taken. Machiavelli remarks that this law is evidence of the high estimation the senatorial class had of the people's "goodness." He concludes that the senators "judged that no one would not present exactly all that had been commanded of him." The Senate believes the people are good because they will honestly follow the law, obey religious oaths, and pay their taxes.⁹¹

However, Machiavelli quickly notes that the law was never implemented because the plebians objected, which forced the Senate to satisfy the religious oath in another way. The people objected to the law because it was a regressive tax, which forced them to pay for a pledge they had not made. The successful plebian resistance to the law, however, in no way caused Machiavelli to doubt their goodness. Rather, he writes, "the plebs thought not of defrauding the edict in any part . . . but of freeing itself from it by showing open indignation. This example . . . shows how much goodness and how much religion were in that people, and how

much good was to be hoped from it.”⁹² Goodness, it seems, is as much a matter of open conflict as it is obedience. The goodness the senators anticipated was not the goodness with which the people responded. The goodness the plebs displayed was not passive and honest obedience but open political contestation. The fear of the gods did not support elite authority. Rather, it structured how that authority was resisted.⁹³

Machiavelli does not tell us the exact role religion plays in this story, leaving us to infer its role on the basis of what we have already concluded about religion. Religion, it seems, was a major reason the plebs engaged in open and public contestation rather than private fraud or partisan conflict. The plebs knew that the oath to the gods had to be fulfilled and were not willing to break either the senator’s oath or their own if they were forced to return their goods. Thus, they were forced to express their “indignation” at the law openly and challenge the patricians through public institutions. Also, some may have realized that the patricians’ need to honor the consul’s initial oath created leverage. Religion bound the plebians and the patricians and could not be altered by either group, forcing both to engage on relatively equal terms. In this story, religion remains a tool of authority that could be used by both the plebians and the patricians. Its most important function was constraining both groups to struggle openly.

The goodness thought to be important for republican politics, then, is a matter of open participation and political conflict. As noted at the outset, the most distinctive feature of Machiavelli’s republicanism is his praise of a certain kind of class conflict. Moreover, one of the biggest threats he sees to republican politics is the rise of private parties that seek private advantage through political disputes rather than the resolution of conflict through public channels.⁹⁴ Religion, we now see, encourages public conflict while discouraging citizens from turning to private means like fraud or the aid of partisan allies to resolve their conflicts. By encouraging this productive form of conflict, far from being an elitist or antidemocratic institution, religion plays a vital role in Machiavelli’s democratic politics. Therefore, in D II.2 Machiavelli

could say without contradiction that religion made men “terrible” and “ferocious” as well as “good.” It did not make men moral; it simply provided good reasons for both the people and the elite to engage in productive democratic politics.

The second example Machiavelli provides to clarify the nature of goodness takes us to the only place in the Christian world where he says religion still produces goodness: Germany. The example he gives is telling. He writes,

When it occurs to those republics that they need to spend some quantity of money for the public they . . . assess on all inhabitants of the city one percent or two of what each has of value. . . . Each presents himself before the collectors of such a duty . . . having first taken an oath to pay the fitting amount, he throws into a chest so designated what according to his conscience it appears to him he ought to pay. Of this payment there is no witness except him who pays. Hence it can be conjectured how much goodness and how much religion are yet in those men. It should be reckoned that each pays the true amount, for if it were not paid, that impost would not bring in the quantity that they planned . . . [and] the fraud would be recognized, and when recognized another mode than this would have been taken.⁹⁵

In Germany, he explains, religion ensures that all keep their oaths to pay their taxes. This Christian example is no different from the pagan one; it returns us to the familiar theme of religion as a technology of authority that operates on the entire community, rich and poor alike. Moreover, as in the Roman examples, it is not religion alone that ensures honesty but the fact that if the correct amount of taxes were not paid, it would become apparent to everyone. Religion thus adds its force to that of the communities; but even in Germany, it does not stand alone. Even in Germany, it works in tandem with the possibility of public conflict to ensure that everyone obeys.

Conclusion

Religion, as argued here, is a technology of authority or an institution of fear. Public actors use it to augment their authority with divine authority when they fear their temporal power will be insufficient. In Machiavelli's Rome, it provided additional force to oaths while imposing limits on the elites who would put it to use. Using religion forced elites to abide by its ceremonies, thereby making their actions more predictable and controllable. Most important, though, is that religion served these functions primarily for the weak. Those who did not have violent power at their disposal like Numa or who, like the people, lack financial might, institutional standing, or the capacity to act in concert could rely on the fear of god and the power of religious oaths to bolster their power. Machiavellian religion, then, has a deeply democratic function. By empowering the people, limiting the elite, and forcing those who would use it for their own ends to engage in a public form of conflict, religion, as a constitutional institution, provides vital support for Machiavelli's conflictual and democratic republicanism.

However, this praise of religion nonetheless seems to pose serious problems for democratic appropriations of his politics. In a modern democracy, religion cannot play the role that Machiavelli envisions. But that fact only raises a more difficult question. If religion cannot play the role Machiavelli assigns it, we must consider whether the role of religion in Machiavelli's politics is needful today. If we find that it is, what might substitute for it? On the one hand, our technologies of authority have advanced greatly. Our states can hardly be said to lack institutions that inspire fear within the populace or ways of ensuring that people keep their promises and pay their taxes. Few doubt the need for coercive institutions, but even fewer would claim that our problems are rooted in insufficient tools for coercion.

On the other hand, coercive powers in modern democracies often lack the internal limitations religion imposed in Machiavelli's account. Invoking religious authority was a fraught enterprise for Machiavelli's Romans. When they did so, they were as likely to

confront open indignation and resistance as much as pious obedience. Moreover, our modern systems are not readily available for a disorganized people facing down a threat, as religion was for the plebs when they made themselves tribunes. In Machiavelli's republicanism, the power of religion is available to anyone who can insist on an oath. Modern sources of coercive power may make it relatively easy for the state to extract obedience from citizens, but those sources of power are rarely available for the people. Credit scores and the IRS might ensure that the poor pay their debts, but they are not much help at all against the rich and powerful, and they do nothing to directly empower the people. Today popular uprisings dissolve as quickly as they begin. They suffer the fate that awaits the collective action of "unshackled multitudes" who cannot bind themselves together.⁹⁶

Machiavelli's treatment of religion, then, should not make us worried that religious diversity makes republican or democratic politics impossible. Instead, it should draw our attention to the absence of institutions of authority that the people can use to bind themselves together and that empower the people to directly challenge the elite. This account of religion also provides some suggestions for how we can interrogate modern forms of authority to assess whether they are indeed democratic. We can ask whether our institutions of authority are constitutionally structured, whether they constrain elites, and whether they promote democratic forms of conflict. Were we to pose these questions to modern authorities—the police, political parties, banks, or schools—we may find it hard to conclude that they are as democratic as the religion Machiavelli praises.

Notes

1. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield Jr and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16.
2. In *Discourses on Livy*, Bk. I, chap. 5 (hereafter D I.5), one of the central distinguishing characteristics of the people (referred to as the ignobles or the plebs) is their relative lack of power. He goes so far as to use the term *potenti* (powerful) as a synonym for "nobles," and "great," setting

- up a contrast between “the people” and “the powerful” (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 18–19).
3. On the use of wealth and personal reputation as a corrupting source of elite power see: Amanda Maher, “What Skinner Misses about Machiavelli’s Freedom: Inequality, Corruption, and the Institutional Origins of Civic Virtue,” *Journal of Politics* 78, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 1003–15; Mark Jurdjevic, *A Great and Wretched City: Promise and Failure in Machiavelli’s Florentine Political Thought*, I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); and Michelle T. Clarke, *Machiavelli’s Florentine Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
 4. Following McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 1–8, I treat democracy as a system in which the people exercise power and a degree of rule over and against the elite. For an alternative account, see Christopher Holman, *Machiavelli and the Politics of Democratic Innovation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018). He argues that Machiavellian democracy is a matter of “no rule” rather than popular rule.
 5. Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 80n70, provides a helpful summary of the five major approaches to religion in Machiavelli scholarship. Machiavelli is interpreted (1) as a radical critic of Christianity (Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958]; Clifford Orwin, “Machiavelli’s Unchristian Charity,” *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 4 [1978]: 1217–28); (2) as understanding religion in functionalist terms (J. Samuel Preus, “Machiavelli’s Functional Analysis of Religion: Context and Object,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 2 [1979]: 171–90; Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in *Against the Current*, ed. Roger Hausheer, Mark Lilla, and Henry Hardy, REV-Revised, 2, *Essays in the History of Ideas* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013], 33–100; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume 2, The Age of Reformation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978]); (3) as endorsing a republican concept of Christianity (Sebastian De Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* [New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1994]; Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010]); (4) as endorsing medieval Christianity (Cary J. Nederman, “Amazing Grace: Fortune, God, and Free Will in Machiavelli’s Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 [1999]: 617–38); or (5) as endorsing a secularized Christianity (Guiseppe

- Prezzolini, *Machiavelli*, trans. Gioconda Savini (New York: Noonday Press, 1967). McQueen does not note, however, that despite these differences all these scholars treat religion as an elite-driven source of unity.
6. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 226–32, 295–98.
 7. Emanuele Cutinelli-Rèndina, *Chiesa e Religione in Machiavelli*, Piste (Pisa, 1995), repr. (Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, 1998).
 8. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*; De Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*; Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*.
 9. E.g., in John Najemy's functionalist account of religion in the *Discourses*, he presents it as an elite institution. See John M. Najemy, "Papirius and the Chickens, or Machiavelli on the Necessity of Interpreting Religion," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 659–81. Catherine Zuckert presents an even-handed account of Machiavelli's treatment of religion but it remains a tool, if a limited one, for bolstering elite authority. See Catherine Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 138–42.
 10. Marco Geuna highlights this problem in Marco Geuna, "Ruolo dei conflitti e ruolo della religione nella riflessione di Machiavelli sulla storia di Roma," in *Machiavelli: tempo e conflitto*, ed. Vittorio Morfino, Stefano Visentin, and Riccardo Caporali, *Itinerari filosofici* 93 (Milan: Mimesis, 2013), 107–40. He argues there is a tension between democratic appropriations of Machiavelli that focus on his praise of civil conflict and the elitist account of religion. He suggests that tension is a result of Machiavelli's argument for freedom and imperial power. Contra Geuna, I will argue that religion itself has a democratic aspect. For a discussion of the contours of the democratic turn, see Boris Litvin, "Mapping Rule and Subversion: Perspective and the Democratic Turn in Machiavelli Scholarship," *European Journal of Political Theory* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 3–25.
 11. Filippo Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: Tumult and Indignation*, *Continuum Studies in Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2009); Gabriele Pedullà, ed., *Machiavelli in Tumult* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
 12. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*; Maher, "What Skinner Misses"; Yves Winter, *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Camila Vergara, "Republican Constitutional Thought: Elitist and Plebeian Interpretations of the Mixed Constitution," *History of Political Thought* 43, no. 5 (2022): 28–55.

13. Miguel E. Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom*, Commonalities (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); Claude Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012); and Holman, *Machiavelli and the Politics of Democratic Innovation*.
14. See Catherine H. Zuckert, "Machiavelli: Radical Democratic Political Theorist?," *Review of Politics* 81, no. 3 (2019): 499–510, for a critical take on the relationship between the democratic turn and democratic critiques of liberalism.
15. Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), draws out this difficulty well. He argues that Machiavelli is part of an anti-liberal tradition of civil religion that seeks to domesticate religion by placing it in service of politics. He argues that this civil religion suffuses Machiavelli's republicanism and is fundamentally incompatible with religious pluralism.
16. Nathan Tarcov, "Machiavelli's Critique of Religion," *Social Research* 81, no. 1 (2014): 213, provides a sobering reminder of the dangers of the patriotic civic religion that some find in Machiavelli.
17. Vatter, *Between Form and Event*, 70, 283–87; Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, 244–52. These arguments go beyond Strauss's claim that Machiavelli is critical of biblical religious morality or Vickie Sullivan's claim that he is critical of all religion in so far as it draws people away from a focus on earthly goods, to indict the basic structure of religion for being overly formulaic and elite driven. See Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 226–31; and Vickie B. Sullivan, "Neither Christian nor Pagan: Machiavelli's Treatment of Religion in the 'Discourses,'" *Polity* 26, no. 2 (1993): 259–80.
18. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 85, 90; Winter, *Orders of Violence* 56–59, 82–85; Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult*, 110–13; Filippo Del Lucchese, *The Political Philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 59–64; and Holman, *Machiavelli and the Politics of Democratic Innovation*, 62–63, opt for this approach.
19. John H. Geerken, "Machiavelli's Moses and Renaissance Politics," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 579–95; Graham L. Hammill, *The Mosaic Constitution: Political Theology and Imagination from Machiavelli to Milton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Warren Montag, "'Uno Mero Esceutore': Moses, Fortuna, and Occasione in *The Prince*," in *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy and*

- Language*, ed. Filippo Del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino, *Thinking in Extremes*, vol. 1 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), 237–49; Miguel Vatter, “Machiavelli, ‘Ancient Theology,’ and the Problem of Civil Religion,” in *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict*, ed. David Johnston, Nadia Urbinati, and Camila Vergara (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 113–36; and Ronald Schmidt Jr, *Reading Politics with Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 50–78.
20. Alison Brown, “Savonarola, Machiavelli, and Moses,” in *Florence and Italy: Renaissance Studies in Honour of Nicolai Rubinstein*, ed. Peter Denley, Nicolai Rubinstein, and Caroline Elam, *Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies 2* (London: Westfield College, University of London, Committee for Medieval Studies, 1988); Marcia L. Colish, “Republicanism, Religion, and Machiavelli’s Savonarolan Moment,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 597–616; Miguel Vatter, “Machiavelli and the Republican Conception of Providence,” in *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy and Language*, ed. Filippo Del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino, *Thinking in Extremes*, vol. 1 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2015) 250–73; Fabio Frosini, “Prophecy, Education, and Necessity: Girolamo Savonarola between Politics and Religion,” in *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy and Language*, ed. Filippo Del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino, *Thinking in Extremes*, vol. 1 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2015), 219–36; John T. Scott, “The Fortune of Machiavelli’s Unarmed Prophet,” *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 615–29; and McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 63–105.
21. John P. McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli: Scandalous Books, Suspect Engagements, and the Virtue of Populist Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 21–45.
22. On the centrality of the praise of civil conflict, see Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult*.
23. On reading Machiavelli for contemporary purposes, see Schmidt, *Reading Politics with Machiavelli*, 1–29.
24. Preus, “Machiavelli’s Functional Analysis of Religion: Context and Object,” 179; or Sullivan, “Neither Christian nor Pagan: Machiavelli’s Treatment of Religion in the ‘Discourses,’” 265–67. Although they disagree on how effective religion is, both Preus and Sullivan present these chapters in the *Discourses* as religion providing the elite with a tool for control. See also John Greville Agard Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican*

- Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, NJ; Princeton University Press, 1975), 192–202. For Pocock religion is a moralizing force rather than an instrument of mere coercion, but it is no less elite driven.
25. For more on Rome's role in Machiavelli's thought, see Patrick Coby, *Machiavelli's Romans: Liberty and Greatness in the Discourses on Livy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999).
 26. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 34.
 27. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 34.
 28. Oaths in Rome invoked one or more gods who were asked to help the oath givers succeed in carrying out their oath and to punish them if they failed to uphold their oath. Romans believed themselves to be particularly pious in their adherence to oaths. See William Turpin, "Oaths, Roman," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For a detailed account of Roman oath giving in certain military and civilian contexts, see Jörg Rüpke, *Peace and War in Rome: A Religious Construction of Warfare*, trans. David M. B. Richardson, Classics (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2019).
 29. Killing a tribune would have been a grave violation of Roman religion as well as Roman law. See Titus Livy, *The History of Rome*, Bks. 1–5, trans. Valerie M. Warrior (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 123–24. This religious rule against harming a tribune would be a prime example of religious authority being used to restrain elites. However, while Machiavelli discusses the murder of tribunes, he does not do so in religious terms (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 80).
 30. Machiavelli draws this from Livy, who introduces the connection between religion and oaths in his account of Numa's religious reforms this way: "The people's constant preoccupation with the gods had imbued the hearts of all with such devotion (*pietas*) that the state was governed by regard for good faith and oaths" (Livy, *The History of Rome*, 32). Machiavelli draws connections between oaths and religion in several other places. In the following pages, the connection is shown several times in D I.11–15. In D III.36, he quotes another passage from Livy emphasizing the connection between religion and oaths (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 293). Beyond the *Discourses*, in *The Art of War* he argues that religious oaths are vital for military discipline because men fear divine retribution: "Since neither fear of the laws nor reverence for man are sufficient to bridle an armed multitude, the ancients used to call in the aid of religion, and with many imposing ceremonies and great solemnity, make their soldiers take a very strict oath to pay due

obedience to military discipline. In addition, they used all other methods to inspire fear of the gods, so that if they violated their oaths, they might have not only the asperity of human laws but the vengeance of heaven to dread." See Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War: A Revised Edition of the Ellis Farnsworth Translation*, trans. Ellis Farnsworth, 2nd Da Capo Press ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 164–65.

In the *Florentine Histories*, he invokes the relationship in the negative in a speech that details the dangers caused by Florence's partisan politics, "because," he writes, "religion and the fear of God have been eliminated in all, an oath and faith given last only as long as they are useful." See Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Florentine Histories*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield Jr and Laura F. Banfield (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 110. Despite significant differences, several authors note the connection between oaths and religion: see, e.g., Preus, "Machiavelli's Functional Analysis of Religion: Context and Object"; Colish, "Republicanism, Religion, and Machiavelli's Savonarolan Moment"; Geuna, "Ruolo dei conflitti e ruolo della religione nella riflessione di Machiavelli sulla storia di Roma"; Marco Geuna, "'The Modes Taken by Saint Gregory': Machiavelli and the Violence of Religious Sects," in *Machiavelli's "Discourses on Livy": New Readings* (Brill, 2021), 117–42; and Vatter, "Machiavelli, 'Ancient Theology,' and the Problem of Civil Religion."

31. Machiavelli, *The Discourses on Livy*, 16–17.
32. Tarcov, "Machiavelli's Critique of Religion," 194–95, highlights this paradox.
33. Zuckert notes this departure but attributes it to Machiavelli's desire to contrast the single-mindedness required to found a city with the subsequent need to justify that city with broader religious legitimacy (Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics*, 138). Sullivan uses the difference as evidence that Machiavelli is preparing a critique of religion itself (Sullivan, "Neither Christian nor Pagan: Machiavelli's Treatment of Religion in the 'Discourses,'" 267–70).
34. Livy, *History of Rome*, 15–25.
35. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 31–33.
36. Livy, *History of Rome*, 28.
37. Livy, *History of Rome*, 28–32.
38. "The heavens judged that the orders of Romulus would not suffice for such an empire they inspired in the breast of the Roman Senate the choosing of Numa Pompilius" (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 34). Anthony Parel suggests this claim evinces Machiavelli's astrological

- beliefs. For Parel, Machiavelli's religion was anti-Christian, premodern, and elitist. See Anthony J. Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).
39. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 35; Livy, *History of Rome*, 30–33.
 40. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 35.
 41. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 35.
 42. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 52.
 43. In this quote, Machiavelli also contrasts Romulus as the founder of Rome and Numa as a maintainer of the city (I must thank one of the anonymous referees for raising this important issue). This echoes a distinction from D I.9, where he argues that founders of “new orders” must act alone while the “many” are better at maintaining. By describing Numa as a maintainer even though he “imposed new and unaccustomed orders” in Rome, Machiavelli seems to associate Numa, and therefore religion itself, with the people. Such an association implies that religion, even when it appears to be imposed from above, is the domain of the people as the maintainers of a political order. However, this is complicated by Machiavelli's portrayal of Numa in D I.11 as the sole founder of Roman religion. Perhaps, Livy's account in which Numa merely adds to the existing Roman religion is leaking through into Machiavelli's comparison (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 28–33).
 44. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 35.
 45. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 36.
 46. On the institutionalization of virtue see Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 183–219.
 47. Another way to see the power that religion provides in this story is to compare the people's behavior with Machiavelli's discussion in D III.42 of promises extracted by force. In that chapter he says, “[W]here force is lacking, forced promises that regard the public will always be broken and it will be without shame for whoever breaks them” (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 302). However, unlike the promise (*promesse*) extracted from the Roman consul by the Samnites, the oaths (*giuramento*) extracted by Scipio and Manlius remain binding after their initial force disappears. Their force is replaced by the constitutionally legitimate force of the religious oath (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 34–36, 300–302).
 48. Contra Tarcov and Sullivan, then, these examples are not a subtle critique of religion. See Tarcov, “Machiavelli's Critique of Religion,” 194–95; and Sullivan, “Neither Christian nor Pagan: Machiavelli's Treatment of Religion in the ‘Discourses,’” 265–73.

49. Machiavelli contrasts the people with the powerful (*potenti*) in D I.5.2, D I.12.1, D I.18.3, D I.49.3, and D I.50.1 (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 17, 36, 50, 101–2.)
50. Although he begins by suggesting that the people are more naturally decent or more interested in freedom than the great, he concludes that the people should have the role because “the powerful . . . are able to make an alteration with greater power and greater motion,” whereas the people “being less able to seize it [the republic] . . . do not permit others to seize it” (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 18–19). This argument marks one of Machiavelli’s most significant breaks with the republicanism of his day. It was a move in a radically democratic direction. See Pedullà *Machiavelli in Tumult*, 117–34.
51. Although Machiavelli often speaks of princes in republican contexts, the term *regno* denotes a kingship rather than a republic. In the paragraph immediately following the one quoted he highlights the disjuncture between kingdoms and republics while providing advice to both. He writes, “Thus it is the safety of a republic or a kingdom.” For uses of *regno* in the *Discourses*, see Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 331.
52. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 35.
53. In D III.19–22 he discusses the different leadership strategies appropriate for a kingdom versus a republic. In D III.19 he begins by suggesting that because “the plebs had equal command in Rome with the nobility,” commanders had to be “humane rather than proud” and “merciful rather than cruel.” Provisionally, he concludes that in Rome, “captains who made themselves loved by their armies . . . had better fruit than those who made themselves extraordinarily feared.” However, in the same passage he notes that in Rome captains with “excessive virtue” were able to rely on fear (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 260). This suggests republican leaders were not necessarily weaker than their monarchical counterparts. In D III.21 he concludes his comparison of Hannibal’s and Scipio’s uses of cruelty and love by saying, “[T]he mode in which a captain proceeds is not very important, provided that in it is great virtue . . . for . . . in both there is defect and danger” (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 264). Finally, in D III.22 he fully reverses the initial conclusion and argues that the “harshness” of Manlius Torquatus was a better form of rule in a republic than the kindness of Valerius Corvinus, because kindness produces private loyalties, which are the foundation of dangerous partisan divisions and ultimately tyranny (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 267–68). Taken as a whole, this account of leadership suggests that fear-inducing leaders are both normal and beneficial for

a republic, which suggests that the distinction between republics and kingdoms in D I.11 cannot be reduced to a difference in leadership styles.

54. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 54.
55. In D I.38 Machiavelli argues that weakness leads to exactly the kind of indecisiveness the people exhibit in the story (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 81–83).
56. Viroli argues that Machiavelli believes that God gives aid to the weak (Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, 40–42). Machiavelli does not suggest that God directly intervenes on the side of the weak, but he does argue that the weak can be made stronger through the practice of religious oaths.
57. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 114–15. He also discusses this problem in D III.11, where he argues that the people and their tribunes, no matter how powerful they became, were always weaker than the patricians because of their large numbers. He explains, “[W]henver there are many powers united against another power, even though all together are much more powerful, nonetheless one ought to always put more hope in that one alone . . . [for] by using a little industry he will be able to disunite the very many and to weaken the body that was mighty” (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 245).
58. The tribunes described in D I.57 would have received oaths from the people (Rüpke, *Peace and War in Rome*, 73, 86). Machiavelli discusses the religious constitution of the tribunate in D III.1 (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 209–10). Machiavelli’s alteration draws our attention to religion’s role in constituting authority.
59. Maher argues that corruption occurs when the rich create private relationships of dependence, unlike Skinner, who argues that it is primarily a moral or religious phenomenon. In this example, Machiavelli is warning that the rich will attempt to turn religious ceremonies into extensions of their personal power (Maher, “What Skinner Misses”). Zuckert argues that corruption occurs when the people cease to defend themselves from domination (Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics*, 138–52). This example supports both conclusions, as the corruption of religion is the result of elite power and domination which causes the people’s loss of belief, rather than the reverse as in Skinner’s account.
60. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 37.
61. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 37.
62. When on campaign the people lost most of their political rights for the duration of their service (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 84).

63. Machiavelli praises Rome for opening high offices to talented plebians in D I.60 (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 121–22).
64. This would be a *sacramentum*, a religious oath which bound the people to fight and if broken resulted in their exclusion from the sacred community and their lives being forfeit to the gods (Rüpke, *Peace and War in Rome*, 80–84).
65. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 39–41.
66. Tarcov and Sullivan suggest that this chapter points to religion's weakness, while Geuna uses this chapter as evidence of the tension between religion and tumults (Tarcov, "Machiavelli's Critique of Religion," 197; Sullivan, "Neither Christian nor Pagan," 268; Geuna, "Ruolo dei conflitti e ruolo della religione nella riflessione di Machiavelli sulla storia di Roma"). These authors fail to note that religion facilitates the people's victory as much as it quells the tumult.
67. Lefort argues that Machiavelli tends to use military examples as stand-ins for domestic politics (Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, 372). See also Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 200–203, on the connection between military orders, religious orders, and citizenship.
68. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 41–42.
69. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 41–42.
70. Najemy, "Papirius and the Chickens, or Machiavelli on the Necessity of Interpreting Religion," provides one such reading.
71. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 63–70.
72. See Pedullà, *Machiavelli and Tumult*, 84–110 for a discussion of both the religious and non-religious sources of fear that Machiavelli praises.
73. See, e.g., Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 59.
74. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 43–44. Here too we see evidence that oaths and religion are connected to weakness in Machiavelli's thought.
75. Najemy credits the Romans' victory to the superiority of Rome's religious orders reflected in the consul's speech. However, Machiavelli points to the virtue of their arms and the fact of their past victories—which were also the result of their military superiority—not their religious superiority. Najemy, "Papirius and the Chickens, or Machiavelli on the Necessity of Interpreting Religion," 678.
76. Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli."
77. Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli's Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996). Vatter, *Between Form and Event*.
78. Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*. De Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*.

79. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 38.
80. If the teachings of religion are central then, as Strauss suggests, Machiavelli's major goal in the *Discourses* may have been to displace those teachings with new ones. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*.
81. See D I.17, D I.34, D I.37, D II.2, and D III.24 (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 48, 74, 80, 132, 270).
82. In D II.2, after a discussion of all the ideological damage Christianity has done and the possibility that it could be altered to be ideologically beneficial, Machiavelli concludes, "Still I believe the cause of this to be rather that the Roman Empire, with its arms and its greatness, eliminated all republics and all civil ways of life" (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 132).
83. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 160–62.
84. "Because of the wicked examples of that court (the papal court) this province has lost all devotion and all religion...thus we Italians have this first obligation to the church...that we have become without religion and wicked, but we have yet a greater one to them...this is that the church has kept and keeps this province divided" (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 38).
85. See D I.11's discussion of Savonarola and D II.2's discussion of patriotic Christianity (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 36 and 132). Timothy Lukes presents a strong case that Machiavelli identifies several features of Christianity that would make it particularly amendable to being put to good use. See Timothy J. Lukes, "To Bamboozle with Goodness: The Political Advantages of Christianity in the Thought of Machiavelli," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 8, no. 4 (1984): 266–77.
86. Notably, in D I.12 Machiavelli highlights "ceremonies" and miracles rather than teachings when discussing the core features that religions must maintain (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 37).
87. For a more detailed argument for prioritizing religion's narrowly political (as opposed to its educative or moralizing) roles in Machiavelli, see Preus, "Machiavelli's Functional Analysis of Religion: Context and Object." For Preus, religion serves only the elite.
88. Indeed, it is what Viroli points to as the explanation for how religion helps moderate tumults. By teaching goodness, religion ensures that the people become neither too ambitious to attempt to dispossess the elite nor too humble to give in to elite domination (Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, 193).

89. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*; Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*.
90. Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics*, 149n67, explains the difference between the civic humanist's common good that the people were expected to sublimate their desires to and Machiavelli's account of the people's and the elites' divergent goods.
91. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 110.
92. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 110.
93. Like the conflict over the Terentillian law (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 39–41).
94. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 24–28, 47–48.
95. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 110–111.
96. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 115.