

Machiavelli's attitude toward religion has received a wide range of scholarly attention over the last three decades. This began with Alberto Tenenti, who introduced the interpretation of religion as an *instrumentum regni* to civilize and control the people.<sup>1</sup> Then came Genaro Sasso, who is more interested in showing religion, on one hand, as the powerful essence of a people and its customs, and on the other hand, as the necessary instrument in the hands of the rulers for controlling individual and collective ways of proceeding.<sup>2</sup> The list continues with Sebastian De Grazia, and his book *Machiavelli in Hell*, who argues, "Behind Niccolò insistence on political action, stands God. He grants His grace when it is earned—in political coin."<sup>3</sup> The discussion continues with the participants in the forum on "Machiavelli and Religion: A Reappraisal."<sup>4</sup> Finally, we find two polar positions in the interpretation of Machiavelli's ideas about religion. On one hand, Alison Brown asserts that "the puzzle" in Machiavelli's attitude toward religion is due to the conflict "between traditional belief in ancient astrology and belief in man's freedom to act independently... Although belief in prodigies and the influence of the stars coexisted with Christian providentialism in the outlook of many contemporaries, Machiavelli's unconventional thinking about religion and Christianity makes his position less than fully clear".<sup>5</sup> Maurizio Viroli, on the other hand, argues that Machiavelli, far from opposing Christianity, thought it was crucial to republican social and political

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<sup>1</sup> Alberto Tenenti, "La religione di Machiavelli," in *Credenze, Ideologie, Libertinismi tra Medioevo Ed Eta' Moderna*. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1978) 184.

<sup>2</sup> Genaro Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli: storia del suo pensiero politico* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1980)

<sup>3</sup> Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 378-379.

<sup>4</sup> Five papers by John Geerken, Marcia L. Colish, Cary Nederman, Benedetto Fontana, and John M. Najemy, "Machiavelli and Religion: A Reappraisal" *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, Alison. "Philosophy and Religion in Machiavelli," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 157-172, 157.

renewal, but that first it needed to be renewed itself. And without understanding this, Viroli contends, it is impossible to comprehend Machiavelli's thought.<sup>6</sup>

What I have found most interesting about Machiavellian scholarship is the “revival which has maintained and continues to maintain”<sup>7</sup> for a long time the ongoing discussion about his attitude toward religion. One might well to say that this arises out of a fascination with a topic that swings like a pendulum between two poles: politics and theology. The former understands religion as a system of belief whose value is determined by its instrumentality or utility to the political life. And the latter as a faith based on a transcendent reality.

Since I am not convinced by any of these ways, the task of this paper will be to present a different avenue of interpretation, especially focusing on Machiavelli's two important works: *The Prince* and *The Discourses*.<sup>8</sup>

Two central theses I would like to articulate in this paper: first, I will explore how the power of religion in Machiavelli is constituted by the power of language, which does not guarantee truth but rather efficacy. In order to prove that, I will analyze the linguistic dimension of the oath (*giuramento*) as creating and shaping social imagination, and not an instrument of civilization. Secondly, the power of language somehow implies two concatenated aspects, on one hand an instrumental conception, but on the other hand, a

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<sup>6</sup> Maurizio Viroli. *Machiavelli's God*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010)

<sup>7</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli. *The Discourses* (London: Penguin, 2003) III. 1, 389.

<sup>8</sup> The English editions that I will use are the translations by Robert M. Adams, *The Prince* (New York: Norton & Company, 1992), and Leslie J. Walker, S.J., *The Discourses* (London: Penguin, 2003). Eventually, I will refer to the Italian edition is Mario Martelli, *Machiavelli, Tutte le Opere* (Florence: Sansoni, 1971).

non-instrumental conception of religion. In this sense, I want explore how they can complement each other without a superposition of one over the other.

### 1. *Imitation as a point of departure*

In the preface of the book one of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli deplores that “in maintaining states, in governing kingdoms, in forming an army, or conducting a war, in dealing with subjects, in extending the empire, one finds neither prince nor republic who repairs to antiquity for examples... This due in my opinion not so much to the weak state to which the religion of today has brought the world,” but rather to the impossibility that the men of his time have to imitate antiquity, “as if the heaven, the sun, the elements and man had in their motion, their order, and their potency, become different from what they used to be.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, Machiavelli wants to undertake a “new way.” A method that “get men out of this wrong way of thinking.”<sup>10</sup>

As part of this enterprise Machiavelli introduces the discussion of religion in the chapter eleven of the *Discourses* with the title “Concerning the Religion of the Romans.” According to Machiavelli, “Though the first person to give Rome a constitution was Romulus, to whom, as a daughter, it owed its birth and its education, yet, since heaven did not deem the institutions of Romulus adequate for so great an empire, it inspired the Roman senate to choose Numa Pompilius as Romulus’ successor, so that the things which he had left undone, might be instituted by Numa.”<sup>11</sup> Machiavelli presents Numa as

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<sup>9</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses* I, 98-99.

<sup>10</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses* I, 99.

<sup>11</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses* I, 11, 139.

someone who is going to strengthen the work of ordering that his predecessor “had left undone.”<sup>12</sup>

Then Machiavelli presents the context in which Numa found the people of Rome and the effects that his work had: “Numa, finding the people ferocious and desiring to reduce them to civic obedience by means of the arts of peace, turned to religion as the instrument necessary above all others for the maintenance of a civilized state, and so constituted it that there was never for so many centuries so great a fear of God as there was in the republic. It was religion that facilitated whatever enterprise the senate and the great men of Rome designed to undertake.”<sup>13</sup> Thus with extraordinary succinctness Machiavelli offers an approximation of his thought about religion. Religion has two dimensions: first, it is an instrument of civilization; second, it does include a strong component of fear. However, this concise definition that the Florentine uses to describe religion needs careful exploration so that we can understand the complexity of the relationship between religion and politics.

First of all, let us focus on Numa. According to Machiavelli, Numa had to face two major political challenges: since he finds the Romans a “ferocious people” (*un popolo ferocissimo*), perhaps due to the “undone” work that his predecessor had left, he had to reduce them first to “civic obedience”; and yet, if he does that by force alone, he would perhaps achieve only a partial and temporary victory without attaining his ultimate goal of “civilizing” them. Therefore, physical force cannot be the solution to secure the cohesion and the stability of the *vivere politico*. This in turn explains why Numa, in order

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<sup>12</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 11, 139.

<sup>13</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 11, 139.

to accomplish his goal, did not try to control the people on his own ground, which was the ground of the physical force and “ferocity”; but he cleverly understood that he had to turn to “the arts of peace,” which consist of nothing more than Machiavelli’s proposition that religion is “the instrument necessary above all others for the maintenance of a civilized state.”<sup>14</sup>

Machiavelli appeals throughout this first part of his definition of religion to a different kind of force, not a physical, spiritual or psychological one but rather a political one. Thus religion seems to be a political *instrument* that Machiavelli takes from ancient Rome as an essential element of the foundation of society.

Secondly, once religion has been established as a secure ground for the civic and political life, Machiavelli affirms, “that [religion] facilitated whatever enterprise the senate and the great men of Rome designed to undertake.”<sup>15</sup> One might well now ask, what does Machiavelli now introduce with this second thought of his description of religion at this point of the *Discourses*? A significant aspect of this second part is that religion is “fear of God” (*timore di Dio*), since the citizens of Rome “were more afraid of breaking an oath than of breaking the law, since they held in higher esteem the power of God than the power of men.”<sup>16</sup> Where “fear of God” is lacking, a kingdom will fall unless religion is replaced by fear of a prince. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli maintains that “fear involves dread of punishment, from which we can never escape.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 11, 139.

<sup>15</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 11, 139. (Parenthesis is mine).

<sup>16</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 11, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XVIII, 46.

Summing up, one can say that ancient religion offers for Machiavelli two important aspects worthy of imitation by those who, “on account of their innumerable good qualities,”<sup>18</sup> deserve to govern a kingdom: it is a political instrument to civilize ferocious people whose essential characteristics is fear. Let us analyze now religion as an instrument and religion as fear.

### **1.1. Religion: a malleable *instrument***

In book one, chapters twelfth to fifteenth Machiavelli presents a series of examples to illustrate how the Romans used religion as an *instrument* of organization for cities and wars. Let us analyze some of these examples and see what can we draw out from them.

The first one is about the creation of one plebeian tribune with consular power by the Roman people in a year in which pestilences, famine, and certain extraordinary things were taken place in Rome. Machiavelli says that the plebs realizing that perhaps their political move was to far they become to “said that the gods were angry with Rome for having abused the majesty of her authority, and that the only way to placate them was to restore the election of tribunes to its proper position.”<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the plebs “terrified by this appeal to religion”<sup>20</sup> decide to move back to the appointment of only nobles for the tribune position.

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<sup>18</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, Dedication, 94.

<sup>19</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 13, 146.

<sup>20</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 13, 146.

Second, Terentillus occasioned a number of turmoil in Rome because of a new law that he wanted to pass, which Machiavelli says he will give an account of it “later in their proper place.”<sup>21</sup> In order to face the unrest in the city, “the first remedies the nobility used was religion.”<sup>22</sup> The nobility availed this remedies in two important ways: first, looking up the *Libri Sibyllini*, they found that because of the disorders the city would be in grave threat of “losing their liberties that very year.”<sup>23</sup> Secondly, the idea of losing their freedom put “such fear into the breasts of the plebs”<sup>24</sup> that they desisted to continue the sedition. Now, Religion is not only an *instrument* of civilization, but also a remedy that cures political diseases.

Let us now examine two more examples: Papirius, the consul, and the Samnites. Papirius having the sense that he would certainly win the battle against the Samnites because they were “weak and dispirited,”<sup>25</sup> just had to choose the right day to defeat them. In order to do that, he “told the poultry men to take the auspices. But the poultry did not peck. Observing, however, the army’s great eagerness to fight and that alike the commander and all the troops thought they would win, the head-poultryman in order not to deprive the army of so good opportunity for the work in hand, sent word to the consul that the result of the auspices had been favorable. So Papirius ordered the troops to fall

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<sup>21</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 13, 147.

<sup>22</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 13, 147.

<sup>23</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 13, 147.

<sup>24</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 13, 147.

<sup>25</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 14, 149.

in.”<sup>26</sup> However, what the consul did not know was that the head of the poultry men had told a lie avoiding discouraging the army in such important moment of the battle against the Samnites.

Having known this, Papirius commands to put the poultry men in the forefront of the battle in order to corroborate if the results of his auspices agree with the prognostication. “Whence it came about that, when they attacked the enemy, the head-poultry man was accidentally killed by a javelin thrown by a Roman soldier.”<sup>27</sup> Listening this the consul said that everything was going well, “thanks be to the gods.”<sup>28</sup>

What fascinates Machiavelli in this story is the ability that Papirius, the consul, has in providing a suitable adaptation of his plans to the results that the auspices had prognosticated. For Machiavelli, Papirius “engaged the enemy and beat them without the army’s suspecting that he had in any way neglected what was prescribed by their religion.”<sup>29</sup>

Thus, religion on one hand is an *instrument*, a *remedy* that it needs to have the necessary malleability for the political life in order to support it. But on the other hand, claims of truth are irrelevant because what really matters is the efficacy of it. These aspects catch the imagination of Machiavelli and many of his contemporary scholars to

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<sup>26</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 14, 149.

<sup>27</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 14, 149.

<sup>28</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 14, 149.

<sup>29</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 14, 150.



affirm that religion is just a matter of instrumentality. However, these examples also show us a different facet that I would like to explore in the second part of this paper: the relationships between religion and language. The thesis that I expect to prove is that power of religion in Machiavelli rests in the power of language, which does not guarantee truth but rather efficacy. And at the same time, it does not have to be instrumental.

Once that we have exposed these aspects of religion in Machiavelli, let us complicate this picture by turning to the example of the Samnites.

The example of the Samnites is introduced by Machiavelli in chapter fifteenth of the *Discourses*. Speaking of how the Samnites had recourse to religion as a last resort after being defeated by the Romans, Machiavelli affirms that they (the Samnites)

“Determined, therefore, to make a final effort; and, since they knew it was necessary to instil into the minds of the soldiers an obstinate will to conquer, and that, to instil it, there were no better means than religion, they decided on the advice of Ovius Paccius, their priest, to revive one of the ancient sacrifices. The ritual they observed was as follows. Having offered a solemn sacrifice, and made all the officers of the army stand between the dead victims and the flame-lit altars and swear that they would never abandon the fight, they called up the soldiers one by one, made them stand between the altars in the midst of a number of centurions with drawn swords in their hands, and first of all swear that they would not reveal anything which they saw or observed. They then made them promise the gods with curses and the most terrible incantations that they would be ready to go wherever the generals ordered, that they would never flee from the battle, and that they would kill anyone whom they saw running away, and if they did not do this, they prayed that the curse might fall on the heads of their family and on their children. Some of them, terrified, were reluctant to take the oath, and were at once

killed by the centurions. All those who came after them, frightened by the ferocity (*impauriti dalla ferocità dello spettacolo*), then took the oath.”<sup>30</sup>

For Machiavelli, religion in order

Machiavelli here uses the very terms with which, in the second book of the *Discourses* chapter two, he will praise ancient religion in general: the “magnificence” and “ferocity” of “sacrifices” and the power of oath as a way of instilling courage and strength. It is these spectacles which fascinated Machiavelli about ancient religion and allowed him to contrast different cultural effects with the religion of his day: on the one hand, the “ferocity” and “magnificence” of pagan rituals of sacrifice which instilled into the men of those times boldness of spirit, strength of body, and love, honor, country, and liberty; on the other, the “humble” and “delicate” quality of Christianity’s rituals, its glorification of “humble” and “contemplative” men and thus of abjectness and contempt for “mundane” things, its preference for suffering over strong action, for enduring injuries rather than avenging them – all of which has produced weakness and deprived modern men of love of country and liberty. According to Machiavelli, “This pattern of life, therefore, appears to have made the world weak... it looks as if the world were become effeminate and as if heaven were powerless.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 15, 150.

<sup>31</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* II, 2, 278.

pacificationIt is interesting to stress how in this example what is important for Machiavelli is the connection between religion, freedom, and fear. bbb

This definition reveals two aspects which must be taken into consideration if one wants to comprehend Machiavelli's attributes of religion: first, in the anthropological realm, and secondly, in the political. Following the anthropological dimension, religion might be used as an instrument to deal with social struggles (*un popolo ferocissimo*); and additionally, the political community receives the benefits that its proper observance (civic obedience) entails.

In a simple way we can affirm that religion is not just an instrument that encourages "fear" (*timore*), but also provides a ground in which men can display ferocity and courage in their actions, and it is this spectacularity and boldness what Machiavelli finds appealing about ancient religion because through the "sacrificial acts in which there was much shedding of blood and much ferocity; and in them great number of animals were killed... caused men to become like them".<sup>32</sup> Following closely these lines, we can affirm that ancient religion had the power to transform men in animals of action. This power introduces three important aspects: first, physical force (ferocity and bodily

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<sup>32</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* II, 2, 278.

strength) that need to be display through boldness and spectacularity, and finally, the power of language manifested in the oath as a recourse to balance the first two.

Let us analyze these three different aspects as an important elements Machiavelli's attitude toward religion.

## **2. Action and Contemplation**

### **2. Oaths, Auspices, and Auguries**

Then if religion in its anthropological and political dimensions is taken as a *recourse* that encourages “fear” (*timore*), one might ask how does Machiavelli relate this anthropological fear (*metus*) with specific political conduct? In this context, one institution that needs to be analyzed carefully is the oath (*giuramento*). What is an oath? What is at stake in it if it defines and calls into question Machiavelli's understanding of political life? In what follows these questions are going to be taken into consideration.

### **2. Oath, Res Religiosa, and Fide**

Paolo Prodi's book *Il sacramento del potere*<sup>33</sup> sheds light on the role that the oath has played in the constitution of western political history. Placed at the crossroads of religion and politics, the oath not only presents a “dual belonging,”<sup>34</sup> in Prodi's words, that defines the specificity and vitality of western culture, but also forms “the basis of the

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<sup>33</sup> Paolo Prodi. *Il sacramento del potere: il giuramento politico nella storia costituzionale dell'Occidente*. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> Prodi. *Il sacramento*, 522.

political pact in the history of the west.”<sup>35</sup> According to Prodi, “we are today the first generations who, notwithstanding the presence of some forms and liturgies from the past... live our own collective life without the oath as a solemn and total, sacredly anchored bond to a political body,” this means, then, that we find ourselves, without being conscious of it, on the threshold of “a new form of political association.”<sup>36</sup>

One first clue that Prodi offers about the definition of the oath is found in the epigraph of his book quoting Lycurgus: “The power that holds together our democracy is the oath (*horkos*).”<sup>37</sup> Two aspects are relevant here: first, it is one of the main characteristics of the oath (*horkos*) to keep unity (holds together, *synechon*); secondly, it is deeply tied to the political life. According to Louis Gernet, “To swear, therefore, is to enter the realm of religious forces of the most fearsome sort.”<sup>38</sup>

Another important clue about the oath comes from Cicero in his book *De officiis*. According to Cicero, an oath is “an assurance backed by religious sanctity (*affirmatio religiosa*); and a solemn promise (*promiseris*) given, as before God as one’s witness, which is to be sacredly kept.”<sup>39</sup> The oath, then, seems to be a linguistic act (*affirmatio*) intended to confirm a meaningful proposition (a *dictum*), whose truth or effectiveness it guarantees. Let us clarify this aspect of the *affirmatio*.

The “religious affirmation” is a word guaranteed and sustained by a *religio*, which removes it from common use and, consecrating it to the gods, makes it the object of a

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<sup>35</sup> Prodi. *Il sacramento*, 522.

<sup>36</sup> Prodi. *Il sacramento*, 522.

<sup>37</sup> Lycurgus. *Against Leocrates*. In *Minor Attic Orators*, vol. 2, trans. J.O. Burt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962) 79.

<sup>38</sup> Louis Gernet. *The Anthropology of the of Ancient Greece*, trans. John Hamilton and Blaise Nagy (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981) 223.

<sup>39</sup> Cicero. *De officiis*, trans. Walter Miller. (London: W. Heinemann, 1913) 3.29.10

series of ritual prescriptions (the formula and gesture of the oath, the calling of the gods as witness, the curse in case of perjury, etc.). The double sense of the term *religio*, which according to the lexicon means both “sacrilege, curse” and “scrupulous observation of formulas and ritual norms,” can be explained in this context without difficulty. In the passage of *On the Nature of Things* (2.II) the two senses are at the same time distinct and juxtaposed: the consul Tiberius Gracchus, who had forgotten to take the auspices at the moment of the designation of his successors, prefers to admit his error and annul the election that has taken place contrary to *religio* rather than allow a “sacrilege” to contaminate the state.<sup>40</sup>

It is in this sense that, when putting together the two meanings of the term, Cicero, just like Caesar and Livy, can speak of a “religion of the oath” (*religious iusiurandi*). In similar way Machiavelli, in chapter 14 highlighting the importance of the auguries claims that the Romans never would set forth on “an expedition until they had convinced the troops that the gods had promised them victory... Nevertheless, when reason told them that a thing had to be done, they did it anyhow, even should the auspices be adverse. But, so adroit were they in words and actions at giving things a twist that they did not appear to have done anything disparaging to religion.<sup>41</sup> We find here the core of Machiavelli's attitude toward religion: reverence for the ceremonies, auspices, prayers, and rituals.

The proximity of faith and oath can be established with clarity. In Greek, *pistis* is synonymous with *horkos* in expressions of the type *pistin kai horkon poieisthai* (to take

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<sup>40</sup> Lucretius. *On the Nature of Things*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975) 2.II.

<sup>41</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 14, 148.

an oath) or *pista dounai kai lambanein* (to exchange an oath). For instance, in Homer oaths are what are *pista* (trustworthy) par excellence. And as an example in Latin literature, Ennius, in a verse cited by Cicero in *De officiis*, defines *fides* as “Oh genial, bright-winged Faith, and oath of Jove!”<sup>42</sup>

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, faith is “complete trust or confidence in someone or something.”<sup>43</sup> In this sense, “trust” (*fides*) is the high esteem in which someone is held as a consequence of our having confidently given ourselves over to him/her, binding us in a relationship of loyalty. For this reason trust is both the confidence that we accord to someone – the trust that we give – and the high esteem in which we are held by someone— the trust or credit we have.

Beyond regulating personal relationships, *fides* performed an important function in international public law, in the special relationships that were established by means of *fides* between cities and peoples. In a war the enemy city could be defeated and destroyed by force (*kata kratos*) and its inhabitants killed or reduced to slavery. But it could also happen, on the contrary, that the weaker city could have recourse to the institution of the *deditio in fidem*. That is to say, it could capitulate, submitting itself unconditionally to the *fides* of the enemy, thus obligating the victor in some sense to a more benevolent form of control. This institution was also called *pistis* by the Greeks (*dounai eis pistin, peithesthai*) and *fides* by the Romans (*in fidem populi Romani venire* or *se tradere*). And we also encounter here the same connection between faith and oath: the cities and people

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<sup>42</sup> Cicero, *De officiis*, 3.29.10

<sup>43</sup> Oxford English Dictionary

who mutually bound themselves in the *deditio in fidem* exchanged solemn oaths to sanction this relationship.

Faith is, then, a vocal act, as a rule accompanied by an oath, with which one abandons oneself completely to the “trust” of someone else and obtains in exchange that one’s protection. The object of the *fides* is, in every case of the oath, conformity between the parties’ words and actions. With the *fides*, exactly as with the oath, we thus find ourselves in a sphere in which the problem of the genetic relationship between religion and law has to be taken up again on new foundations.

However, let us introduce another ancient institution with which the oath is closely connected: *sacratio*. The ancient sources and the majority of scholars, in fact, agree in seeing in the oath a form of *sacratio* (or *devotio*).

According to Festus, “One calls *sacramentum*, an act that is done with the sanction of the oath.”<sup>44</sup> As Benveniste writes: “the term *sacramentum*... implies the notion of making *sacer*.”<sup>45</sup> One associates with the oath the quality of the ‘sacred,’ the most formidable thing which can affect man: here the ‘oath’ appears as an operation designed to make oneself *sacer* on certain conditions”.<sup>46</sup>

In the same sense the oath can be seen as a *devotio*: “once the oath is formulated, the man taking it is by anticipation a ‘devoted’ person... For the oath is a kind of *devotio*: as we have seen, the Greek *horkos* signifies an act of self-consecration by anticipation to

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<sup>44</sup> Festus, Sextus Pompeius. *De verborum significatione* (Lipsiae: Teubneri, 1913) 466.2

<sup>45</sup> Émile Benveniste. *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, vol. 2 (Minuit: Paris, 1969)

<sup>46</sup> Georges Dumézil. *Mythe et épopée*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) 168.



the power of an avenging deity if the given word is transgressed.”<sup>47</sup> This definition introduces a third aspect of the oaths: the curse. The curse appears as an essential part of the oath. This is the rule in Homer, in whom the curse is accompanied by eloquent gestures and rites, as when, in the scene in which the Trojans and the Achaeans exchange oaths before the duel of Paris and Menelaus, Atreus pours wine on the ground from a bowl and utters the formula: “whichever host the twain shall be first to work harm in defiance of the oaths, may their brains be thus poured forth upon the ground even as this wine.”<sup>48</sup>

The oath seems, then, to be the result of the conjunction of three elements: an affirmation, the invocation of the gods as witnesses, and a curse directed at perjury. In the same sense, one can say that the oath is an institution that joins an element of the *pistis* type (the reciprocal trust in the words offered) and an element of the *sacratio-devotio* type (the curse). In chapter 15 of *The Discourses* we find an example of these elements: speaking of how the Samnites had recourse to religion as a last resort after being defeated by the Romans, Machiavelli affirms that they (the Samnites)

“Having offered a solemn sacrifice, and made all the officers of the army stand between the dead victims and the flame-lit altars and swear that they would never abandon the fight, they called up the soldiers one by one, made them stand between the altars in the midst of a number of centurions with drawn swords in their hands, and first of all swear that they would not reveal anything which they saw or observed. They then made them promise the gods with curses and the most terrible incantations that they would be ready to go wherever the generals ordered, that they would never flee from the battle, and that they would kill anyone whom they saw running away, and if they did not do this, they prayed that the curse might fall on the heads of their family and on their children. Some of them, terrified, were reluctant to take the oath, and were at once killed by the centurions.

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<sup>47</sup> Dumézil, vol. 3, 243.

<sup>48</sup> Homer. *Iliad*. Trans. A. T. Murray, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1924) 3.299-300.

All those who came after them, frightened by the ferocity (*impauriti dalla ferocità dello spettacolo*), then took the oath.”<sup>49</sup>

Machiavelli here uses the very terms with which, in the second book of the *Discourses* chapter two, he will praise ancient religion in general: the “magnificence” and “ferocity” of “sacrifices” and the power of oath as a way of instilling courage and strength. It is these spectacles which fascinated Machiavelli about ancient religion and allowed him to contrast different cultural effects with the religion of his day: on the one hand, the “ferocity” and “magnificence” of pagan rituals of sacrifice which instilled into the men of those times boldness of spirit, strength of body, and love, honor, country, and liberty; on the other, the “humble” and “delicate” quality of Christianity’s rituals, its glorification of “humble” and “contemplative” men and thus of abjectness and contempt for “mundane” things, its preference for suffering over strong action, for enduring injuries rather than avenging them – all of which has produced weakness and deprived modern men of love of country and liberty. According to Machiavelli, “This pattern of life, therefore, appears to have made the world weak... it looks as if the world were become effeminate and as if heaven were powerless.”<sup>50</sup>

These three constitutive elements of the oath which we have explored and traced in Machiavelli’s work, a religious affirmation, the invocation of god as witness, and the element of *sacratio-devotio* (curse), are so closely intertwined terminologically and factually in the term *sacramentum*, meaning both oath and *sacratio*, that Machiavellian’s scholars overlook them when they treat religion as a singular concept rather than as one

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<sup>49</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 15, 150.

<sup>50</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* II, 2, 278.

which presents two quite different faces. “One sees it is as a form of political control; the other follows Lucretius in describing religion anthropologically as the expression of the deeply rooted beliefs and fears of ordinary people, which Machiavelli, unlike Lucretius, saw as the basis of their respect for law and civilized behavior.”<sup>51</sup> However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that one of the main characteristics of the oath seems to be the calling of the gods as witnesses, since the people “held in higher esteem the power of God than the power of man.”<sup>52</sup>

The oath is a verbal act that accomplishes a testimony – or a guarantee – independently by the very fact that it has taken place. In this sense, the oath reveals the power that language has to configure certain beliefs. However, language here is not an instrument but rather a *mediation* (recourse); it is *in* language that religion in Machiavelli comes to be configured as mediation (*ricorso*) between politics and theology. Thus the oath reveals the efficacy of religion as a performative experience of the spoken word. Let us now analyze this connection.

## II. Toward a Non-instrumental Conception of Religion

In *The Discourses* Machiavelli affirms that Numa, fearing that his own authority would not be sufficient for the introduction of new institutions, “pretended to have private conferences with a nymph who advised him about the advice he should give to the people” (*simulò di avere domestichezza con una ninfa, la quale lo consigliava di*

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<sup>51</sup> Alison Brown, “Philosophy and Religion in Machiavelli,” 166.

<sup>52</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 2, 139.

*quello ch'egli avesse a consigliare il popolo*).<sup>53</sup> Machiavelli uses the verb *simulare*, which in English can be translated as “to pretend” introducing the idea of fiction to “speaking with God.”

Sometimes fiction might be necessary to employ as a recourse when the rulers or lawgivers either want to persuade people or are facing difficult situations, for example Moses, Numa Pompilius, Lycurgus, Solon, Savonarola, Sertorius, Sulla, and Charles VII. According to Machiavelli, “In fact was there ever a legislator who, in introducing extraordinary laws to a people, did not have recourse to God.”<sup>54</sup> If we analyze the list of those who have claimed to have “private” conferences with God or his mediators we will find an interesting blend of people: the founder of the Hebrew religion, two Christians, two pagan Greeks, and three pagan Romans. For John Najemy it was, “the structure and power of the myth of sacred conversations in all religions that fascinated Machiavelli. In this myth he found one of the chief reasons for the ability of religions to persuade and even to transform people.”<sup>55</sup>

Nonetheless, we will argue that the stories of “speaking with God” are for Machiavelli more than a myth or an instrument, even though his doubts about “to decide whether it was so or not.”<sup>56</sup> However, this does illustrate the way in which religion, as *ricorso*, is constitutive of the very fabric of the *vivere politico*. The spectacle of the oath and sacrifices as a juridical and religious institution and the fiction of the sacred

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<sup>53</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 2, 140.

<sup>54</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 2, 140.

<sup>55</sup> John M. Najemy. “Papirius and the Chickens, or Machiavelli on the Necessity of Interpreting Religion,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, (1999) 659-681, 671.

<sup>56</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 2, 142.

conversations call into question the very nature of human beings as speaking beings and as political animals.

At this stage we can affirm that the power of religion in Machiavelli is the power of language, which does not guarantee truth but rather efficacy. It does not mean an instrumental use of it. Language has, indeed, an instrumental pole of naming and labeling. This aspect of utilitarian designation makes language a tool of the greatest importance for political life. But this first pole must be joined to a second more fundamental pole. Indeed, so fundamental is this second that it must not be understood as being simply opposite the first, to which it remains joined, but as belonging to a different level: the intersection between politics and theology. It is on this political-theological level that language is of an order completely different from that of the useful instrument which rhetoric exploited so well as a means of manipulation and power. Now, this power of the oath, sacrifices, *devotio*, curse, and sacred conversations gives evidence that language is capable of seizing social identities.

Let us take the example of Brother Girolamo Savonarola among those who use “speaking with God” as recourse to persuade people. According to Machiavelli, “The people of Florence... were persuaded by Friar Girolamo Savonarola that he had converse with God.”<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, Machiavelli criticized him because he did not know how to use the power of language to shape people’s imagination and especially the grace of “speaking with God” – which Machiavelli does not want “to decide whether it was so or not”<sup>58</sup> – to give good instructions to the people and make them love their freedom,

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<sup>57</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 2, 142.

<sup>58</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 2, 142.

country, and becoming true “men of action.” Instead of preaching boldness, he encouraged passivity, “his sermons were full of indictments against the wise of this world, and of invectives against them.” But more importantly than that, what Savanarola “failed to realize was that time waits for no man, that goodness alone does not suffice, that fortune is changeable and that malice is not to be placated by gifts.”<sup>59</sup>

Thus, through the mediation of the power of language religion reveals itself as a recourse for political success to which wise men and rulers must know how to appeal, “in order to escape difficulties... even though they be convinced that it is quite fallacious.”<sup>60</sup> It does not matter if the lawgivers, rulers or preachers are convinced of the truth claims of religion, what really matters are the effects on behavior, imagination, institutions, society, and history. Machiavelli contrasts this line of thought in ancient religion and in Christianity – not of course in their doctrines or truths claims – but rather in the way the two religions employ different recourses to achieve certain ends, and especially, in the kinds of power that as a recourse they exercised over the fabric of society.

For Machiavelli, Christianity is not a *ricorso* because through the glorification of humility and abnegation, “Italy has lost all devotion and all religion... is that we have become irreligious and perverse.”<sup>61</sup> Modern religion, Christianity, has taken out the ferocity and esteem for the worldly honor which characterized the ancient people.

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<sup>59</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* II, 30, 486-487.

<sup>60</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 11, 141; I, 12, 143.

<sup>61</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 12, 144.

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