



**A portrait of Machiavelli by Santi di Tito**

## **Machiavelli: Theories on Liberty, Religion, and The Original Constitution**

Erin Bos

*Erin Bos, from Yankton, South Dakota, is entering her junior year in the honors program. Majoring in Social Studies Education, she aspires to teach high school American History. In the fall, Erin joined the school's chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, and in the spring she presented her paper at the Phi Alpha Theta Regional Conference.*

Machiavellian qualities are often described as conniving or corrupt. Niccolò Machiavelli coined the idea of power-hungry, unremorseful princes in his book, *The Prince*. However, Machiavelli's true political theory can be found in his other political theory book, *The Discourses on Livy*. In his *Discourses*, Machiavelli did not singularly focus on the preservation of power or the role of the ruler; rather, he explored the idea of Rome being the model republic. Machiavelli used the republic of Rome as a basis for the creation of his perfect republic, in which liberty was a right given to the public, religion worked as a political tool and a moral compass, and returning to the original constitution occurred frequently.

Machiavelli saw the republic as a civil way of life in which power is not absolute within any regime.<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli claimed that clashes were good for the republic, in that the clash lead to change: "enmities between the senate and the

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Coby, *Machiavelli's Romans: Liberty and Greatness in the Discourses on Livy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 1999), 43.

plebeians kept Rome free, since they gave rise to laws in favor of liberty.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, Machiavelli advocated that the source of Roman liberty was the disturbances between the nobles and plebeians, because the disturbances produced good effects, or liberty.<sup>3</sup>

Liberty played an integral role within Machiavelli’s republic. For Machiavelli, “among the most necessary things established by those who have founded a republic in a prudent fashion is a safeguard for liberty.”<sup>4</sup> Liberty described the relations among equals, being “compromise, restraint, and settling for one’s dues.”<sup>5</sup> Liberty strengthened and excited the plebeians while compelling the nobility to direct their energy towards conquest. Thus, liberty demonstrated its own value, being the republic’s secret to “increased dominion and riches.”<sup>6</sup> However, liberty rested on laws, which are the moral cores of integrity and responsibility. Therefore, liberty, when accompanied with equality (laws), consisted of free will, or free way of life, private rights to citizens, and free suffrage.<sup>7</sup> The republic, because it guarded liberty among “the most necessary of things,” and maintained a republican constitution, created a lasting

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<sup>2</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (New York: University of Oxford Press, 1997), 101.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Coby, 262.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 261; 255.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Roebuck, “A Search for Political Stability: Machiavelli’s ‘Discourses on Livy’,” *Phoenix* 6 (1952): 59.

free life, which everybody can enjoy.<sup>8</sup>

Within the republic, the citizens found the prince unfavorable when controlling liberty, seeing as only steel could change the prince's heart.<sup>9</sup> Princes practiced liberality in order to gain support for the military, not out of a desire to share good fortune.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Machiavelli suggested that the guardianship of liberty "must be given to those who have less of an appetite to usurp it," meaning the plebeians.<sup>11</sup> He insisted that the plebeians are better to guard it, in that the plebeians desired not to be oppressed: "the desires of free peoples are rarely harmful to liberty, because they arise either from oppression or from the suspicion that they are oppressed."<sup>12</sup> The plebeians would not violate their guardianship of liberty, considering that the guardianship was their guarantee of security.<sup>13</sup> Machiavelli understood that the people were constant and wise:

But with respect to prudence and stability, I would say that a people is more prudent, more stable, and of better judgment than a prince... It is not without reason that the voice of a people is compared with that of God, for it is obvious that popular opinion is wondrously effective in its predictions, to the extent that it seems able to foresee its own good and evil fortune through some occult power.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Harvey Claflin Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders: A Study of the Discourses on Livy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 45; Quentin Skinner, "Machiavelli's *Discorsi* and the Pre-Humanist Origins of Republican Ideas," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Avon: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 141; John P. McCormick, "Machiavelli's Political Trails and the 'Free Way of Life'," *Political Theory* 35 (2007): 395.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 309; Coby, 254.

<sup>10</sup> Grant B. Mindle, "Machiavelli's Realism," *The Review of Politics* 47 (1985): 225.

<sup>11</sup> Machiavelli, 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31; Mansfield, 44.

<sup>13</sup> Roebuck, 61.

<sup>14</sup> Machiavelli, 143.

However, this ideal of liberty was difficult to achieve and maintain due to ordinary citizens being intimidated by the idea of retaliation from those with greater economic and political power.<sup>15</sup>

Machiavelli placed an emphasis on religion's role as a political and moral tool in Rome. To the Romans, religion functioned as a moral compass for the republic. Religion promoted national unity, in which all citizens were united by the civil obedience it created.<sup>16</sup> Religion instilled fear of the gods into Roman citizens, which in turn created civil obedience. The gods' punishments were not visible or immediate like the punishments of the law, thus implanting the idea to be virtuous.<sup>17</sup> Roman citizens needed to fear the gods, because it replaced the fear of a tyrant. The gods and their punishments were far more frightening than the immediate punishment from the ruler.<sup>18</sup> Due to this fear, Roman citizens were habitually willing to obey authority.<sup>19</sup> Thus, religion created good citizens and good customs: "the religion introduced by Numa was among the principal reasons for the happiness of that city, because it produced good institutions, the good institutions created good fortunes, and from good fortune arose the happy successes of their undertakings."<sup>20</sup> From this sequence of good fortunes came the idea of *pietás*. *Pietás* meant that Romans would do duty to their family, which in

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<sup>15</sup> McCormick, 386.

<sup>16</sup> Mansfield, 73; Coby, 76.

<sup>17</sup> Coby, 68-69.

<sup>18</sup> Markus Fischer, "Machiavelli's Political Psychology," *The Review of Politics* 59 (1997): 820.

<sup>19</sup> Coby, 76-77.

<sup>20</sup> Machiavelli, 52.

turn performed duty to the military, then to the state, then lastly to the gods. However, if religion was ignored or disdained, ruin would fall upon the republic: “just as the observance of divine worship is the cause of the greatness of republics, so is the disregard of divine worship is the cause of their ruin, because where fear of God is lacking, that kingdom must either come to ruin or be sustained through fear of a prince who makes up for the shortcomings in its religion,” and “there can be no greater indication of the ruin of the state than to see a disregard for its divine worship.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, rulers, while not imposing their gods or interpretation, maintained the foundations of religion in order to sustain their integrity: “those princes or republics that wish to maintain their integrity must, above all else, maintain the integrity of their religious ceremonies, and must always hold them in veneration.”<sup>22</sup> The rulers ought to support all religions, even when they believed them to be false: “they must also encourage and support all those things that arise in favor of this religion, even those they judge to be false.”<sup>23</sup> If the prince or republic supported and encouraged all of the religions and religious ceremonies, the prince or republic would have a better understanding of “natural phenomena,” natural forces explained within each religion, and an easier time “maintaining a devoted and united republic.”<sup>24</sup>

Religion also functioned in the republic’s military as a preservation tool. Religion instilled courage and a willingness to fight enemies of the state in the

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<sup>21</sup> Machiavelli, 52-53.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

republic.<sup>25</sup> Romans understood that a key way to make people risk their lives for the state was to require them to take an oath. This oath was taken under the gods, and could not be broken. Therefore, if a person did break the oath, he would have to face the gods' ultimate punishment. Romans would rather risk their lives than risk angering the gods.<sup>26</sup> Religion also acted as an effort to instill motivation in the soldiers. Machiavelli's prime example, the Samnite Leaders, although not Roman, and in preparation for battle against the Romans,

Made all the leaders of the army swear never to abandon battle, and they called forward the soldiers one by one, and between the altars and in the midst of a number of centurions with their drawn sword in hand, they made the soldiers swear first that they would never repeat what they had seen or heard; then, curses and verses full of fear, they made the men promise the gods they would go swiftly wherever their commanders sent them and would never flee from battle and would kill anyone they saw fleeing; if this oath were not observed, it would come back upon the heads of their families and tribes<sup>27</sup>

For the Samnites, religion worked as a motivator through fear. Machiavelli pointed out that because the Samnites used fear as a motivator, soldiers were overcome with fear and that "fear engendered by past defeats overcame whatever determination the Samnites might have been able to derive from the strength of their religion and the oath they had sworn."<sup>28</sup> However, Machiavelli presented another case in which religion inspired hope within the soldiers. For the Romans,

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<sup>25</sup> Maurizio Viroli, "Machiavelli and the Republican Idea of Politics," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Avon: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 157.

<sup>26</sup> Quentin Skinner, "The Republican Ideal," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Avon: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 306.

<sup>27</sup> Machiavelli, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

they discovered that Priests of Apollo and other “soothsayers” claimed that the city of Veii would be defeated during the year in which Lake Albanus overflowed its banks. That year just so happened to be the exact same year of the battle. The faith in prophecy allowed the soldiers to enter into battle with hope, knowing that their war could be won.<sup>29</sup>

Religion also functioned as a political tool. It acted as a veil behind which politicians could operate effectively.<sup>30</sup> Religion could be used as a political tool because it could be interpreted. Therefore, religion was open to partisan use.<sup>31</sup> Machiavelli demonstrated the idea of religion being a political tool when the Consul manipulated the plebeians and their religion in response to the tribunes attempting to undermine his power. Therefore,

Through the fear of their religion, the plebeians preferred to obey the consul rather than to believe the tribunes, writing the following words in favor of ancient religion: ‘there was as yet no sign of our modern skepticism which interprets solemn compacts, such as those embodied in an oath or a law, to suit its own convenience.’ Because of this, the tribunes, fearing they would lose all their prestige, reached an agreement with the consul that they would yield to him, and that for a year they would not discuss the law of Terentillus, while the consuls could not, for a year, lead the plebeians outside the city walls to war.<sup>32</sup>

Without the use of religion, the Senate would not have been able to overcome such difficulties between parties.

Despite the glorification of the republic, Machiavelli acknowledged that

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<sup>29</sup> Machiavelli, 56-57.

<sup>30</sup> Vickie B. Sullivan, “Neither Christian nor Pagan: Machiavelli’s Treatment of Religion in the ‘Discourses’,” in *Polity* no. 26 (1993): 265-267.

<sup>31</sup> Mansfield, 75.

<sup>32</sup> Machiavelli, 58.



with government came corruption, and that the republic was not immune. His solution: return to the original constitution and first principles. He stated, “The ones [republics] that have the best organization and the longest lives are, however, those that can renew themselves often” and that “nothing is more necessary in a community, whether it be religion, kingdom, or republic, than to restore to it the reputation it enjoyed at its beginnings and strive to ensure that either good institutions or good men achieve this effect.”<sup>33</sup> This renewal included the reawakening of the moral forces of the citizen body, meaning “the method of renewing them is, as was stated, to bring them back to their beginnings, because the beginnings of religions, republics, and kingdoms must always contain in themselves some goodness through which they may regain their early prestige and their early expansion.”<sup>34</sup> Machiavelli suggested that the republics renew themselves every ten years, which could be brought on by two forces: “some extrinsic accident,” as in the Gauls overtaking Rome, or “intrinsic prudence,” through the rise of a man from within the republic.<sup>35</sup> Machiavelli exemplified intrinsic prudence with Romans such as Horatius Cocles, Scaevola, and Fabricius.<sup>36</sup> However, Machiavelli admired the Kingdom of France for its intrinsic prudence, because “the parliaments maintain their laws and institutions, especially the one in Paris; which renews them every time it takes an action

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<sup>33</sup> Machiavelli, 246-250.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 249.

against a prince of that kingdom and condemns the king in its judgment.”<sup>37</sup>

Machiavelli continued in saying that the goodness in the state was preserved by “a combination of legalized violence striking dread into hearts of citizens and patriotic heroism inspiring citizens with the love of the nobles,” meaning that the renewal should demonstrate the awesome power of the state’s ability to execute; the more awesome the execution, the better the results.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast, if the state did not renew itself every ten years, the republic would not last. Returning to past morals and glory allowed for change, which in turn removed the sources of corruption. Machiavelli claimed, “that if they do not renew themselves, these bodies will not endure,” because “in the course of time that goodness is corrupted, if something does not come about to bring it back to its proper limits, it will, of necessity kill that body.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the longer the republic went without change, the greater the chance for corruption. Machiavelli suggested that even though good, exemplary men such as the two Catos rose to power after the reign of Marcus Regulus, “there was too great a space between him and them, and then between the two of them, and they remained so isolated that they could not, with their good examples, accomplish any good work; this is especially true of the last Cato who, finding the city for the most part corrupt, could not with his own example, make the citizens better.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Machiavelli, 250.

<sup>38</sup> Coby, 151-152.

<sup>39</sup> Machiavelli, 246.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 249.

In his *Discourses on Livy*, Niccolò Machiavelli discussed the ideal republic, which he based off of ancient Rome. Machiavelli ultimately supported the republic, in which liberty is a given right to the public, religion works as a political tool and moral compass, and returning to the original constitution occurs frequently. Liberty was to be guarded by the people, or plebeians, and was an equal right given to all Romans. Religion, while demonstrating the Roman idea of pietás, motivated the people and militia to fight for the state, acted as a political tool, and created national unity. The only way to preserve the republic was to go through a renewal of the state in which the republic reverted to its original constitution. Although most well-known for his political theory, *The Prince*, Machiavelli made known his personal political theories in his *Discourses on Livy*.