Civil Religion and the Pursuit of Happiness from Machiavelli to *Italian Theory*

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Abstract: In this article I propose a conception of "civil religion" to bridge the tension (or dissolve the antinomy) between immanence and transcendence that has characterized *Italian Theory* to date. This tension is due to the two central components of *Italian Theory*, namely, the discourse on biopolitics and the discourse on political theology. In what follows I argue that this conception of "civil religion" originates with Machiavelli and is functional to his vision of democratic constitutionalism. I propose a new genealogy of this conception drawn from the history of the reception of Alfarabi and Averroes in western political thought. The article explains that the difference between civil religion and political theology consists in the former maintaining the priority of worldly happiness over otherworldly salvation. The article concludes with a reflection on how this concept of worldly happiness can serve to contrast the "biopolitical" pursuit of private happiness.

Keywords: civil religion, republicanism, Italian Theory, Machiavelli, Alfarabi.

1. The Debate on Religion in the Public Sphere and Italian Theory

The critical discussion on secularism and the return of religion in the public sphere remains today of great pertinence and as contested as ever[1]. The contemporary discussion divides itself, roughly, into two debates that have yet to meaningfully interact with each other. On the one side is the debate on political liberalism and post-secularism initiated by John Rawls's recovery of the idea of public reason and the debate with Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor, among many others, on the acceptability of "religion reasons" in the discourse of liberal-democratic

[1] For the debate in the last decade, see C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2007 and C. Laborde, *Liberalism's Religion*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2017. In the English language debate, I refer to the special issue of *Intellectual History Review* 27: 1 (2017) dedicated to the state of the art of the discussion on secularization.

legitimacy[2]. Central to this debate is whether there exists a "wall of separation" between Church from State in modern constitutionalism and in what consists its meaning. Within this debate one can also place the efforts to deconstruct (Christian) "secularism" as formulated by Talal Asad, Judith Butler and others[3]. On the other side is the biopolitical debate, especially as developed in recent Italian political philosophy from Mario Tronti, Antonio Negri and Massimo Cacciari to Gianni Vattimo, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito. By "biopolitical debate" I mean an approach to the post-Weberian secularization theorem that highlights the tension between an ever more "immanent" rationalization of life-forms, driven by politico-economical imperatives, and an ever more "transcendent" constitution of political order, driven by politico-theological conceptions of sovereignty[4].

In this article I suggest that these two debates overlap on the question of happiness. Hannah Arendt showed that the pursuit of "public happiness" is an essential concept to understand the way in which the revolutionary republican project of *constitutio libertatis* resolved the tension between Church and State that characterized the *respublica christiana* since the Donation of Constantine[5]. But the pursuit of "private happiness" is also a good formula to capture the finality of biopolitical governmentality. In this article I propose that the most appropriate category through which to think this overlap is that of "civil religion". In what follows I shall sketch a new interpretation of Machiavelli as a thinker of civil religion and of democratic constitutionalism, and try to show why his discourse bridges the tension (or dissolves the antinomy) between immanence and transcendence that has characterized *Italian Theory* to date. In the next section I begin by distinguishing the main features of these two debates. In the third section I introduce the idea of civil religion and oppose it to that of political theology. In the fourth section I propose a genealogical reading of Machiavelli that leads back to the central concerns here at stake: the question of the meaning of the constitutional division of Church and State, and its relation to the "biopolitical" pursuit of happiness. In the fifth and last section I explain the way in which this conception of civil religion brings together a messianic and a scientific conception of nature within its discourse on public happiness.

[2] For this discussion, see T. Bailey and V. Gentile (eds.), *Rawls and Religion*, Columbia University Press, New York 2014 and E. Mendieta and C. Calhoun (eds.), *Habermas and Religion*, Polity, London 2013. In Italy the reception of this debate is mainly found on the pages of *Micromega* and moved by the interventions of Paolo Flores d'Arcais. On the debate on the veil from a French perspective, see C. Laborde, *Critical Republicanism: the Hijab Controversy and Political Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York 2008.

[3] T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 2003; T. Asad, W. Brown, J. Butler and S. Mahmood (eds.), *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*, Fordham University Press, New York 2013; and G. Anidjar, *Blood. A Critique of Christianity*, Columbia University Press, New York 2014.

[4] For an overview of this Italian debate, see R. Esposito, *Pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana*, Einaudi, Torino 2010, ch. 5 passim; and now the wide-ranging discussion in E. Stimilli (ed.), *Teologie e politica. Genealogie e attualità*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2019.

[5] See H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, Penguin, New York 1990.

2. *The Liberal and Biopolitical Discussions of Post-secularism*

For a long time the ideal of secularism has been the undisputed protagonist of the public sphere. From Marx to Comte and Weber, the widespread belief held that scientific, technological and economic progress would minimize the importance of religion in the public life of individuals. Secularism finds its origin in the Enlightenment project of constructing society on a rational basis, rather than on tradition and faith. Liberalism adopted this project by sidelining religions to the private sphere and setting up an opposition between reason and faith, which in turn led to the struggle between progress and orthodoxy (or fundamentalism)[6]. With the defeat of 20th century totalitarian regimes, many thought that not only history, but also the public role of religion had come to its official "end"[7].

However, for a series of complex reasons that we still do not entirely comprehend, religions were not tamed by secularism, and this has led to our contemporary "post-secular" situation[8]. In my opinion, two compelling and partially overlapping narratives have since emerged that offer an explanation as to why liberal secularism could not abolish religion in the public sphere. The first narrative is put forward by Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* and it centres on the idea of happiness. Taylor argues that secularism began when people were convinced to cut off their aspirations to an "eternal" life in another world, in a Beyond, that would lend to their passage on earth a "fullness" or absolute meaning. Instead, the discourse of modernity directed them to put all their energies into fulfilling the immanent goals of human flourishing, as the best way to attain a happy life (*eudaimonia*) in this world[9]. The project of Enlightenment promised that humanity could achieve happiness on its own, if only it focussed all of its energies inwardly. If only people worked hard enough, disciplined their minds and bodies to the utmost, polished their conduct in society, then it would be possible to maximize the satisfaction of most people's preferences[10].

But if increased discipline in our lives and control over our biological life-process promises an ever higher "quality of life" for the greatest numbers, it also inevitably raises the question: why is the struggle to live-on (what Spinoza called the *conatus*) inherently meaningful? From an existentialist standpoint, for which death is the ultimate horizon of meaning, this question finds no satisfactory an-

[6] See L. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1997; and I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity. Chapters in the History of Ideas*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 2013 for the early, but still compelling, analysis of the Enlightenment origins of secularism and the reactions against it in late modernity.

[7] One of the first protests against this narrative of the "end of history" in a reconciled liberal democratic global order (Fukuyama) from the side of religion came in J. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, Galilée, Paris 1993; and J. Derrida, *Foi et Savoir. Les deux sources de la 'religion' aux limites de la simple raison*, Seuil, Paris 2000.

[8] For one of the first analyses of this situation, see J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994.

[9] C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 15-19.

[10] C. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, Durham (NC) 2004.

swer. But, as Arendt showed, existentialism makes for a poor political philosophy: the fact that, sooner or later, we are all going to die is not exactly the best starting point to answer the legitimation needs of political orders. Thus, a liberal political order based on the satisfaction of the drive to live-on (*conatus* or, in Freudian terms, *Lustprinzip*) inevitably had to pose itself again a very ancient question: can some part of me live on forever? If so, how can I hope to attain an "eternal" life? Of course, this is the same hope that spiritual religions have always had on offer. And this is one offer that liberal secularism cannot trump. In short, the advent of secularism is encircled back and front by the idea of eternal life[11].

The other narrative that offers an explanation for the inherent limits of secularism is the one offered by Michel Foucault, which intersects at many points with Taylor's narrative. Foucault's "history of governmentality" gives a very compelling reason why the rise of liberalism could not lead to the disappearance of religion. The reason is that, on Foucault's hypothesis, liberalism is a form of government, and not a form of sovereign power nor a doctrine of constitutionalism. Governmental practices have a pastoral genealogy[12]. This hypothesis led in short order to the connection between a biopolitical and a politico-economic-theological analysis of governmentality, as developed by Agamben and Esposito, and many others since.

Agamben and Esposito adopt the Heideggerian claim that western metaphysics is a "machine" (*Gestell* in Heideggerian terminology, a *dispositif* or apparatus to speak like Foucault) that divides the human species against itself: into *zoe* and *bios*, person and thing, soul and body, God and Man[13]. This division has the effect of including one part as inferior into the other part as superior: thus the soul includes the body in order to exclude it and bring it into submission, while making of this submission a sign of freedom. Following Agamben's thesis that Trinitarianism is the fundamental discourse of governmentality, for Esposito the paradigm for all these dualisms remains Trinitarian Christian theology, where the singularity of God is split into the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit simultaneously subjects the Son to the Father and frees Him from the Father. In order to undo this Trinitarian structure of political and/or economic theology, Agamben and Esposito expand on what can be called the Averroistic

[11] I have developed this theme in M. Vatter, "Eternal Life and Biopower", *CR: The New Centennial Review* 10 (3), 2011, pp. 217-249; and M. Vatter, *The Republic of the Living. Biopolitics and the Critique of Civil Society*, Fordham University Press, 2014.

[12] M. Foucault, *Sécurité, Territoire, Population. Cours au Collège de France. 1977-1978*, Gallimard Seuil, Paris 2004; T. Lemke, *Gouvernementalität und Biopolitik*, VS Verlag fuer Sozialwissenchaften, Wiesbaden 2007; O. Marzocca, *Perché il Governo. Il laboratorio etico-politico di Foucault*, Manifestolibri, Roma 2007; L. Bazzicalupo, *Il governo delle vite. Biopolitica ed economia*, Laterza, Bari 2006; S. Forti, *I nuovi demoni. Ripensare oggi male e potere*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2012; and V. Lemm and M. Vatter (eds.), *The Government of Life. Foucault, Biopolitics, and Neoliberalism*, Fordham University Press, New York 2014, among much other literature dedicated to Foucault's pastoral hypothesis.

[13] G. Agamben, *L'aperto. L'uomo e l'animale*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2002; G. Agamben, *Altissima povertà. Regole monastiche e forma di vita*, Neri Pozza, Venezia 2011; R. Esposito, *Terza Persona. Politica della vita e filosofia dell'impersonale*, Einaudi, Torino 2007.

signature of Italian biopolitics by arguing that the only way out of political theology consists in appropriating the potentiality of the human intellect and turning it against the metaphysical separation between living and thinking[14].

The main point of contention within so-called *Italian Theory* remains the role played by political theology within affirmative biopolitics. For Negri, political theology has no affirmative uses: it is merely the index of the autonomy of the political from the creative power of living labour, and thus belongs with ideology[15]. Negri charges both Agamben and Esposito with having abandoned the Averroist, immanentist impulse of biopolitics as an extension of Spinozist and Marxist conceptions of *Deus sive Natura*, and having introduced elements of personalism and transcendence into their affirmative biopolitics. This charge may not be entirely unfounded in the case of Agamben, who seems to develop the affirmative sense of "bare life" in the form of the Franciscan ideal of "highest poverty", where a communal *zoe* is approximated through the model of Jesus's messianic life[16]. Esposito, for his part, adopts an intermediary position. He follows Agamben in claiming that the main tradition of western political philosophy is indeed governed by political and economic theologies that turn on the identity of subjectivity with personality. But he opposes affirmative biopolitics to political theology by recovering the Averroist separation of a common intellect of the human species from the individual self-consciousness.

The difficult question of the relation between biopolitics and political theology remains open, especially because *Italian Theory* adopts an Averroist framework whose political consequences remain undertheorized by its advocates. Thus, if Averroes's doctrine of the potential intellect might seem appealing from an affirmative biopolitics standpoint, little attention has gone into reconstructing the political reception of Averroes in European political philosophy, starting in the Renaissance[17]. In this article I argue that the least problematic and most plausible way to take up the Averroistic framework is in relation to Machiavelli and his conception of civil religion. Machiavellian civil religion offers a way to contrast both the politico-theological foundation of political order in "transcendence" and the biopolitical foundation of governmentality in the "pursuit of happiness".

[14] On this Averroistic signature see G. Agamben, *Mezzi senza fine. Note sulla politica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1996; G. Agamben, *Potentialities*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 1999; and R. Esposito, *Due. La macchina della teologia politica e il posto del pensiero*, Einaudi, Torino 2013.

[15] T. Negri, "A proposito di Italian Theory", in E. Stimilli and D. Gentilli (eds.), *Differenze italiane. Politica e filosofia: mappe e sconfinamenti*, DeriveApprodi, Roma 2015. For a discussion of this debate, see M. Vatter, "Community. life, and subjectivity in Italian biopolitics", in S. Prozorov and S. Rentea (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Biopolitics*, Routledge, London and New York 2017, pp. 123-140.

[16] For a critical discussion of Agamben's Christology, I refer to M. Vatter, "Law and Life Beyond Incorporation. Agamben, Highest Poverty and the Papal Legal Revolution", in D. McLoughlin (ed.), *Agamben and Radical Politics*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2016, pp. 234-262.

[17] See now G. Giglioni and A. Akasoy (eds.), *Renaissance Averroism and Its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe*, Dordrecht, Springer 2013, in which, however, a treatment of this question in humanism and Machiavelli is absent.

3. *The Concepts of Civil Religion and Political Theology*

The term "civil religion" in the sense that is discussed in this article was brought into prominence by Rousseau, who chose to end his *Social Contract* by dedicating its last chapter to this concept[18]. In this very dense text, Rousseau gives us a brief history of the different ways in which religion and politics have been joined throughout western history[19]. For the Greeks and Romans, Rousseau argues, the gods were the gods of the city, and to be pious meant to do what was good for the city, that is, ultimately to be a good citizen-warrior and defend it against enemies. For Rousseau, ancient pagan religions were inherently intolerant because the worship of different gods entailed automatically that one was a political enemy[20]. In these polytheistic cultures one also finds the tendency to identify the political ruler with the divine ruler, as happened most clearly with Roman emperors[21]. Thus, for Rousseau pagan religion is a "political" religion or a "religion of politics"[22]. Interestingly enough, Rousseau thought that the Mosaic religion was also such a political religion.

Opposed to this pagan "religion of citizens", Rousseau argues that what we today call "Axial" religions introduced a "religion of man" whose highest principle was solidarity or fraternity or "love of thy neighbour" or charity[23]. If the religions of the city were equivalent to "divine positive right", Rousseau claims that the axial religions opened up the possibility of a "divine natural right". However, Rousseau made the point that these religions also distinguished the city of men from the city of God, and opposed the religious calling to the political vocation.

[18] For a recent overview of the idea of civil religion, see R. Beiner, *Civil Religion. A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2011.

[19] On Rousseau's idea of civil religion, see G. Silvestrini, *Diritto Naturale e Volontã Generale*, Claudiana, Torino 2010; and J. Swenson, "Le 'concours de la religion': une religion politique ou une politique des religion" in B. Bernardi, B. Bachofen, and G. Olivo (eds.), *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Du Contrat Social ou essai sur la forme de la République (Manuscrit de Genève)*, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, Paris 2012, pp. 203-218.

[20] This does not exclude that the enemy could become the guest, *hostis* turned into *hospes*, as Cacciari has often discussed. See M. Cacciari, *Europe and Empire. On the Political Forms of Globalization*, Fordham University Press, New York 2016. But this point does not invalidate anything that Rousseau is saying about pagan civil religion: the possibility of asylum presupposes the enmity between the gods of different cities.

[21] For the theme of sacral kingship and its Hellenistic origins, see now F. Oakley, *Kingship. The Politics of Enchantment*, Blackwell, Oxford 2016; and F. Oakley, *Empty Bottles of Gentilism. Kingship and the Divine in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (to 1050)*, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) 2010.

[22] Not to be confused with the meaning that Eric Voegelin gives to the term "political religion", by which he means modern forms of Gnosticism that assign to human beings the capacity of salvation. See E. Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen*, Wilhelm Fink, Paderborn 2012; ed. Fr. *Les religions politiques*. Translated by J. Schmutz. Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1994.

[23] On the concept of axial religions, see K. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1953; and C. Taylor, "What was the Axial Revolution?", in R. N. Bellah and H. Joas (eds.), *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2012, pp. 30-46.

Axial religions put an end to the divinization of political leaders, but they also separated the individual from its own political life. These "religions of man" permitted individuals to be guided in their public conduct by something other than persuasion and laws approved by all in common, namely, they brought into public life the guidance of a priesthood and of some form of institutionalized "universal" religion.

Strictly speaking, as employed by Schmitt, political theology is a discourse that allows for the transference of (Axial) theological categories into political ones[24]. "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state… – but also because of their systematic structure"[25]. In other words, from Constantine until the Enlightenment, Christianity in the West is a gigantic machine that spins out of the city of God a "city of man" to its measure. Whether the main instrument through which Christianity achieves this de-paganization, and thus also de-politicization, of political life is "sovereignty" (Schmitt's thesis) or "government" (Agamben's thesis) is ultimately of secondary importance because in both cases "the typical process that occurred was the assimilation of a text of Roman private law into church law, its adaptation and transmutation there to a principle of constitutional law, and then its reabsorption into the sphere of secular government in this new form"[26]. What counts is that pagan political language coursed through the Church, its concepts were reformed therein, before being let out into the new European *ius publicum* of national monarchies. From the republican perspective, whether led by development of (absolutist) sovereignty or by the development of (liberal) government, the important point is that these are both forms of political theology, that is, forms of pastoral government of spiritual religions that managed to cut off western political life from its pagan origins[27].

From the republican perspective of Rousseau, there are two great shortcomings with political theology so defined. First, although the "religion of man" was originally a religion of tolerance (unlike pagan political religions), it comes to be construed throughout Christendom in anti-political terms, so that to be pious meant to accept injustices and inequalities rather than addressing them. Second, the belief in a city of God distinct from the city of human beings, that is, distinct

[24] On the meaning of political theology in Schmitt, I refer to the discussion in M. Vatter, "The Political Theology of Carl Schmitt", in J. Meierhenrich and O. Simons (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, Oxford University Press, New York 2017.
[25] See C. Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 2015; tr. Eng. *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1988, chapter 3.
[26] B. Tierney, *Religion, law and the growth of constitutional thought 1150-1650*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982, p. 25.
[27] It is clear that I share neither Agamben's attempt to read Rousseau as an economic theologian of governmentality, nor Loughlin's and Tuck's attempts to read him as a political theologian of sovereignty. For these two interpretations, see M. Loughlin, *Foundations of Public Law*, Oxford University Press, New York 2010 and R. Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign. The Invention of Modern Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2016.

from a human republic, in turn gave rise to a "religion of the priest" which for Rousseau opened up the worst of all scenarios. Namely, the scenario in which the religion of priests used the ideal of love of neighbour for the sake of acquiring an autonomous power basis that drained power from the people, and mobilized citizens in religious wars. This is the "politics" of (Christian) religion.

In order to address the shortcomings of both the "religion of citizen" and the "religion of man" Rousseau posits the need for a modern, republican "civil religion". Modern civil religion is a religion in which love of neighbour and tolerance would become embodied in the constitution of the republic and would become the new "religion of the citizen" based not on a "divine natural right" but rather on a "human natural right", or what Kant calls the "right of humanity", the precursor of our human rights. But how could such a transformation take place? How was it possible to give Moses or Jesus or Mohammed a neo-Athenian and neo-Roman, republican interpretation that would somehow lead to new "Rights of Man"?

4. *The Hidden Genealogy of Civil Religion*

The first one to have posed this question in early modernity prior to Rousseau was Machiavelli. During his life, Machiavelli faced a complicated situation: on one side, he saw how the Catholic Church used its power in Italy to prevent the establishment of a successful republic that would unify the country. The Church would play city against city, and occasionally call in foreign powers to intervene whenever it saw a threat to its own political power. On the other hand, Machiavelli's political career in the Florentine republic had been made possible by Savonarola, a self-styled Christian prophet who had mobilized the people of Florence to get rid of the Medici oligarchy and set up a republican self-government[28].

Machiavelli was an exponent of the Renaissance, namely, of the effort to resurrect pagan culture and wisdom in order to apply it directly not only in the arts and sciences, but also in politics and religion. This attempt to revive the civil religion of the Roman Republic faced a great resistance from the Church: it risked undermining its entire political theology. For analogous reasons, it was not seen as a welcome development by the monarchies of Spain, France, and England. These monarchies would later resolve the religious wars through the formula *cuius regio, eius religio*, namely, that the (Christian) religion of the king became the "public" religion of the state and its citizens, with the proviso that religious minorities would be more or less tolerated and allowed to retain their religious preferences in the private forum. Only the Italian city-states, because

[28] In this article I do not have the space to engage the large amount of recent literature dedicated to the question of Machiavelli and religion. For convenience, in what follows I refer to my own previously published work on this question, in which the interested reader will find a discussion of most of the relevant secondary literature.

of their attempts to defend communal freedom, could show sympathy with the project of reviving the ancient civil religion. Thus, someone like Remigio de Girolami, "Aquinas' pupil and Dante's teacher" could make the claim that "the citizen must love the city more than himself, because the city is his only possible actuation"[29]. A claim that comes close to Machiavelli's own proclamation of love for his city more than love for his soul.

My hypothesis is that Machiavelli tries to develop a novel way that avoids both the Catholic incorporation of politics under the priesthood, and the Protestant-monarchic way of incorporating religion to the goals of the state. The novel way consisted in understanding the political role of religion as a civil religion: this required, so my thesis, the placement of prophetic religions on the side of constitutional politics. As an ally of constitutionalism, religion would be neither subservient to the Church, nor an instrument of the State (*instrumentum regni*). But in order to do this Machiavelli had to discover an entirely different way in which religion and politics could be joined[30]. Machiavelli rediscovered this "new" path in his analysis of the civil religion of the Roman Republic. He saw that in Rome, religion was the "condition of good arms" and "good arms" were the condition of "good laws"[31]. By "good arms" Machiavelli meant a people who could defend itself without needing mercenary armies. The appropriate religion would therefore have to be one that does not see power and independence as signs of a sinful condition, but as features of a free people. In other words, a civil religion would place supreme power not in the hands on one individual, king or emperor, but in the assembled people-in-arms. Now, for Machiavelli the Roman example showed that as soon as power was in the hands of a free people, this would lead to a government through "good laws" by which he meant a constitutional government. So, the concept of "civil religion" in Machiavelli refers to a religion that necessarily leads to a political constitution: a religion that finds its highest expression, in the practical sphere, with a political constitution.

But from where does Machiavelli get this idea of civil religion and its internal link to a political constitution of freedom? My hypothesis is that Machiavelli was responding to the theologico-political sermons of Savonarola: the Florentine prophet had often cited the example of Moses, but for Machiavelli Savonarola had not drawn the necessary inference from this example, namely, that only

[29] E. H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1997, pp. 478-479. For a recent attempt to revive this form of republican Christianity, see M. Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 2010.

[30] In what follows I rehearse the argument which is now found in M. Vatter, "Machiavelli, 'Ancient Theology' and the Problem of Civil Religion", in N. Urbinati, D. Johnston, and C. Vergara (eds.), *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2017, pp. 113-138.

[31] For Machiavelli, "good laws and good arms" make up "the principal foundations that all states must have" (*The Prince* 12). In the *Discourses on Livy*, he argues that "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" (I, 11).

"armed prophets" are successful[32]. Machiavelli's genius here was to unite the republican idea of civil religion, which he gets from the Roman example, with the Mosaic idea of prophetology. Since the figure of the prophet was essential to monotheistic spiritual religions, a new interpretation of the meaning of the prophet could potentially redirect these religions away from their absolutist political theologies and towards a direction more conducive to republican freedom and constitutional government. A revival of prophetology could cast doubt on the deep-seated belief that the form of a Church was the true representative of God's Kingdom on earth.

In civil religion as prophetology, the political meaning of God translates directly to the power of the people or to a republican democracy, and this is entirely different from the "use" of religion made by the reason of state favoured by early modern monarchies. On my hypothesis, Machiavelli's prophetology contains the following three principles: 1) no individual is the political representative of God. Politically speaking, this entails the prohibition of an absolute monarch. 2) God loves His people and wants them as powerful as Him. This entails a particular, not just universal, divine providence that goes hand in hand with a policy of arming a people, and against the reliance on mercenary armies. The corollary of this point is that only priestly forms of government do not seek to arm their people. 3) The true armed prophet is the one that gives a political constitution to its people. The corollary to this point is that divine revelation is not supra-political: it contains no special instructions as to how to reach "heavenly happiness" or "eternal life" other than as political or worldly happiness. The sole purpose of politics is "worldly happiness", not the attainment of a "future world" or afterlife.

It follows from this idea of civil religion that any truly prophetic religion will have, as its constitutional principles, the freedom and equality of its people; the belief that all political power derives from the power of the people; and, lastly, the principle that every individual has a right to pursue happiness.

Before spelling out the consequences of this idea of civil religion for the biopolitical question of the pursuit of happiness, I need to add an important coda to this genealogy of civil religion. Machiavelli could not have read the books of the Bible dedicated to Moses in such an original way without some prior help. Indeed, the idea that through Moses, God had given the Hebrew people a political constitution was an idea popularized a few decades before Machiavelli under the name of "ancient theology" by the Florentine Platonist Marsilio Ficino[33]. This "ancient theology" was a product of worldly philosophers who followed Plato's

[32] For an extended discussion of this point and critique of alternative readings, I refer to M. Vatter, "Machiavelli and the Republican Conception of Providence", *The Review of Politics* (75), 2013, pp. 605-623.

[33] On *prisca theologia* in the Florentine Renaissance see D.P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology. Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, Duckworth, London 1972 and C. Vasoli, *Ficino, Savonarola, Machiavelli. Studi di storia della cultura*, Nino Aragno Editore, Torino 2006.

original insight that, if to philosophize is to imitate God, then a philosopher is the more god-like the more it gives its people a legal constitution under which all citizens are to be treated equally. This way of reading Plato's late dialogues was lost for centuries: it reappeared for the first time at the hand of a Muslim philosopher from Baghdad, Alfarabi, who lived in the 10th century and died in Damascus. Plato had not personally witnessed the activity of a prophet, but Alfarabi was living in Islamic lands, so he had to confront in first person the problem of how to reconcile reason and faith, philosopher and prophet[34].

Alfarabi's fundamental thought was that the prophet is at the same time a philosopher and a legislator[35]. The main idea here is that it is the prophet – and not a king – who is the true political founder because he brings what the Greek philosophers called "divine *nomoi*" to the city. It is by founding a (Platonic) republic that the prophet is charged with the earthly happiness of a people[36]. The proper political action of the prophet is that of giving a constitution – that is why the prophet is a legislator. But the prophet is also a philosopher: the legislation must be rational, and that means, it must be oriented by the idea of the common good. As a philosopher, the constitution will be based on political principles that are hypothetical, in the sense that they must be verified experimentally by the democratic life of the people which they make possible. Lastly, the prophet is also more than a philosopher because he or she must also develop a civil religion that makes accessible the philosophical foundations of a free political life to all citizens, not just to those versed in scientific demonstrations.

Alfarabi's interpretation of monotheism as a civil religion is so important because he shows that philosophy and revealed religion should not be opposed as reason and faith are opposed for dogmatic interpretations of revealed religions. Rather, Alfarabi argued that philosophy has the task of making possible the happiness of the greatest number (not just of the happy few philosophers), and that it can achieve this task by inventing a civil religion which explains, by means of rhetorical and literary devices, for those who are not educated in dialectics the very same things that those who know philosophy or dialectics know by argument. Revealed religion ceases thereby to be the exclusive province of

[34] The "politico-theological" character of Alfarabi's thought is a highly contested topic. Compare M. Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2001 with P. Crone, *God's Rule, Government and Islam: Six Centruies of Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, Columbia University Press, New York 2004, with M. Campanini, "Alfarabi and the Foundation of Political Theology in Islam", in Asma Afsaruddin (ed.), *Islam, the State, and Political Authority*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2011, pp. 35-52.

[35] See L. Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 2. Philosophie und Gesetz – Frühe Schriften*, J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart 2013; tr. Eng., L. Strauss, *Philosophy and Law. Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, State University of New York Press, Albany (NY) 1995. Leo Strauss was the first to understand the implications of this equation between prophet and philosopher-king.

[36] See Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, ed. by M. Mahdi, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) 2001 and compare with *Averroes on Plato's Republic*, ed. by R. Lerner, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) 2004.

"doctors" of theology and is opened up for both a politico-philosophical and poetical-mystical interpretations. This new way of thinking the relation between philosophy and religion is promising because it moves beyond the dualism between reason and faith: by interpreting spiritual religions as civil religion, the many are supposed to know as much as the select few. In principle, there are no more "mysteries" or "secrets" associated either to the Church or to the State. The many citizens should be in a position to argue, persuade, and assent to its laws just like the elite or the few. In reality, with Alfarabi I believe we find the first seeds of the idea of "public reason" recently defended by Rawls, which explains that constitutional principles need to be discussed in terms that avoid both the technicalities of philosophy or science as much as the "intuitions" of faith-based interpretations of religion.

Alfarabi's idea of a civil religion influenced Averroes and Maimonides, the most important philosopher of medieval Judaism, and made its way to the Latin Averroists in the faculty of arts in Paris, from where this approach to monotheism reached Dante and Marsilius of Padua, and from there was taken up and elaborated by Machiavelli, Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant and Jefferson[37].

5. *Civil Religion and Worldly Happiness*

Let me now recapitulate my conclusions so far. A civil religion is a philosophical idea of religion that re-interprets the idea of revealed or prophetic religions as divine *nomoi* in terms of a political theory of constitutionalism. From the perspective of a civil religion, the ideal polity will have no Church which is superior and separate from the State, but equally the ideal polity will always be ready to sacrifice the power of government to the power of the people and not vice versa. For civil religion the artefact that mediates philosophical principles (idea of good) with democratic politics (public happiness of the many) is a constitution. Thus, the role of civil religion in politics and law is very simply this: it is what guarantees that a constitution stands higher than the State. Thus, for civil religion the prophet-philosopher stands higher than the king or political leader.

But what is a political constitution? A constitution is a complex design, a living mechanism that divides and balances powers designed to safeguard the liberties of individuals and to empower the people living under these laws. This idea of constitution is the great achievement of Enlightenment political philosophy, and it is a scientific achievement, but one that was made possible by the idea of civil religion. The most important achievement of this idea of civil religion is that it allows us to think of a political constitution as what unites both natural sci-

[37] The history of transmission of Alfarabi's politico-theological ideas is complicated and also contested. For one hypothesis, see S. Pines, "La philosophie dans l'économie du genre humain selon Averroes: une réponse à Alfarabi?" in S. Strousma (ed.), *Studies in the History of Arabic Philosophy. The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines*, The Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1996, pp. 357-377.

ence and messianic religion, Nature and God, prudence and salvation. It is not by accident that the formula found in the American *Declaration of Independence* refers to "Nature's God": this is the idea of God according to civil religion and is an idea of God that underpins the superiority of the constitution over the king and over the government.

I have argued that the idea of civil religion posits that the goal of government should be nothing less and nothing more than the worldly or public happiness of peoples. This means that every politics that demands sacrifice in this world to be compensated in some "beyond" is illegitimate. But it also rejects every form of sacrifice that is justified in the name of the maximization of the private happiness (or preferences or utility), even if this is the private happiness of the majority of people. Thus, neither spiritual religion nor economic rationality ought to guide politics: neither fundamentalist martyrdom nor neoliberal "austerity" and "precariety" are as such legitimate demands.

But what does "public" happiness mean as opposed to "private" happiness? To answer this question my discussion of civil religion has to extend beyond political matters. The idea of worldly happiness or salvation in civil religion must be able to compete with the idea of other-worldly happiness or salvation offered by spiritual religions. The concept of worldly happiness does not refer only to the idea of "world", meaning whatever pertains to the public sphere, as a synonym of "the city" or of the "human order of things". True, worldly happiness entails the freedoms of individuals and the empowerment of citizens; it entails realizing the egalitarian ideals inscribed within the republican constitution. But "worldly" happiness refers also to the part of the world that is nature, i.e., the reality that transcends the human order. We are a part of nature; nature is not a part of us. That is why the God that is mentioned in the civil religion of the *Declaration of Independence*, "Nature's God", is the Spinozist *Deus sive Natura*. A civil religion worthy of its name ought to provide a cosmic meaning of happiness, beyond the limits of republican political life, since after all a republic is part of nature, and, like Spinoza says, the best form of government is a republic because it is the one closest to nature[38].

My hypothesis is that this "cosmic" aspect of worldly happiness is the functional equivalent of messianic discourses in spiritual religions, except that in civil religion the messianic dimension is captured by the formula of a "return to nature". Whereas a spiritual religion needs to push us upwards, to an other-worldly dimension, and forwards, towards an "end of history", or, in its secularized fashion, forwards into a never-ending progress, the kind of civil religion I have in mind argues that happiness is found not by moving forwards but in a turning-back, in a return to beginnings, that is, a return to nature.

But what kind of nature are we meant to return to? The modern discourse on civil religion gives two meanings to nature: a messianic conception of nature, and

[38] For a recent development of Spinoza's complicated conception of God, see É. Balibar, "Spinoza's Three Gods and the Modes of Communication", *European Journal of Philosophy* 20 (1), 2012, pp. 26-49.

a scientific conception of nature. The civil idea of messianic nature, which we find in Spinoza, for instance, but before him in Machiavelli as well and after him in Nietzsche, is based on the idea of a radical equality between all living beings. This intuition is safeguarded by our political belief that it is "by nature" that all human beings are "equal and free". Thus, for civil religion the return to a messianic conception of nature means a return to an ideal of radical equality of each with all. In Negri and Agamben, this ideal has recently taken the form of a recovery of the Franciscan notion of "highest poverty". This is the ideal of "poverty" not as lack or deprivation, but as a form of life in which certain public things and goods are to be used by everyone but owned by no one. Another example of this messianic idea of return to nature is found in the call for strong versions of ecological sustainability, and, in general, in the drive to "recycle" and "reuse" as much as possible – recycling is a very profane form of "return to nature". Yet another aspect of messianic nature in civil religion is the belief that everyone is in principle capable of knowing as much as anyone else, because true knowledge is not the possession of individual intellects but of a general or public intellect[39]. This ideal is what motivates the practical policy of aiming towards a free education accessible to all, which is a fundamental principle of civil religion.

What is the scientific meaning of the "return to nature"? If we consider the possibility that aspects of modern science are also part of civil religion, as I do although I cannot demonstrate this now[40], then the meaning of a "return to nature" requires that we opt for the belief that nature is eternal rather than the creation of a God. Whereas spiritual religion, at least in the West, assumes the idea of nature as creation of a supra-natural God, civil religion, by way of contrast, favours the belief that nature is eternal. To persuade us of this belief is the purpose of Stephen Hawking's narratives about contemporary cosmology. More particularly, the belief in the eternity of nature entails a belief in the "eternal return" of everything. Recent advances in cosmology, detailed by Hawking and others, have bolstered this belief in the eternal return thanks to the theories of parallel universes or the multiverse[41]. On this model of an eternal rhythm of exploding and contracting parallel universes, everything that did not happen to you in this universe, everything that you regretted doing or omitting to do, has hap-

[39] For the development of this idea in post-operaism, see P. Virno, "General Intellect" in *Lessico Postfordista*, Feltrinelli, Roma 2001, pp. 1-23; and A. Illuminati, *Averroe e l'intelletto pubblico*, Manifestolibri, Roma 1996. From the perspective of French post-Althusserian thinking, see A. Honneth and J. Rancière, *Recognition or Disagreement*, edited by K. Genel and J.-P. Deranty, Columbia University Press, New York 2016. Rancière speaks of the "capacity of anybody" to participate in politics based on the premise that "intelligence is the same in all its operations and it belongs to everybody" (ivi, 139).

[40] For the background to this claim, see the discussion of Bacon and Galileo in H. Gatti, *Ideas of Liberty in Early Modern Europe: from Machiavelli to Milton*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 2015.

[41] See B. Greene, *The Hidden Reality. Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2011, and for the history of the multiverse idea, see M.-J. Rubenstein, *Worlds without End. The Many Lives of the Multiverse*, Columbia University Press, New York 2014.

pened to you, not once but an infinite amount of times, in a parallel existence, in some other version of this universe. I believe that this idea of eternal recurrence, if properly understood, contains the deepest layer of meaning that can be associated with the idea of worldly happiness and is the kernel of a republican civil religion worthy of its name[42].

[42] I refer to the discussion of eternal return in contemporary cosmology and its relation to radical conceptions of revolution from Blanqui to Benjamin in M. Vatter, *The Republic of the Living*, cit., chapter 9.