

“Of This World”

Religion and Politics in *The Prince*

By Matthew Sohn

Although Christ famously remarked that “[His] kingdom is not of this world,” religion and politics have, at times, been virtually indistinguishable.¹ Indeed, the Catholic Church under Popes Alexander VI and Julius II behaved as though it were its own nation-state, guided not by scripture, but by *Realpolitik*. As the lines distinguishing the sacred from the temporal blurred, the papacy assumed powers that superseded St. Peter’s original prerogative, such as the right to raise armies, the right to negotiate treaties, and the right to annex territory. In light of these developments, it should come as no surprise that Machiavelli drops biblical ethics from consideration. By framing the papacy as a political actor and eschewing Christian moral absolutism, *The Prince* subordinates religion to politics in the hierarchy of needs – a development that marks the beginning of political realism.

Perhaps Italy’s most able statesman, at least according to Machiavelli, was Cesare Borgia, the illegitimate son of Alexander VI. The pope practiced nepotism relentlessly and ruthlessly, going so far as to authorize Louis XII’s divorce. Upon his entry into Italy, the French king rewarded Alexander by furnishing his son with an army, which was then used to seize the Romagna and build Cesare’s power base.² As for the city of Rome itself, Cesare also strengthened the Borgia at the expense of the aristocracy, namely the Orsini and Colonna clans.³ Despite being the leader of Christendom, an occupation that, in theory, transcended earthly politics, Alexander

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“showed, more than any other pope that ever was, how much can be done in that office with money and arms.”⁴ The politicization of the Church was not confined to the papacy; it affected the College of Cardinals, which is the body responsible for electing popes. To secure himself from his father’s successors, Cesare “controlled a good majority [of the College].”⁵ Exercising this advantage, he tried to elect a favorable pope. Yet he faltered upon Julius II’s triumph.⁶ The Vatican not only waged external conflicts, but also witnessed internal power struggles, which means we can define its ecclesiastical institutions as political entities.

Alexander’s death did nothing to forestall the Church’s increasing encroachment into peninsular politics. Julius II “pushed beyond [his predecessor]; he planned to take Bologna, crush the Venetians, and drive the French out of Italy.”⁷ The “Warrior Pope” was a politician in priest’s clothing, so much so that, as the historian Christine Shaw argues, “his military exploits damaged the spiritual prestige of the papacy.”⁸ Julius was, without question, a political animal. Machiavelli reserves special praise for his adroit exploitation of Fortune, which *The Prince* uses as a substitute for God’s divine intervention. The impulsive nature of Julian diplomacy notwithstanding, papal boldness “kept the Spanish and the Venetians uneasy and inactive,” allowing Rome to score victory after victory.⁹ Given Julius’s conduct, Machiavelli contends that “the man who wants to hold [Fortune] down must beat and bully her”¹⁰ — a takeaway that sharply deviates from “blessed are the meek.”¹¹ Rather than embody Christ-like meekness, Julius exuded an imperial aura akin to that of a Roman emperor. Thus, the Renaissance papacies functioned as political reigns, justifying political means through political ends.

One biblical leader to whom Julius compared himself was Moses, who was featured most prominently on the pope’s tomb. Moses, after all, was a “priest, lawgiver, [and] ruler.”¹² Machiavelli, however, does not evaluate him as a priest, choosing instead to only assess his performance as a lawgiver and as a ruler. Unlike the Bible, *The Prince* claims that Moses became a prince “by [his] own powers,” making no mention of

supernatural manifestations—be it the Burning Bush or the Ten Plagues.¹³ Furthermore, Machiavelli's Moses epitomizes the principle that might makes right. Had it not been for their weapons, Moses, Theseus, Romulus, and Cyrus "could never have imposed their institutions on their peoples for so long."¹⁴ The equivalence drawn between Moses and non-Christian rulers like Theseus, Romulus, and Cyrus simultaneously downplays Moses's religious fealty and emphasizes his secular, political *virtù*. No longer in a class reserved for saints, Moses becomes a model of princely rule, not Judeo-Christian virtue.

With charity toward none and malice for all,¹⁵ the ideal sovereign as described in *The Prince*, is an individual who learns "how not to be good, and [uses] that knowledge, or [refrains] from using it, as necessity requires."¹⁶ Morals, then, are to be regarded as malleable, a man-made artifice built of wax that wanes whenever Fortune elopes with one's adversaries. Although Machiavelli and the Bible both presume that human nature suffers from intrinsic flaws, they prescribe radically different responses to the fall of man. Christian doctrine urges the faithful to turn the other cheek, whereas *The Prince* asserts that, "cruelty can be described as well used . . . for reasons of self-preservation."¹⁷ Audacious yet sober, Machiavelli does not completely throw morality out of the window. He rejects moral absolutism, which is the notion that the choices facing policymakers are always a clear-cut Manichaean dichotomy of good versus evil, or obedience versus transgression. In other words, the world for all its messy complexities, is not black-and-white. Some questions, such as those regarding the very survival of the state, inherently demand answers that may not be attractive, but are no less necessary or unavoidable. As Machiavelli points out, "Doubtless if all men were good, this rule would be bad; but since they are a sad lot, and keep no faith with you, you in your turn are under no obligation to keep it with them."¹⁸ Even though many disparage this view as being overly cynical and "Machiavellian," none can deny that it provides the epistemological basis for realism.

Hence, religion serves a useful purpose, so long as it remains subordinate to political considerations. In fact, Machiavelli commends ecclesiastical states for their “safe and happy governments,”¹⁹ enjoying “such authority that they keep their princes in power whatever they do, however they live.”²⁰ The political legitimacy conferred by faith and scripture is formidable, “ruled by a heavenly providence to which human reason cannot reach.”²¹ Machiavelli’s implicit recognition that political strategy cannot factor in “heavenly providence” explains why theological and scriptural references do not surface in *The Prince*, a work purely devoted to the temporal. This demarcation of the political and religious spheres is, for the most part constant, with one exception: when religion is used as a means to a political end, an exception demonstrated best by the Renaissance papacy. Pope Alexander VI, supposedly the paragon of virtue, “never did anything else, never had another thought, except to deceive men,” lest the Borgia family lose its grip on dynastic power.²²

Nevertheless, rulers can profit immensely from a public image that projects righteousness and piety. Machiavelli is indeed cognizant of the potential for backlash, particularly over cruelty, deception, and other forms of unethical conduct. No matter how powerful, any leader who defies popular opinion does so at their own peril, for, as President Lincoln once observed, “with public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed.”²³ *The Prince* acknowledges the clear and present danger in scorning the body politic through excessive, categorical unscrupulousness, and notes that a prince “should appear all compassion, all honor, all humanity, all integrity, all religion. Nothing is more necessary than to seem to have this last virtue.”²⁴ Therefore, a veneer of religiosity, even in the absence of substance, will foster trust among the masses, assuring them that their sovereign is restrained by God and His irrevocable commandments. According to the Machiavellian worldview, rulers should pursue all of religion’s benefits without incurring any of its costs. Religion, simply put, is a means to political power, not an end in itself. By appealing to things not of this world, politicians empower themselves with

assets that cannot be ignored: a moral pedestal, an idealistic vision, and rhetorical felicity. Such advantages enhance the prince's exceptionalism, the aura that inspires awe, respect, and, in some cases, fear. Art patronage is Machiavelli's advice put into practice. Medici's commissions, for instance, enabled Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici to "appear all compassion, all honor, . . . all religion."²⁵ In more recent years, it has grown common to hear public figures quote scripture or talk about being born again. To be clear, not all references to religion arise from Machiavellian motives. Rather, the main point is that religion holds public power, and to dismiss this power is untenable, especially given the high-stakes nature of politics.

If there is one claim that Machiavelli's defenders and detractors can both agree on, it is that *The Prince* heralded the advent of political realism. Through realism, regimes acquired intellectual justifications for state policy. The diminution of any recourse to a higher ethical order bent the arc of the moral universe ever more toward secular governance.²⁶ Yet it left a void, one that would have to be filled by new philosophical and legal standards. The social contract replaced the New Covenant as the warrant for governmental legitimacy; the security of natural rights supplanted the sanctity of church doctrine as the purpose of government; majority consent displaced dynastic and apostolic heritage as the mechanism for succession. In addition, *The Prince* has educated some of history's most consequential statesmen, including Napoleon Bonaparte, Joseph Stalin, and Henry Kissinger. Their respective legacies attest to the significance of Machiavelli's work. The maps redrawn, the zeitgeists fostered, and, yes, the lives lost are the real-life, tangible outcomes of teaching men "how not to be good."²⁷ The intersection of religion and politics in *The Prince* is unquestionably significant; whether it is to be loved or feared is a different question.²⁸

NOTES

1. John 18:36.
2. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992), 20.
3. Ibid., 20.
4. Ibid., 33.
5. Ibid., 22.
6. Ibid., 23.
7. Ibid., 33.
8. Christine Shaw, "Julius II," in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, ed. Paul F. Grendler (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999), 362.
9. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992), 69.
10. Ibid., 69.
11. Matt. 5:5.
12. John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy* (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2012), 400.
13. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992), 16.
14. Ibid., 17.
15. Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address of Abraham Lincoln" (speech, Washington, D.C., March, 4, 1865), The Avalon Project, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln2.asp.
16. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992), 42.
17. Ibid., 27.
18. Ibid., 48.
19. Ibid., 32.
20. Ibid., 31-32.
21. Ibid., 32.
22. Ibid., 48.
23. Abraham Lincoln, "First Debate: Ottawa, Illinois" (speech, Ottawa, August 21, 1858), National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/debate1.htm>.

24. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992), 49.
25. Ibid., 49.
26. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution" (speech, Washington, D.C., March 31, 1968), The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-10>.
27. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992), 42.
28. Ibid., 46.

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