MACHIAVELLI, LUTHER, AND THE REFORMATION OF POLITICS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School

of the University of Notre Dame

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Jarrett A. Carty, B.A., M.A., M.A.

_____________________________

Michael P. Zuckert, Director

Graduate Studies in Political Science

Notre Dame, Indiana

April 2006
MACHIAVELLI, LUTHER, AND THE REFORMATION OF POLITICS

Abstract

by

Jarrett A. Carty

Niccolò Machiavelli and Martin Luther were two contemporaries of the early sixteenth century who recognized a theological-political crisis in their age. Though based upon vastly different foundations, they each diagnosed the crisis, explained what had contributed to it, and sought a way to resolve it. In so doing, their political theories converged. Essentially both men sought to restore temporal government to its place of honor and purpose beyond ecclesial control, and to restore an understanding of political reality so that temporal government could be well founded and efficaciously maintained.

Machiavelli claimed that by going to the effectual truth of politics (rather than the imagination of it), he had departed from the writings of others. Luther boasted that not since the Apostles had spoke so highly of temporal government as he. This dissertation accounts for these boasts and their political theories, tracing them first through the common experience of a theological-political crisis, followed by their respective diagnoses and criticisms of the age, their substantive political theories, and finally the common ground between these political theories.
Both men argued against any kind of medieval universalism in government, utopian politics, or any withdrawal from or denunciation of temporal government. Both men saw political reality as imperfect and limited, a world which was morally ambiguous. In so doing Machiavelli and Luther reformed political theory.
For Carol and Patrick

“I thank the rich and gracious Creator on behalf of myself and all the world that he has established and assured in the commandment the increase and preservation of the human race, that is of households and states. Without these two institutions or governments the world would not exist a single year, because without government there can be no peace, and where there is no peace there can be no family, children cannot be begotten or raised, and fatherhood and motherhood would cease to be.”

Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*
# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION: MACHIAVELLI, LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION OF POLITICS

CHAPTER ONE: THE THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL CRISIS OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

CHAPTER TWO: MACHIAVELLI AND THE CRISIS OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

CHAPTER THREE: LUTHER AND THE CRISIS OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

CHAPTER FOUR: MACHIAVELLI AND THE ART OF POLITICS

CHAPTER FIVE: LUTHER AND THE RESTORATION OF POLITICS

CHAPTER SIX: MACHIAVELLI, LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION OF POLITICS

REFERENCES
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An enduring irony in writing this dissertation was that it required so much time in quiet study and isolation which was only made possible through the sacrifices of others. In the most difficult moments of writing and thinking, when I was most tempted to see this project as a solitary hardship with which no one else could relate, I would remind myself with the comfortable truth that I was supported (and indeed blessed) by so many others in a myriad of ways. I wish this brief note of thanks to be only the beginning of my expression of gratitude.

Though I seldom have had the chance to extol them publicly, my teachers throughout my academic career at Carleton University and the University of Notre Dame could not have been finer instructors and mentors. I am particularly touched by my professors from Carleton University and their wives, who to this day continue to guide me through higher studies and welcome me as their friend. My love and appreciation is given to Will and Mary-Roz Mullins, W. Randy and Jackie Newell, Tom and Kay Darby, and Phil and Kathleen Azzie. At Notre Dame, I am grateful to the political theory faculty – a community which combines serious scholarship with a warm collegiality – particularly to Fred Dallmayr, Walter Nicgorski, Edward Goerner. The members of my proposal and defense committees I thank below.

I will always cherish my experience at Notre Dame for the friendships that were made and continue to endure. The list of “Domer” friends who have helped me in this
project is rather long; I expect to convey my appreciation to them as our friendships grow throughout our lives. I am gladdened that my distance from Notre Dame in this past year or so has not hindered the closeness I feel to all of them.

The bulk of this dissertation was written after I moved back to my native city of Ottawa; thus I must acknowledge the unwavering friendships back home that kept me buoyant in the turbulent waters of research and writing. To Josh and Melissa Cooper (and their girls) and Cedric and Leslee Nizman: they welcomed me back as if I had never left and provided the often needed relief from my proverbial “ivory tower.” I am so grateful for their love. To Cynthia and Greg Lemoine: their invaluable company never ceased to enlighten the darkest dissertation day. To Eileen Clarkin and Dimitris Foss: their continued friendship has always been a warm pleasure. Great thanks are due to Marion Fleming and Conn Hutcheon, who in this last year, like in so many other years, have given me a place to rest my mind while my body worked. To Chris Matusiak (whom I have affectionately known since I can remember) and Philippa Lenczewski, I am ever thankful for their deep friendship, especially now that Chris and I are comrades in the battle for meaningful scholarship. I cannot forget the great comfort that Geoff Kellow and Kelly Walker (and their little ones) have been in the past year. As another companion in academia, Geoff has been a stalwart friend keeping my sanity in order and my spirits up through all the ups and downs of writing. To my dear sister Paula and her soon-to-be husband Rob Tyson: my sincerest thanks for their love and support this past year. I am delighted that a completed dissertation will be rewarded with a new brother.

I am grateful to John Roos and Eileen Botting in the Department of Political Science at Notre Dame for their service on my dissertation proposal committee. They
were instrumental in helping this project launch with appropriate perimeters. I am also grateful to Brad Gregory of the Department of History, Notre Dame, for his insights on the sixteenth century Reformation and Renaissance, and for revealing the riches of historical scholarship.

I am very grateful to Mary Keys, Department of Political Science at Notre Dame for her efforts and service on my dissertation committee. Though I was not fortunate enough to have taken a class from her, I was elated that she agreed to serve on my committee. She is – like so many of my other teachers – an exemplary scholar and a kind person. I am also very grateful to Ruth Abbey at the Department of Political Science at Notre Dame who graciously joined my dissertation committee when a substitute was needed. I only wish that I had still been a resident student when she joined our department.

For Catherine Zuckert and my advisor Michael Zuckert, I am especially thankful. I cannot imagine two teachers more supportive than they have been during my studies at Notre Dame and in this last year away in Canada. They have the rare gifts of being both a source of great support and of challenge to their students, thus eliciting my best efforts. Like any graduate student, I found doctoral studies at times very trying, yet the Zuckerts were relentless in their confidence and trust in my abilities. Simply put, this project would not have reached completion without their help. They are models of professorial dedication to their students and the fruits of the mind. A doctoral student could not find a better advisor than Michael Zuckert.

The final thanks are reserved for my parents. While writing this dissertation, they had me live again “at home,” which they honestly welcomed, though I suspect Hamish,
the Scottish terrier, benefited more by my presence than they did. They neither researched nor proofread a page of this project; moreover, they have treated the dissertation with some wonder (my mother once aptly asked “how many books on Luther does one person need?”). Yet their part in its completion surpasses all others. They have been in many ways excellent parents, approaching an ideal of love and selflessness in what they have given me. Appropriately then, this dissertation is dedicated to them.
INTRODUCTION:

MACHIARELLI, LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION OF POLITICS

*The Imitation of Christ*, a famous devotional manual of the fifteenth century, urged Christians to nurture the interior life and scorn the sundry vanities of the world. A book so popular it would be printed in hundreds of editions in many languages in Niccolò Machiavelli and Martin Luther’s lifetimes alone, it brought elements of the monastic ideal and the interior life to more laity in more places than had any other devotional book of the late medieval age. *The Imitation of Christ* did not countenance disobedience to civil authorities; rather, it urged devoted Christians to be lawful, obedient, and submissive. Neither did *The Imitation of Christ* disparage temporal government; in fact, it was not mentioned at all.

As a devotional manual, it is no surprise that *The Imitation of Christ* did not treat political matters. Yet it certainly taught a Christian ethic, and the fact that affairs of government were absent implicitly taught a lesson about their value and place in holy living, according to this late medieval devotional guide. In the midst of the Great Western Schism and its aftermath, *The Imitation of Christ* brought to laity a way of holy living outside the domain of monasticism and the control of Church authorities, but it also taught that this way of holy living was separate from politics; holy lives, the manual taught, were best lived apart from the affairs of temporal government.
Yet just as the fifteenth century layperson was often compelled to withdraw from temporal affairs, the late medieval papacy was compelled to be more enmeshed in them. To strengthen its place in the universal Church, to survive as an institution, and often to satisfy the unsavory desires and ambitions of the pontiff, the papacy sought to dominate and control the political affairs of Western Europe. The papacy in this period became the head of a proto-modern state: its rule of the papal lands approached the absolutism characteristic of early modern divine right of kings, its codified system of law had not been seen since the rule of the Roman Empire, and its bureaucracy was surpassed only by the administrative machines of modern nation-states.

At once, Christendom in the late medieval age seemed to deny the divine sanction of temporal government and relinquish its control to ecclesial authority. Yet there were many who protested ecclesial control over temporal government. Moreover, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries intellectual and cultural movements in the early Renaissance had begun to look back at classical political thought and practice, aiming to revitalize them in the present age through the emulation of the ancient examples. However, to some political thinkers these intellectual movements and apologists for temporal government failed to restore it to its place of honor, and may have exacerbated its neglect at the hands of the Church.

Machiavelli and Luther were two contemporaries of the early sixteenth century who recognized a political crisis in their age. Though based upon vastly different foundations, assumptions, and worldviews, Machiavelli and Luther each diagnosed the crisis, explained what had contributed to it, and sought a way to resolve it. In so doing and despite their enormous differences, the political theories of Machiavelli and Luther
converged. Their projects were essentially restorative: to restore temporal government to its place of honor and great purpose beyond ecclesial control, and to restore an understanding of political reality so that temporal government could be well founded and efficaciously maintained.

Each claimed that his ideas on temporal government were watershed ideas in the history of political thought. Machiavelli claimed that by going to the effectual truth of politics (rather than the imagination of it), he had departed from the writings of others. Luther boasted that not since the Apostles had anyone spoken so highly of temporal government as he. Their claims to be watershed political thinkers signaled the beginning of their remarkable convergence in political theory. The substance of their political thought reveals how much more remarkable that convergence really was. What follows herein is basically an account of their boasts and their political theories, tracing them first through the common experience of a theological-political crisis, followed by their respective diagnoses and criticisms of the age, the political theories they put forth to respond to their troubled age, and finally the common ground between these political theories.

Machiavelli and Luther’s political thought converged in the effort to restore temporal government from the perceived corruptions of the late middle ages. Both men argued against any kind of medieval universalism in government. Machiavelli and Luther stood vehemently against both utopian politics (which saw government as the means for perfecting this world) or any withdrawal from or denunciation of temporal government. Both men saw political reality as imperfect and limited, a world which was morally ambiguous. Is so doing Machiavelli and Luther reformed political theory.
Machiavelli and Luther are easily contrasted. Machiavelli was the shrewd Florentine diplomat, the observer of Renaissance warfare and the imprisoned partisan. He wrote of political successes and failures, the winning of glory, the survival of the cunning and wise prince, and the perpetuation of a republic. Luther was the uncompromising Augustinian monk, the father of the Reformation and the great critic of Western Christianity. His voluminous writings were pervaded with a deep concern for the salvation of souls. Although they greatly differed in many respects, their political theories converged in part because they were similarly shaped and directed by the theological-political crisis they shared in the early sixteenth century.

To understand the character of this crisis, one must understand the theological and political complexity of the medieval world. Too often, medieval political theory is at best oversimplified, or at worst ignored. Introductory university courses in political philosophy can safely skip medieval thought in favour of a binary contrast of ancients and moderns. The very term “middle ages” sweepingly relegates entire cultures and civilizations into an interregnum between ancient and modern periods. In part the reason for this neglect may be the many obstacles facing the modern reader of medieval political theory, not the least of which is the misguided notion that the questions with which the medieval thinkers had struggled, such as the relationship of revelation to reason, are no
longer relevant to the modern or post-modern age. However relevant medieval political thought may be in itself, the political theories of Machiavelli and Luther cannot be understood without reference to the medieval political thought that preceded them.

Avoiding anachronisms and misnomers in a study of medieval political thought is essential. One ubiquitous anachronism is the use of the word “state” in contrast to “church.” Broadly speaking these terms are inapplicable to the relationships between ecclesiastical authority and political authority in the medieval period. Both civil and ecclesial authorities were considered to be established by God and so both were necessary to the full worship and service of Him here on earth. How finely temporal and ecclesial authority were to be distinguished always stirred contention. And so, the common projects of political thought in the middle ages were to determine how civil and ecclesial authority were to interact with one another, over where and what their jurisdictions lay, and whom (either pope or emperor; bishop or prince), under various circumstances, one was to obey. Furthermore, even though medieval thought saw civil and ecclesial authorities as complementary jurisdictions within a Christian whole, this by no means eliminated the conflict between the authorities. Disputes over lay investiture, taxation, and papal supremacy were often bitter, long-standing, and destructive. Instead of assuming that the shared values and faith of the European medieval world calmed


disputes, one could just as easily conclude from medieval politics, as one commentator put it, that “disputes tend to become more embittered when each side is intent on capturing the same symbols of authority and truth.” The contention over papal authority in temporal affairs, for example, recurred through many centuries, and became a subject of great importance to both Machiavelli and Luther.

Why consider this crisis as both theological and political? Just as the medieval world conceived the civil and ecclesial authorities as complementary powers in the governing of Christendom, it would be misleading to label the crisis of the sixteenth century as strictly speaking a political one, without paying heed to the theological debates woven into it. To see how theologically significant the debates about political power were in Machiavelli and Luther’s time, we need not look further than their own major writings. On the one hand, consider Machiavelli’s Prince: it was theologically provocative precisely for its lack of theology, and the challenges it posed to Christian ethics. Though published posthumously in the 1530’s, it was put on Pope Paul IV’s Index autrorum et librorum in 1559 and by the later sixteenth century was seen as the prime enemy of the political theorists of the counter-reformation. On the other hand,

---


4 While it shall later be argued that Machiavelli and Luther both sever temporal authority from the ecclesial, the terms “church” and “state” are still for them, like medieval thought in general, modern anachronisms. See for e.g., E. G. Schwiebert “The Medieval Pattern in Luther’s Views of the State,” Church History, 12 (1943).


consider Martin Luther, who unlike Machiavelli was pre-occupied with theological questions, yet was also early in his career called upon to explain the political implications of his theology. Most notable was his Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obeyed\(^7\) of 1523. In his most important political work, Luther responded both to harsh secular rulers, such as Duke George of Saxony who had banned Luther’s translation of the New Testament in November, 1522, and several radical Anabaptist reformers who had begun to deny the need for secular government altogether.\(^8\)

The theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century resulted from the convergence of three interrelated trends of the late medieval period: the growing political disunity of Christendom, the growing but paradoxical political assertions of the Holy Roman Emperor, and those of the papacy. Together, these trends combined in such a way that a major pillar of medieval political theory was rendered obsolete. The standard Christian dualism of the “two swords,” which considered secular and ecclesial authorities as complementary organs and sharers of temporal sovereignty, were discarded and

---

\(^7\) Von Weltlicher Oberkeit; the English title above is from the J. Schindel translation in Luther’s Works, Volume 45 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962): 75-129. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent English titles of Luther’s writings are those from the Luther’s Works (LW) translations. References to Luther’s writings will also include the Weimarer Ausgabe (WA) (Weimar: H. Bohlau, 1883-1993) references for the German text (WA 11, 245-280).

replaced with either hierocratic papal arguments or claims of imperial supremacy in temporal government.

The Growing Political Disunity of Christendom

Disunity in the Christian world in the late medieval age and the early sixteenth century was surely not unprecedented. A great division had severed Christendom into a mutually excommunicated Latin West and Greek East by the end of the first Christian millennium. The events most often associated with the schism are those of 1053-1054. Pope Leo IX (1049-1054), in an attempt to secure the Papal States, led a disastrous military attempt against the occupying Normans in southern Italy and Sicily, a region traditionally under the ecclesial jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople.⁹

The disunity of Latin and Greek Christianity, however, did not begin with the hostilities between pope and patriarch in 1054. Divisions between East and West had become apparent even in the period of Augustine of Hippo in the late fourth and early fifth century.¹⁰ There would be many to follow. The Christological controversies of the fifth century, the Acacian Schism of the sixth century, and the iconoclasm controversy in the seventh and eighth centuries had also divided east from west.¹¹ After the split of the eleventh century he Fourth Crusade in 1204 brought the conquest of Constantinople by

---


¹⁰ See Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), Ch. 24.

the Latin Christian forces; this humiliation at the hands of their Western brethren still remains a symbol of the bitterness and suspicion the Orthodox Church has for the West.\textsuperscript{12}

The schism with the East strongly influenced the politics of the Western Christian world leading up to Machiavelli and Luther’s time. Most notable was its effect on the papacy. In the early medieval age up to the end of the millennium, Western civilisation paled significantly in comparison to the grandeur, achievement and prosperity of Byzantium. While the cultural and ecclesial weight of Christendom was found in the East, the papacy in Rome grew in stature for the Western world. When the seat of imperial power moved to Constantinople from Rome, the political significance of the papacy increased. Though for much of the early medieval period its political influence was exerted mainly over Rome and central Italy, the papacy was well poised to become a powerful political actor over Europe in the absence of effective imperial rule.

In the eleventh to thirteenth centuries Western Christendom flourished as in no other period in the medieval age. As R. W. Southern said of this age: “there have been periods in European history in which more rapid progress has been made in some directions, and in which there has been a greater variety of individual genius, but there has never been a period which has displayed so great a variety of achievement in the service of a single aim.”\textsuperscript{13} This variety of achievement included accomplishments in natural science, philosophy, theology and art. Canon law, which had barely been considered legal science at the turn of the eleventh century, had by the beginning of the


fourteenth developed into a massive scholarly undertaking.\textsuperscript{14} The twelfth century, has often been named the “renaissance” of the middle ages for its renewal of legal jurisprudence, and Greek and Arabic knowledge.\textsuperscript{15} Religious orders grew exponentially in this high point of the middle ages, all with their own constitutions and \textit{raison d’être} and all under papal direction and protection. The great Orders of friars (such as the Franciscans and Dominicans) were formed, as well as hermetic Carthusians, the Cistercians, hospitals and many other organizations of service and charity. This was also the period of the great military Orders of Christendom: the Templars, the Teutonic Knights, and the Hospitalers all arose to defend the holy sites of the faith, pilgrims, and the holdings of the Christian world against Muslim and Mongol infidels, from southern Spain to Palestine and Egypt.\textsuperscript{16} This was also the age of the crusades, with the First Crusade coming at the conclusion of the eleventh century (1096-1099) under the pontificate of Pope Urban II, and several other crusades, including the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204), which sacked Constantinople, in the century to follow. These centuries were the apex of Latin Christendom, and events from the formation of the Franciscans to the crusading of the Templars in various ways expressed the consolidation of the Western world into a Latin Christian culture.

Whereas religious orders and crusades united Europe culturally, the papacy in the Latin West united it politically. Claims to papal supremacy over temporal authority were

\textsuperscript{14} ibid., p. 42.


not an innovation of the eleventh century; the ninth century forgery, *Donation of Constantine*, for example, had been by then used for two centuries to buttress all sorts of arguments for papal temporal sovereignty.\(^{17}\) Even though the papacy at the beginning of the eleventh century made lofty claims to power, its influence and power lay in squalor. Yet in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, its power and influence over the secular authorities had reached, with few exceptions, to the status of a pan-European monarch.\(^{18}\) The papacy of this period was at the centre of medieval politics. Many scholars of political theory have stressed the importance of understanding this papal monarchism if one is to understand the later middle ages and the development of modern political theory.\(^{19}\)

The pope who best represented the era of the papal monarchy was Innocent III (1198-1216).\(^{20}\) Yet he was also an exceptional pope. Part of what made him exceptional, was his deep concern and involvement in matters of politics and diplomacy. Soon after his consecration as Bishop of Rome, Innocent established his authority in the city of Rome and throughout the papal territories, replacing recalcitrant secular authorities with men loyal to his pontificate. His involvement in politics had only begun: throughout his pontificate he would intervene in a disputed imperial election, crown the

\(^{17}\) The *Donation of Constantine* was the supposed bequest of the Emperor Constantine of the temporal authority over Italy and other territories to Pope Sylvester I (314-335). By the fifteenth century it was universally recognised as a forgery; throughout the centuries many had doubted its authenticity.


\(^{19}\) Foremost on this list is Walter Ullmann’s *Medieval Papalism: The Political Theories of the Medieval Canonists* (London: Methuen, 1949).

\(^{20}\) Innocent III was pope during the failed Fourth Crusade, which sacked Constantinople.
king of Bulgaria, attempt to depose the king of Norway, excommunicate kings and claim jurisdiction in feudal disputes between France and England. He raised the authority of the papacy to an unprecedented degree; he was oft to describe himself as “lower than God, but higher than man,” and the office of the papacy as not “of man but of the true God on earth.”

In addition to his political interventions, Innocent expanded the power and authority of the papacy through his decretals, using terms such as *plenitudo potestatis* and *plena potestas*. These terms came to be appropriated by the canonists and decretalists of the high middle ages. Innocent’s claims were rife with major political implications for the papal supremacy, for they allowed the decretalists and popes who succeeded him to expand the temporal authority of the papacy. The popes of the high middle ages, through primarily consolidating papal authority in ecclesial affairs over dissenting and recalcitrant bishops and priests, became in effect the most powerful monarchs in all of Western Christendom. They expanded the idea of “Vicar of Christ” well beyond the episcopal and apostolic claims of the early papacy, claiming to be the

---


23 A decretal was a papal letter sent to settle disputes in a wide variety of matters. Decretals became, by the time of Innocent III, an important source of canon law.

supreme governors of the Christian world, over all sorts of secular powers, including the Holy Roman Emperor.  

But this apparent unity under papal monarchy, did not match the political reality of the medieval age. Remarkably, it is in this high medieval period that we trace the political disunity that comes to pervade Machiavelli and Luther’s sixteenth century. For the papal monarchy of the high middle ages had presided over quite a precarious unity in European politics. It was a unity defined not by the simple submission of secular powers to papal will, but a complex web of relationships between ecclesial and secular powers in which the papacy was the most prominent and influential actor with which major temporal authorities had to contend.

To add to the precarious political unity, many of the tools of political influence available to the papacy could hurt it own ambitions. As one scholar has remarked, the pontiff’s power over temporal authorities could “only be effective by being over-effective.” The tools wielded by the popes could indeed destroy their foes, but not without major political and ecclesial upheavals. These consequences could last for generations and through several popes. There were only two major weapons directly under papal control: interdict, or the suspension of the sacraments in entire communities.

---


26 R. Southern, Western Society and Church in the Middle Ages, p. 125.
and even vast territories,\textsuperscript{27} and excommunication, the exclusion of a member of the Church from the full sacramental and ministerial life. Of course, these weapons were powerful only if they were obeyed and respected, and often they were not. Interdicts and excommunications were often counterproductive to the ends the papacy desired, and sometimes resulted in great factional violence. Machiavelli gives us a telling example in the \textit{History of Florence} where he describes Pope Sixtus IV’s interdict of Florence in 1478; the Florentines refused to obey it and thus forced their priests to celebrate divine office, all the while consolidating their lands and allies against the forces of the pope.\textsuperscript{28}

Thus the papacy of the high middle ages, as an ecclesial monarchy with the primary political influence over the whole of Latin Christendom, found itself bound by the nature of its spiritual primacy to wield temporal authority through means that could end up undermining its own political prominence. Its place in the politics of Europe did not last: by the beginning of the fourteenth century the papacy faced the formidable challenge of both maintaining Rome and the papal lands in Italy and guarding its political stature against rising monarchs and dynasties.

The papacy of Boniface VIII (1295-1303) aptly symbolizes the dissolution of the political position the popes had held only a century earlier. Boniface’s episcopacy remains famous for the intense conflicts it endured against King Philip IV (“the Fair”) of France. It is also famous for its seemingly unprecedented claims for supreme papal authority over temporal powers. By and large, these claims were expressed in two bulls proclaimed in the midst of fervid confrontation between the French monarch and the

\textsuperscript{27} A famous example was Pope Paul III’s interdict of England (along with the excommunication of King Henry VIII) during the English Reformation. Interdict need not be upon communities, cities or nations; it has also applied to individuals.

\textsuperscript{28} Book VIII, Chapter 11.
papacy. The first, *Clericis Laicos* (1296) was written during a war between England and France in which both kings taxed their clergy to finance the “just war” against the other kingdom.²⁹ Boniface’s bull attempted to settle the dispute through a financial stranglehold: under the threat of excommunication, it forbade the clergy to pay taxes and the laity to collect them without the consent of the papacy. At first it appears as though the bull sought only to protect the integrity and authority of the Church. It opened, “that laymen have been very hostile to the church antiquity relates; and it is clearly proved by the experiences of our time.”³⁰ Yet it was a major challenge to the sovereignty of the monarchs. It commanded clergy to disobey their kings and declare all ecclesial goods and persons beyond the authority of the secular ruler. At its political core, *Clericis Laicos* defied the temporal authorities within their own territories.

The second bull, *Unam Sanctam* (1302), went further: it declared that though a pope could err, he could only be judged by God, and further, that it is “altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff.”³¹ Yet even though it was published in the midst of the second dispute caused by King Philip’s condemnation of a French bishop, *Unam Sanctam* was devoid of specific political references and even of explicit papal claims to temporal power. Furthermore, the text scarcely said anything new; much of the bull were bits and pieces of Church sources,

²⁹ By calling it a “just war” and thereby an appropriate endeavour for Church revenues to support, both kings claimed the authority and prerogative to tax the clergy as they were able to do in financing crusades; see B. Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State 1050-1300*, p. 173.


including Hugh of St. Victor and Thomas Aquinas. However, the political implication of the bull could not be ignored. It was a thorough reassertion of the subordination of temporal authority to the pope as a necessary implication of hiercratic spiritual unity in the Church. Essentially, *Unam Sanctam* was an attempt to reaffirm and regain the central place the papacy had held in the politics of Christendom.

Pope Boniface VIII did not regain the political stature for the papacy that his predecessors (such as Innocent III) had held. As a foreshadowing of the political turmoil that was to come, Boniface’s episcopacy ended after a brief return to Rome following the humiliation of his capture by mercenaries at his palace in Anagni, south-east of Rome. Although some accounts of his last days include madness and masochism, most agree he died exhausted from being at the utter mercy of his enemies. And so Boniface came to represent the great disparity between principle and practice in the papacy.

The Great Western Schism of the late middle ages (1378-1417) manifested this growing political disunity of Latin Christendom. The schism added another axis to divide the once politically formidable papacy. In addition to the disparity between claims and practice, the papacy itself was divided amongst competing claimants for the seat of St. Peter. The questions concerning papal authority were no longer only ‘what does the papacy claim to be’ or ‘what can the papacy actually do’ but also ‘who is the real pope?’

---

32 B. Tierney, *Crisis of Church and State 1050-1300*, p. 182.


The schism flagrantly displayed and exacerbated two growing problems for the late medieval papacy. First, the supreme spiritual authority of the papacy became increasingly contested against the authority of church councils. Conciliarism, claiming that church councils – as the representation of the body of Christ – had authority to limit and modify papal authority, rose to its greatest influence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Councils aimed to solve the crisis of the schism, but also to implement many other church reforms to correct perceived ecclesial shortcomings. Second, the schism weakened the effective authority of the papacy in secular matters. Though the claims to authority of Boniface VIII were plenary, the pope’s effective power, as the conflict with Philip had shown, was quite constrained. The schism further manifested this disjunction between papal theory and practice for the papacy in the fourteenth century had to increasingly ally itself with the growing secular monarchs of Europe if its wishes, at least in political affairs, were to be put into effect. During the Great Western Schism, for example, the multiple claimants for the papacy were supported by multiple powers and allegiances in Europe. Thus the popes and antipopes of the schism found themselves indebted to the support of dynasties and emerging national monarchies in order to exert their waning political and spiritual authority over the churches in the territories of the secular powers.

The political disunity of Christendom at the end of the middle ages was manifest in the state of its two most prominent institutions: the Holy Roman Emperor and the papacy. While each institution tended more and more to assume supreme secular

---

authority, neither institution could escape its formidable restraints to actualize its authority. These difficulties caused a considerable philosophic effort in the late medieval period to theorize hierocratic defences of papal and imperial supremacy. It is in the context of these practical and theoretical problems that the crisis of the sixteenth century influenced the political ideas of Machiavelli and Luther.

The Paradoxical Power of the Holy Roman Emperor

When Charles V became the Holy Roman Emperor in 1519, he became arguably the most powerful figure in sixteenth century European politics. His empire covered much of Western Europe, included a multitude of languages and cultures and commanded the allegiance of many princes, lords and nobles. Yet the emperor’s effective power was at the same time remarkably limited. This conundrum existed for several reasons. First, the idea of the empire had begun to wane. Though imperial power had been highly regarded since the reign of Charlemagne, it had by the sixteenth century become clear to many of its subjects – especially the German states – that a functional, unified monarchy was not to be found in the Holy Roman Empire. Second, the constitutional structure of the empire made the emperor largely dependent on the cooperation of the princes and secular authorities under him. Third, even though the Reformation and Turkish invasion threatened to dissolve and eradicate the Empire and Western Christianity, the emperor had to endure and contend with the political aspirations of the papacy to the detriment of its own consolidation of power. At times this relationship produced strong allegiances, in other times outright hostility.
The idea of a Europe united under the Holy Roman Emperor had begun to wane. At the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth, there were several efforts to reform the Holy Roman Empire. Earlier calls for imperial reform in the mid-fifteenth century had been generally fruitless. The actual reforms at the turn of the century by and large, rather than consolidating effective rule, revealed the dysfunction of the imperial system and the degree to which the idea of monarchy under the Holy Roman Empire had waned in the German principalities. The gathering of the Worms Reichstag of 1495, the creation of the Reichsregiment in 1500, and the division of the empire into Reichskreise in 1512, all addressed the weaknesses of imperial rule, particularly the lack of effective, uniform rule of the emperor over the territories. Yet these reforms, instead of strengthening the emperor, gave increased power to the German princes over their respective territories. To be sure, these reforms had helped create for Emperor Maximilian I (1459-1519) a worldwide, supra-national dynasty out of a small central European monarchy. Reforms, conquests, and dynastic allegiances saw Maximilian stretch the Holy Roman Empire to include Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Burgundy, Northern Italy, the Iberian peninsula and even Spanish colonies overseas. Maximilian’s reign and influence helped found a political structure that would last until the Napoleonic


wars of the nineteenth century and beyond. However, the particularism of the imperial princes severely constrained effective imperial control over these territories.

Second, the emperor was very much dependent on the cooperation of local princes, but he had few resources with which to coerce or thoroughly persuade them. In the sixteenth century, there was no greater example of the difficulty of imperial rule than Luther’s survival under the protection of his Imperial Elector, Frederick the Wise (1465-1525). To be sure, Frederick’s protection of Luther was not an example of the normal relationship of princes and electors against the policies of the Holy Roman Emperor. Frederick’s unique personality, the death of Emperor Maximilian in 1519, the appeal of Luther’s protest to German nationalists, amongst a myriad of other special conditions and circumstances, account for this famous episode in German history. Yet the fact that Luther remained alive attests to the relative weakness of the emperor over his German princes. Luther had been accused of heresy in 1517 and was excommunicated by Pope Leo X in 1520; but instead of a hearing in Rome, Frederick managed for Luther to be examined before the imperial diet at Worms, even guaranteeing him safe passage. After his condemnation by Emperor Charles V’s (1500-1558) decree, Frederick managed to keep Luther hidden so well that even damnation by both pope and emperor could not harm him. Frederick could never have protected Luther if the Holy Roman Empire had not been so dependent on the cooperation of his subject princes.

For a look at Maximilian’s influence and importance, see Gerhard Benecke, *Maximilian I (1459-1519): An Analytical Biography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982): 175-181. It is noteworthy that Machiavelli criticises Maximilian in *The Prince*, Chapter 23 for not knowing how to seek good counsel; in the *Discourses*, 2.11, Maximilian serves as an example of princes who can aid allies not by force, but by name only.

For an excellent account of the role of Frederick in Luther’s survival as well as the relationship of the elector to imperial power, see Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New York:
Third, the emperor continued to have to contend with the political aspirations of the papacy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Great Western Schism had severely weakened the power of the papacy in temporal affairs, but it had not rendered it impotent. The late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries witnessed a considerable rebirth in the political stature of the Bishop of Rome. For the emperor, this rebirth was ambivalent. On the one side, Maximilian I and Charles V came to an apex of imperial power in part through the aid of the Roman pontiff. However, on the other side, the efforts of the papacy to regain its political stature and consolidate its ecclesial authority against national churches at times conflicted with the interests of the emperor. The clash between Charles V and Pope Clement VII (1523-1534) illustrates how tenuous and contentious the relationship between emperor and pope could be. Largely in order to secure the papal lands in Italy, Clement changed the papacy’s political and military allegiances multiple times in the first half of his pontificate. At times he allied with the emperor and asked for his protection; at other times he consorted with imperial enemies. In 1527, when the Reformation had become sustained, the forces of Charles V invaded Italy, sacked Rome, captured the pontiff and held him prisoner for over six months.  

This episode showed yet another way in which the consolidation of imperial power was hindered and frustrated.

---


The Quandary of the Papacy

In the fall of 1503, exactly thirteen years before Luther’s publication of his Ninety-Five Theses, Giuliano della Rovere was consecrated to the papacy as Pope Julius II. Julius would gain great fame for his patronage of artists such as Raphael and Michelangelo and great notoriety for his military exploits for the Papal States, his political ambitions, and, as Machiavelli would later describe him, his impetuosity.41 With examples such as Julius II, corruptions in the fifteenth and sixteenth century papacy are easily identified; indeed, the “Warrior Pope” (as Julius was often called) was far from the pastoral strength and ecclesial vision of Saint Gregory the Great.42 However, casting aside the personal flaws and shortcomings of the Renaissance popes, it must be recognized that the papacy Julius inherited was in a daunting quandary. So much had the gap between the claims of papal power and its effective power grown that popes, even to exert authority in the affairs strictly of the Church, had to continually assert their political standing through political and military allegiances and the consolidation of the Papal States.

The gradual decline of papal power in the later middle ages, the disastrous schism that befell it in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the conciliar movement that challenged its supremacy, had taken a heavy toll upon the effective power of the popes in the political affairs of Europe. By the sixteenth century, the Renaissance papacy was in large part pre-occupied with regaining the stature it once enjoyed and stabilizing its place in world politics such that it could protect itself from the encroachment of other secular

41 Discourses III. 2.3; Prince Ch. 25.
42 One of the most influential and revered popes, 590-604.
powers. It attempted to accomplish this task in two significant ways. First, it tried to return the city of Rome to pre-eminence in the Western world. Second, it sought protection in consolidating the papal lands and asserting its supreme temporal authority over them.

In the early fifteenth century, Rome had ceased to be the world capital it had once been. The papacy had switched its residency to Avignon and the Great Western Schism and conciliarism had all but destroyed Rome’s central place in the world; meanwhile the economic, artistic and cultural power of the city was in decline. Yet by the beginning of the sixteenth century, Rome had been restored to the pre-eminence of its ancient glory. No doubt that part of its rebirth was due to the peculiar qualities of the city itself: its overwhelming wealth in classical ruins and Christian landmarks, its ideal natural setting, its economic and artistic potential. The role of the papacy in this revival cannot be underestimated. It was the papacy that often coordinated these other factors and movements into a Roman revival, and it did so to reassert its political and ecclesial authority. The papacy sponsored great Renaissance artists and architects for the rebuilding of both church and civic sites. Consequentially, Rome’s unique Renaissance beauty largely resulted from papal policy. Popes also became the patrons of scholars


and humanist scholarship. 45 Through the papacy, Rome became once again the centre for canon law. The papal curia settled and grew in fifteenth century Rome. Most importantly, with the revival of Rome as a world capital, came the revival of the papacy as a significant political actor. Indeed, the popes were conscious of the tied fortunes of Rome and the papacy. The more that the Church’s divine mission (with the pope at its head) was melded to Rome’s historical import as imperial city and cultural capital, the more the papacy regained its ecclesial and political standing. 46

The papacy also tried to reassert its political standing in the sixteenth century by securing and centralizing its control of the Papal States. Throughout the medieval period, the existence of the Papal States was justified as a guarantee of papal independence from secular powers. By the sixteenth century, the Papal States became the cornerstone of papal power and the crucial source of its financial support. Like the rebuilding of Rome, the consolidation of the Papal States was deliberately undertaken to augment the effective political power of the papacy. However, the Great Schism, conciliarism and the Avignon papacy had very much weakened the pope’s dominion over the Papal States, so much so, that after Pope Martin V 47 restored the papacy to Rome and regained control of the Papal States after the Great Schism, his successor, Eugenius IV, lost much effective control of

45 Machiavelli is an example: his History of Florence was commissioned by Pope Leo X in November of 1520 (coincidentally during the most contentious clash with Luther).

46 Although open to the charge (from Protestant and Roman Catholic reformers alike) that the marriage of the Church’s gospel mission and the imperial worldliness of Rome was apostate, in general the sponsorship of Roman revival was seen by the papacy as part of God’s charge to the church in the world. Thus the glory of a rebuilt, majestic Rome was seen by Renaissance popes as complementary to the mission of the universal Church, such that a renewed Petrine city would renew the authority of the papacy and thereby aid the salvation of the Church’s flock. See John W. O’Malley, Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1979); C. Stinger, The Renaissance in Rome, 83-155.

47 1417-1431; Martin V was elected by a group of cardinals and electors out of the Council of Constance, effectively ending the schism.
the lands through conflicts with the powerful Colonna family, and conciliar challenges to papal authority at the Council of Basle.48

The barriers to the centralized authority of the Renaissance papacy in the Papal States included fiefs and vicariates beyond the control of papal governors as well as instability in the eastern and northern regions. In the fifteenth and up to the turn of the sixteenth century, the popes dealt with these difficulties through nepotism in papal armies and administration. In the short-term, this nepotism ensured papal loyalty and effective political power against recalcitrant lords and hostile families. In the long-term, however, it created more difficulties for papal power; once the patron died, familial loyalty died with him, and thus new popes had to face at least a lukewarm, potentially antagonistic host of appointments made by his predecessor.49 Papal nepotism in the control of the Papal States reached its height under the pontificate of Alexander VI. Alexander was arguably the most notorious of all the Renaissance popes, fathering several illegitimate children, including the equally notorious Cesare Borgia.50 The notoriety of the Borgias ought not to obscure the fact that they at least partially succeeded in ridding the Papal States of its political difficulties, particularly rival factions, and clearing the way for a firm consolidation of papal political power.


49 This is one of Machiavelli’s criticisms of the “Ecclesiastical Principalities” in Chapter 11 of The Prince.

50 For an account of Alexander, Cesare and the Borgia family (including Alexander’s uncle, Pope Calixtus III), see Michael Mallett, The Borgias: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Dynasty (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969). Machiavelli has much to say about Alexander and Cesare, which will be explored in a later chapter.
It was Pope Julius II, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, who instituted direct papal rule over the Papal States by conquering the border territories and consolidating papal fiefdoms and principalities. Though he was not able to reform much of the actual administrative structure of the Papal States, he diminished the impact of nepotism in its government and eradicated much of its factionalism. Julius centralized temporal authority of the Papal States in Rome, ever more making the Papal States effectively subject to the pope.\(^{51}\) While the motives of several of the Renaissance popes such as Sixtus IV, Alexander VI or Leo X seem to be dominated by nepotism over the best interests of the papacy, Julius’s motives appeared to be dominated by the interests of papal power and authority and a Christian faith welded to the centrality of the papal office. Despite his unseemly wars for papal territory and temporal power, Julius appeared convinced that strengthening the independence of the Papal States and the papacy would strengthen the Church.\(^{52}\)

To resolve the quandary of the papacy Julius and the Renaissance popes rebuilt Rome and consolidated their temporal sovereignty over the Papal States. Doubtless this raised the political standing of the papacy. By the early sixteenth century, papal policy was a major factor in any political consideration or dispute in Italy. Furthermore, the papacy regained its foothold as a significant actor in pan-European politics. By these measures, the efforts of popes like Julius were successes. Yet, the re-emergence of papal political power did not dissolve the quandary of the institution: it still struggled to


maintain any sort of effective political power while the secular dynasties and authorities across Europe grew with a nascent nationalism, administrative centralization and more powerful armies. For these and other reasons, Machiavelli would strongly criticize the papacy. Furthermore, the rebuilding of Rome and the administration of the Papal States exerted financial pressure on an already very strained papal revenue. This financial pressure, among many other factors, encouraged the widespread and popular sale of indulgences, against which Luther protested.

The Impasse of Late Medieval Political Theory

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, political theory in the West had reached an impasse. Political theories buttressing either papal or imperial claims abounded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The polarized contest over secular authority charged political philosophy with the task of determining who possessed supremacy in the secular realm.

It had not always been this way in medieval political thought. No doubt that ecclesial and secular authority had a long history of competing and often hostile claims to supreme secular authority throughout the middle ages, yet there had also been an enduring history of dualism. This dualism manifested itself in multiple ways throughout the centuries as the “two swords” of ecclesial and secular authority. The roots of the dualism, at least in a nascent form, were first found in several early Christian writings that would later become canonical scripture, particularly Paul’s letter to the Romans and the first letter of Peter.

53 For the financial pressure and revenues of Julius’s pontificate, see Felix Gilbert, *The Pope, His Banker, and Venice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980).
In the era of the Church fathers, Augustine of Hippo and Pope Gelasius I were foremost in articulating this dualism. Augustine’s *City of God* famously distinguished between the earthly and heavenly cities. Citizenship was determined by love: “the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self.” Augustine’s two cities, however, did not coincide with a clean division of church and temporal government. At times Augustine argued that the visible church was a mix of heavenly and earthly citizens, that temporal power was on account of sin, and that human government was also ordained by God. Though enigmatic, Augustine’s political thought arguably leaves us with a heavenly city on earth, comprised of temporal and ecclesiastic authorities both working toward eternal salvation, yet in great tension.

At the end of the fifth century, Pope Gelasius attempted to more precisely define the relationship of sacred to secular power. His letter to Emperor Anastasius in 494 affirmed that imperial power was conferred on the emperor with divine disposition and that all persons (including clergy) must obey the laws of the secular authority; yet it also argued that ecclesial authorities must be obeyed in the administration of the sacraments and in spiritual matters in general. Thus a subtle superiority of pope over emperor was

---

54 Augustine lived from 354-430; Gelasius was Pope from 492-496.
56 XVIII, 49.
57 XIX, 14-15.
58 XIX, 13.
claimed by Gelasius. Nevertheless, the Gelasian doctrine also separated the authorities, despite its assertion of papal supremacy. With Gelasius I at the end of the Roman period and at the outset of the medieval age, a dualism in the ecclesial and temporal powers in Christendom took form.

The fourteenth century witnessed the waning of this dualism, at least as a form in which ecclesial and secular powers retained sovereignty over separated realms of jurisdiction. Political theory of the period became quite polarized between arguments for the supreme sovereignty of either pope or emperor. Many political theorists defended a hierocratic papacy over secular authority in the early fourteenth century. Giles of Rome (1246-1316) became a noteworthy defender of unlimited supremacy of papal power in his treatise On Ecclesiastical Power in 1301. Rooted on the works of Aristotle and of Thomas Aquinas, the treatise became a foundation for Boniface VIII’s Unam Sanctam in 1302, and thus a defender of papal power against secular power, but it also became an important document for the defence of papal power against later conciliarist challenges.

Several other political theorists of the fourteenth century became famous (or infamous) for their views on imperial supremacy. John of Paris (ca. 1250-1306) challenged the extreme claims of the papalists on the very same basis of Aquinas and Aristotle in his treatise On Kingly and Papal Power. Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) defended imperial power as a universal monarchy in his major political work, Monarchy. In the three divisions in the work, Dante respectively defended the necessity of a universal temporal power, the importance of Rome as its seat of power, and its divine

---

sanction to rule independently from papal authority. For Dante the corollary of his imperial political theory was a revitalization of the Church and its mission. As the renowned *Divine Comedy* also indicated, the corruption of the Church (and especially of the papacy) was due to its delving into political affairs and usurping the role of temporal government for its own gain of power and authority.\(^{61}\)

Although more vilified than Dante, Marsilius of Padua also gained much notoriety for his radically imperial position in *Defensor Pacis* and the later work, *Defensor Minor*.\(^{62}\) Marsilius founded his imperial supremacy on radically secular grounds. More than Dante, and certainly more than John of Paris, Marsilius’s political theory attacked papal supremacy in temporal government. His much stated goal throughout *Defensor Pacis* was to combat the evil encroachments of the papacy in politics, which for him in political affairs could do no other than upset the peace.

As this small sketch of early fourteenth century thinkers shows, political theory in the late middle ages became largely polarized between competing papal and imperial claims to supremacy in temporal government. However, despite this polarization, the

\(^{61}\) A colourful example of Dante’s criticism of ecclesial power is *Purgatorio*, Canto VI, 94-99: You priests who, if you heed what God decreed, should most seek after holiness and leave to Caesar Caesar’s saddle and his steed – see how the beast grows wild now none restrains its temper, nor corrects it with the spur, since you set meddling hands upon its reins!


\(^{62}\) Dante had been exiled, under threat of death, from Florence for much of his later life. His *Monarchy* was posthumously considered heretical for many centuries. It was placed on the Roman Catholic Church’s Index of Prohibited Books in 1554. Marsilius too, once the *Defensor Pacis* had been positively identified with him, had to live in exile under the protection of a German prince. Marsilius, more than Dante, became the representative of secular imperial supremacy and thus throughout the ages was much attacked by church authorities as a dangerous and heretical thinker.
philosophical foundations for either papal or imperial theories rested on similar sources. Broadly speaking, temporal government was considered an integral part of the catholic mission of Christian civilization. By the fourteenth century, though the dualism of the “two swords” had weakened, the idea that temporal government be catholic remained. Despite the fact that Dante and Marsilius’s political theories focussed on worldly ends such as peace and happiness in this world, both retained the idea that a universal monarch ought to hold the reins of temporal authority. Thus the political thought of Dante and Marsilius remained essentially medieval Christian; though temporal authority was not to be wielded by the Church, it ought to be wielded by a universal monarch who executed laws and principles applicable to all subjects. The impasse of late medieval political theory was that both the papalist and imperialist theories had integrated a universal mission of temporal government, yet the ability of the pope or emperor to effectively rule in political affairs had been in decline. Political reality beckoned political theory to look beyond universal monarchy.

Machiavelli, Luther and the Crisis of the Sixteenth Century

The theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century combined the aforementioned trends: a growing political disunity of Christendom, a growing paradoxical power of the Holy Roman Emperor, and the political quandary of the papacy. Together, these trends in the sixteenth century rendered any dualism of temporal and ecclesial power obsolete and any universalism untenable. Yet the political theory of the late middle ages tended to become more polarized between hierocratic claims of the papacy or of the emperor. The emperor, though powerful, had great difficulties in
executing his authority, particularly in the German lands. The pope, though rising in
temporal power through the rebuilding of Rome and consolidating the Papal States, could
not consolidate power over Italy. By the sixteenth century, political theorists, in search
for the justifications of supremacy in temporal government, were wont to challenge the
universalism of the late middle ages.

The political theories of Machiavelli and Luther emerged within this theological-
political crisis, and each thinker provided a diagnosis and assessment of the crisis. For
Machiavelli the crisis was manifested in the political disarray of Italy. The crisis
however, was not simply that Italy was not a unified kingdom or nation as existed in
Spain, France or England. Although Machiavelli may be called an Italian nationalist,
there were more pressing and immediate political concerns than the lack of a pan-Italian
kingdom.63 The Italian cities, including Machiavelli’s Florence, were time and again
embroiled in political upheaval by internal factions and by external wars and allegiances.

As Machiavelli saw it, this was a crisis of political science, a failure to understand
what political power was, how it was gained, maintained and lost.64 Most often the
problem was manifested in the failures of the pope or emperor to effectively consolidate

63 The interpretation of the nationalistic rhetoric of the 26th Chapter of The Prince often determines
the extent to which Machiavelli is seen as an Italian nationalist. See Felix Gilbert, “The Concept of
Nationalism in Machiavelli’s Prince,” Studies in the Renaissance, 1 (1954). Considering his life and
career as a public servant, Machiavelli’s first loyalty was to his native city Florence, a place which at the
end of his life he claimed to love more than his own soul, Letter No. 225, 16 April 1527, Forli to Francesco
Vettori in Florence. Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others, Volume 2, Allan Gilbert, trans. (Durham,
North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1989): 1010; Tutte le Opere, Mario Martelli, ed. (Florence:
Sansoni, 1971): 1250. Hereafter Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others shall be abbreviated as CW
with page number, and Tutte le Opere as Op. with page number.

64 See Frederico Chabod, Machiavelli and the Renaissance (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1958)
and Elena F. Guarini, “Machiavelli and the Crisis of the Italian Republics,” G. Bock, Q. Skinner, M. Virola,
the political and cultural crisis of the age, see Hans Baron, The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance
power in Italy. Machiavelli’s major works each offered unique angles on this crisis. In the *History of Florence* the failure to understand political power was shown to result in the tumultuous political history of a city that otherwise excelled in talent and greatness. Machiavelli’s diagnosis of the problem was apparent in the preface to the work; while other histories of Florence had reliably given accounts of wars with foreign powers, they were silent with respect to “civil discords and internal enmities, and the effects rising from them.”\(^65\) Florence’s internal divisions were quite remarkable, but their causes and effects are poorly understood. Thus he summed up the purpose of his work: “if no other lesson is useful to the citizens who govern republics, it is that which shows the causes of the hatreds and divisions within the city, so that when they have become wise through the dangers of others, they may be able to maintain themselves united.”\(^66\) Likewise the *Discourses on Livy* spoke to the ignorance of political power, albeit there Machiavelli intended to teach about political power through ancient models. These ancient examples were frequently praised, but seldom understood. The ignorance of ancient history, alongside the other-worldliness of a Christian education and a growing complacency had led to the want of political efficacy in Italy.\(^67\) The *Discourses* responded to this want. *The Prince* was also directed to the crisis of political knowledge in Machiavelli’s Italy. *The Prince* was much more than prudent advice of a civil servant to an influential prince.


It was a radical political theory in the guise of a ruler’s handbook. Machiavelli’s advice to distrust mercenaries, avert contempt and hatred, rely on one’s own arms and avoid flatterers was founded on the great need of a modern political science too long neglected in Italy.

For Luther the theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century was not coeval with his personal crisis of faith nor was it manifest until he began to challenge church authorities years later. Early in his adult life, Luther struggled with an apparently apolitical question: how can human beings be justified before God whilst time and again sinning and failing to be perfectly holy in everyday life? As his biographers have noted, it was Luther’s acute preoccupation with this problem which helped drive him toward taking his vows at the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, 1506.68 After realizing that most of the standard remedies for his crisis of faith did not alleviate his alienation from God, Luther came to see that the church itself had lost sight of the relationship of humanity to God and God to humanity. The significance of this loss was most pressing and pernicious, for not only did he think that the church had become unmoored from sound theology, it had also set itself and the faithful adrift in ignorance about God’s grace and salvation. Only then did Luther begin to identify and assess the theological-political crisis of his age. The controversy over the sale of indulgences was only one manifestation of this crisis. By the time Luther began to develop a comprehensive theology, the signs of a corrupted spiritual authority were to him unmistakably clear. In

The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, a text which Luther had penned in 1520, the litany of ecclesiastical degradations included simony, patronage, a general abuse of power by the popes, an abuse of Holy Scripture and a misunderstanding of the sacraments. But the theological crisis for Luther also had a major political aspect: spiritual authority had claimed sovereignty over political authority to the detriment of both church and civil government. Thus, upon a theological foundation, Luther objected to the cornerstone of hierocratic papal claims to political power; he argued that civil authority was granted directly by God and not through a mediating church. Thereby he declared corrupt any spiritual authority that claimed political power under its province. In so doing, Luther implicitly questioned the imperial claim to temporal government, a question that would not become clear until well into the Reformation. For Luther the role and purpose of temporal government were not conducive to the ideals of a universal monarch, either as pope or emperor.

Though their reactions initially appeared quite different, Machiavelli and Luther reacted to the theological-political crisis with political theories that significantly converged. Machiavelli’s response to the crisis was to purify politics. He freed the understanding of politics from ecclesial constraints, and in particular, from what he considered the politically inefficacious teachings of Christianity. Machiavelli accomplished this in several ways. Foremost, he offered a new art of politics. This new art brought with it a repudiation of several major elements of ancient political philosophy and Christianity. Machiavelli rejected several pillars of Platonic philosophy: he dismissed “imagined republics” and discarded Plato’s priority of educating the soul to

---

69 *LW* 36, 3-126; *WA* 6, 497-573.
strive for the best regime.\textsuperscript{70} Contrary to Aristotle, Machiavelli rejected any scheme of ethically evaluating regimes, or even clearly distinguishing between regimes on the basis of the number who rule.\textsuperscript{71} Machiavelli differed from Cicero, claiming that vice is at times preferable to virtue.\textsuperscript{72} In contrast to Aquinas and much of late medieval political thought, Machiavelli denied natural law. Machiavelli also claimed to revive crucial ancient teachings on politics, though with his own modifications. In his major writings, especially the \textit{Discourses} and the \textit{History of Florence}, he put forth the idea of the “two humors” that were always in tension in a given polity.\textsuperscript{73} Understanding these two humors and using that knowledge for government, as the ancient Romans did (but unlike the Florentines), could lead to a polity that would not only be stable, but also great and glorious. Machiavelli’s teaching on the two humors was thus directed at resolving the crisis of the early sixteenth century that plagued Italian politics.

As a mirror image of Machiavelli’s purification of politics, Luther’s response to the theological-political crisis was a purification of the Church. Appropriately, Luther’s response was a theological stance; yet it had major political implications. Luther’s answer to the theological-political crisis was not concomitant with the early controversy over the sale of indulgences. While Luther’s \textit{Ninety-Five Theses} and \textit{The Disputation

\textsuperscript{70} See, for example, Chapter 15 of \textit{The Prince}.  

\textsuperscript{71} Thus I disagree with J. G. A. Pocock’s argument that Machiavelli, like many Florentine humanists, revived Aristotle.  

\textsuperscript{72} Machiavelli’s most extreme teachings on the necessity of vice is found in Chapters 15-18 of \textit{The Prince}. A particularly striking contrast is the advice in Chapter 18 for the prince to know to be both a lion and a fox and Cicero’s rejection of emulating either beast in the \textit{De Officiis} (1.11.34, 13.41).  

\textsuperscript{73} See for example \textit{Discourses} 1.4, \textit{History of Florence} 2.12 and \textit{The Prince} 9.
Against Scholastic Theology\textsuperscript{74} gained him notoriety, they only reveal in a piecemeal, nascent form the systematic theology that he was to author in the following years.\textsuperscript{75} As a result of his theological tenacity, the reticence of ecclesiastical authority to adequately address his early concerns and the political and economic battles of the German princes with imperial powers, Luther began to explicate an organized theology as early as 1520 with such significant writings as *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and *Christian Liberty*.\textsuperscript{76} His theological response to the spiritual crisis quickly became the basis for a political theory. In 1523 he wrote *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*.\textsuperscript{77} By the end of the decade Luther had been immersed in the problems of temporal authority, obedience and war, first through the Peasant Revolt (during which he wrote *Admonition to Peace*, *A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia*, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, and *An Open Letter Against the Harsh Book Against the Peasants*,\textsuperscript{78} all in 1525), then through conflict between German principalities (*Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved*,\textsuperscript{79} 1526) and a supposed imminent invasion by the Turks (*On War Against...*)

\textsuperscript{74} LW 31, 17-33, WA 1 233-238. LW 31, 3-16, WA 1, 224-228.

\textsuperscript{75} There is considerable debate on just how systematic was Luther’s theology. It was certainly not systematic in the way that Thomas Aquinas gave the *Summa Theologica* or John Calvin presented the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Luther’s political theory was systematic in that it is over time consistently developed and applied to a myriad of themes and issues and in this rivalling the thought of Calvin or Aquinas.

\textsuperscript{76} LW 44, 115-227, WA 6, 202-276; LW 36, 3-126, WA 6, 497-573; LW 31, 327-377, WA 7, 1-38. This was the same year that Pope Leo X had published the bull *Exsurge Domine* in mid-June, condemning the errors of Luther in the *Ninety-Five Theses*. Luther publicly burned the bull in December. In the intervening period, Luther published these three works.

\textsuperscript{77} LW 45, 75-129; WA 11, 245-280.

\textsuperscript{78} LW 46, 3-43, WA 8, 291-334; LW 46, 45-55 WA 18, 357-361; LW 46, 57-85 WA 18, 384-401.

\textsuperscript{79} LW 46, 87-137, WA 19, 623-662.

37
Luther’s political theory, based on his theological stance, challenged the long reigning medieval doctrine of the “two swords” and the late medieval idea of a universal monarch. The challenge began when Luther developed a distinction between two regiments in the world as the spiritual and civil governments. His vision of the two regiments was derived from the theology of justification, and as such it dismantled the medieval view of an ecclesiastical or spiritual supremacy over temporal authority.

Luther’s two regiments were distinct and parallel. Each regiment also had its own form of righteousness: for the spiritual order it is grace, an inner gift from God come through the gospel; for the temporal order it was the abstention from evil actions derived from reason. With these two regiments Luther, like Machiavelli, freed political authority from the sovereignty of the church; in so doing he, like Machiavelli, reformed the theory of temporal government.

---


81 Unlike Augustine’s two cities, Luther distinguishes both between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the devil and the spiritual regiment and the temporal regiment (church and civil authority); see W. D. J. Cargill Thompson, “The Two Kingdoms and the Two Regiments: Some Problems of Luther’s Zwei-Reiche-Lehre,” *Studies in the Reformation* (London: Athlone Press, 1980).
CHAPTER TWO:
MACHIAVELLI AND THE CRISIS OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Italy’s experience of the theological-political crisis was acute and pervasive. More than most territories in Europe, the Italian peninsula had experienced first-hand the consequences of papal schisms, imperial disputes, and foreign invasions. A growing Christian disunity, the paradoxical power of the Holy Roman Emperor, and the quandary of the papacy had contributed to producing an Italy torn asunder by competing claims to political and ecclesial authority.

The chaos of Italian politics had over the centuries invited experiments in political thought and practice. Despotisms, often tyrannical though sometimes beneficent, ruled much of Italy; yet several cities had elements of a republican regime often dating back to the late middle ages or even the origins of the city itself.¹ Other than the widespread rule of despots, Italian politics up to the sixteenth century was difficult to generalize in simple regime classifications; likewise, Italian political ideas during this time were varied. Yet Renaissance era Italian political thought had a great asset: the variation in Italian regimes and politics afforded political thinkers a comparative vantage point that was unparalleled in the rest of Europe. A serious political mind had before it a myriad of Italian regimes

¹ Florence was one such city. For an account of its communal regime in the fourteenth century, see Gene A. Brucker, Florentine Politics and Society 1343-1378 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962).
constantly competing, conflicting and cooperating amongst one another to maintain their hold over their own city, or to extend it elsewhere.

Yet the many Italian political experiments were also cause for great concern, especially when they occurred in one’s own city. Such was Machiavelli’s Florence: in his own lifetime, he witnessed the rise and downfall of several regimes, including one which made him an authoritative and respected civil servant, and another which imprisoned and tortured him. Personal fortune aside, one of Machiavelli’s driving concerns in his political thought was for the well-being of Florence. A man who shortly before his death claimed to love his native city more than his soul, Machiavelli seems to have valued his civic duty over his own ambitions and wealth.\(^2\) As in any Italian city, regime change in Florence brought instability. Tensions between different classes or rival families could resurface and explode; foreign allegiances and vital treaties could be upset or abandoned. Moreover, regime change was often accompanied by revolutions in political thought. The political traditions and ideals of a city could be revived or challenged; ideas that once supported a polity could be quickly overturned.

For Machiavelli, the early sixteenth century was a time of political crisis. The examples of Florence and Italian politics in general amply demonstrated to him the problem: there was a want of an art of politics. The ambitions of the papacy, the influence of the emperor, and the campaigns of foreign monarchs had wreaked havoc on

\(^2\) In his Letter No. 137, 10 December 1513, Florence to Francesco Vettori, \textit{CW} 930, Machiavelli claimed to have always been honest servant of the city. Given Machiavelli’s relative poverty and meagre properties, his claim to honesty appears to have been true, considering that his influential position during the republican government would have allowed him ample opportunity for embezzlement. See Maurizio Viroli, \textit{Niccolo’s Smile: A Biography of Machiavelli} (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000): 135; Sebastian de Grazia, \textit{Machiavelli in Hell} (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989): 72.
the Italian peninsula. Disparate cities and territories struggled against one another. Regimes rose and fell under internal fissures and external pressures. The want of an art of politics was to him abundantly clear: the failure of so many Italian regimes and the failure to secure stability and prosperity in a land so promising, demonstrated the neglect of political art and the need to revive it.

Yet the crisis of the sixteenth century for Machiavelli was more than just the fact of political chaos in Italy. The chaos was a symptom. For Machiavelli there were several reasons for the neglect of an art of politics in the sixteenth century. First, there was a lack of good political men. Machiavelli blamed this on the effects of Christianity. The Christian religion, at least as it was practiced in the sixteenth century, made men weak in the face of evil and discouraged the desire for civic glory. Second, Machiavelli argued that the papacy had become an institution that thwarted the revival of political art through the combination of its political ambition and ecclesial authority. Though he had some muted praise for certain popes, Machiavelli offered a sharp and sustained criticism of papal involvement in temporal affairs.

Machiavelli and the Renaissance

Machiavelli’s political thought is one of the most influential of the fifteenth and sixteenth century movement known as the “Renaissance.” Yet defining what exactly was the “Renaissance” – let alone Machiavelli’s place in it – is a difficult and elusive task. Yet the term continues to have currency. Art historians and art galleries continue to employ it as both a time period and major watershed artistic movement in the history of
art. Its architectural achievements are preserved in countless public spaces throughout Europe. A rich resource of period literature, doubtless aided by the fifteenth century invention of the printing press, has been preserved to this day. In short, the Renaissance has come to be associated with some of the finest achievements in European history, and Renaissance figures, such as Leonardo da Vinci, command a continued fascination.

Amongst the most influential studies of the Renaissance, Machiavelli’s stature and role is often awarded a prominent place for his political criticisms of his age, and for his innovations in political theory. Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* has been one of the most enduring and influential studies of the Renaissance. Though today nearly one hundred and fifty years old, it remains the formative work in contemporary Renaissance studies, and has become a classic text in intellectual history. Without disparaging the middle ages, exalting secular humanism, or tracing progress towards the Enlightenment, Burckhardt’s study argued that the Renaissance in Italy was the “discovery of the world and of man,” and the place and period in which there was the first recognizable evidence for modern ideas on human nature and politics. With special relevance to Machiavelli’s political theory, Burckhardt argued that modern individuality first arose in Renaissance Italy.

[Medieval] man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation – only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time

---


4 There are many editions in English. The text I have used here was the S.G.C. Middlemore translation, with an introduction by Peter Burke and notes by Peter Murray (London: Penguin Books, 1990).
asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*,
and recognized himself as such.\(^5\)

For Burckhardt, the political ideas of the Renaissance arose out of the particular Italian conditions. These were recognizably modern political ideas: the state began to be seen as the fruits of man’s own thought and calculation.

While in France, Spain and England the feudal system was so organized that, at the close of its existence, it was naturally transformed into a unified monarchy, and while in Germany it helped to maintain, at least outwardly, the unity of the empire, Italy had shaken it off almost entirely… Between [the emperor and the papacy] lay a multitude of political units – republics and despots – …whose existence was founded simply on their power to maintain it. In them for the first time we detect the modern political spirit of Europe, surrendered freely to its own instincts, often displaying the worst features of an unbridled egotism, outraging every right, and killing every germ of a healthier culture. But, wherever this vicious tendency is overcome or in any way compensated, a new fact appears in history – the state as the outcome of reflection and calculation, the state as a work of art.\(^6\)

So began the first section of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*; a grand and overarching account of the politics and political thinkers of the Italian Renaissance followed.

For Burckhardt, Machiavelli was the archetypal political thinker of the Italian Renaissance and the foremost teacher, the “greatest beyond all comparison,” who “thought it possible to construct a state.”\(^7\) Burckhardt recognized “modern man” in Machiavelli’s objective statecraft; he argued that the Florentine was “at all events able to forget himself in his cause.”\(^8\) Amidst the chaos of Italian politics, Machiavelli thought about the causes of success and failure of regimes in order to construct a stable polity,

\(^5\) *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, p. 98.


taking into account human nature, natural and historical conditions, and the institutions of government itself. In short, Burckhardt saw in Machiavelli the beginning of a modern art of politics.

As a seminal and enduring work, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy has been the focus of many criticisms for its arguments on the Italian Renaissance. Generally, Burckhardt’s work has been vindicated against criticisms of its treatment of the middle ages or of religion, though it doubtlessly contained misjudgments and anachronisms. One powerful criticism comes against Burckhardt’s attribution of the “rise of the individual,” attributing it to the leisure of those living under despotisms, rather than to the participation of the citizen in the life of the city or to the energetic competition between the Italian city states. This criticism of Burckhardt prepared the ground for the “civic republicanism” interpretation of Machiavelli.

Yet aside from the shortcomings and criticisms, Burckhardt’s placement of Machiavelli at the pinnacle of political thought in the Italian Renaissance, the archetypal modern thinker on the art of politics, remains relatively uncontested. Some scholars have wondered whether the originality, importance and influence of Machiavelli in the

---


Renaissance and in the modern world has been exaggerated. Other scholars acknowledge the importance of Machiavelli in the Italian Renaissance, but raise the profile of other neglected thinkers. Generally however, Machiavelli’s reputation as the Renaissance man of political theory and the harbinger of modern political ideas continues to thrive.

Burckhardt’s position on Machiavelli has been the common source for disparate and contentious interpretations. Machiavelli has been seen as a reviver of civic republicanism and virtue, a critic of civic humanism, a founder of a new political morality, a reviver of Aristotle, an enemy of classical philosophy, a pre-philosophic republican Roman, the founder of modernity, a blasphemer, the founder of raison

---


16 Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli*.


d’état and a discoverer and theorist of executive power. On the contentious question of his relationship to religion, Machiavelli has been considered an enemy of Christianity, an admirer of pagan religion and a Christian. Yet in some way or another, all these positions concur with Burckhardt’s Machiavelli as the preeminent political thinker of the Italian Renaissance.

The contention is over what was, in Burckhardt’s words, Machiavelli’s “art of statecraft.” For Skinner and Viroli, Machiavelli’s art of politics amounts to a reworking of ancient civic republicanism, adapted for the statecraft princes needed to turn Italian cities into free republics. Pocock argues much the same thing, emphasizing the influence of civic humanism and its revival of Aristotle upon Machiavelli’s thought, and thus seeing the art of politics as in part the crafting of polities for civic participation. Berlin considers Machiavelli’s art of politics as the development of pagan morality in statesmanship, discarding the Christian ideals and ethics for political life, in favour of the


22 To a varying degree, each of the above interpreters of Machiavelli would agree on this point.


24 Sebastian de Grazia, Machiavelli in Hell (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989). This requires qualification. It is not de Grazia’s position that Machiavelli demonstrates Christian faith or holds orthodox Christian beliefs; however, he does argue that Machiavelli’s thinking is grounded in a Christian universe.


values which uphold “the strong, united, effective, morally regenerated, splendid and victorious patria, whether it is saved by the virtù of one man or many.”

For Mansfield, the art of politics is Machiavelli’s “new political science,” based firmly in his “new modes and orders,” through which Machiavelli gains notoriety for his warfare against traditional morality, religion, and philosophy, teaching the often duplicitous or violent necessities of governing. Thus Burckhardt’s “art of statecraft” is appropriated in multifarious ways.

Yet the simple fact remains that in his age of crisis Machiavelli offered an art of politics. What was it about the sixteenth century that compelled him to profess this new art of politics? For Machiavelli, the crisis was manifold: from the ignorance of ancient political history to the lessons of the latter-day small despotisms, sixteenth century political thought was plagued with barriers to political success. To Machiavelli, these problems were surmountable, yet they pointed to the much larger enemies of the new art of politics: the pernicious influence of humanism, the loss of virtue due to Christianity, and the destructive temporal power and influence of the papacy.

The Want of an Art of Politics: Humanism and the Lessons Neglected

Machiavelli’s criticisms of his age were offered in part against what he considered to be the detrimental political teachings of the contemporary Renaissance and Reformation movement known as “humanism.” The destructive legacy of humanism’s political teaching was a recurring concern in his major works of prose. However,


understanding Machiavelli’s criticism of humanist political thought is difficult, for how
the movement ought to be defined is contentious and the scholarly literature on the
subject is voluminous and varied. It is most commonly seen as an intellectual and
educational movement amongst the scholars of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. At
least a century before Machiavelli’s time, humanism was identifiably a “state of mind”
consisting of high scholarship and educational programs built on ancient texts,
particularly those concerned with moral and ethical philosophy, history and rhetoric.

A further complication in understanding humanism’s relationship to Machiavelli
and the theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century, is that humanism’s influence
upon Machiavelli himself has been considered by many scholars to be strong and
striking. The civic republican interpretation of Machiavelli as put forward by Baron,
Pocock, or Skinner, argues that he was part of a large “civic humanist” movement in
Italian political thought, reviving classical ideas on civic republicanism – in the case of
Pocock, Aristotelian ideas – and modifying them for their application to Italian politics.
Doubtless Machiavelli in many ways displayed the art and skill of a Renaissance
humanist. Artful letter writing was a distinct mark of Renaissance humanism, and
Machiavelli was a talented letter writer. Broadly speaking, Machiavelli also shared

31 See Chapter One, “Renaissance Epistolarity” in John M. Najemy, Between Friends: Discourses
of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli-Vettori Letters of 1513-1515 (Princeton: Princeton University
importance of letter writing to Renaissance humanism is demonstrated by not only the production and
collection of letters by literary persons of the period, but also the production of letter writing manuals. For
a famous example, see Erasmus of Rotterdam’s De conscribendis epistolis [On the writing of letters],
Charles Fantazzi, trans., Collected Works of Erasmus, Volume 25 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,
1985).
with Renaissance humanism the accomplishment of a man of letters: he composed histories, letters, commentaries, short stories, plays, poems, and of course political treatises.\textsuperscript{33}

Yet Machiavelli’s writings contain several departures from the humanist “state of mind”; in no small way this is shown by how Petrarch and Cicero appeared in his major prose writings. Francesco Petrach, or Petrarch (1304-1374), the major Italian writer of prose and poetry, would later in the Renaissance prove to have great influence upon the humanists and literary artists. Petrarch lamented the low culture and barbarism of his age, and looked to classical scholarship to bring the “dark ages” to an end through the revival of ancient virtue, rhetoric, art, and morality. Amongst the litany of classical sources, Petrarch looked to the Roman statesman and writer Cicero to spearhead the rebirth of a cultured age: for Petrarch, he became a model of ethics, statesmanship, rhetoric, and writing (including letter writing). For humanism, particularly Italian humanism of the fifteenth and sixteenth century Renaissance, Petrarch and Cicero were venerable father figures looked to for the rebirth of high civilization.\textsuperscript{34}

Petrarch and Cicero are scarcely found in the writings of Machiavelli, despite his familiarity with these heroes of humanism. There is little doubt that Machiavelli was


\textsuperscript{33} For an excellent collection of essays on the former genres, see Vickie Sullivan, ed., \textit{The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary Works}. See also David Sices and James B. Atkinson, eds., \textit{The Comedies of Machiavelli} (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1985) and Joseph Tusiani, \textit{Lust and Liberty: The Poems of Machiavelli} (New York: I. Obolensky, 1963). In the introductory essay, Tusiani argues that Machiavelli’s poetry was quite untypical Renaissance poetry for its realism.

quite familiar with the works of Petrarch; though he only quoted him two times in his major prose writings,\textsuperscript{35} he claimed to have read Petrarch regularly in his leisure time on the farm during his exile from active Florentine politics.\textsuperscript{36} Cicero was quoted three times in the \textit{Discourses}, though there were many allusions to him and his works in other passages in the \textit{Prince} and \textit{Discourses}.\textsuperscript{37}

Of course, the sparseness of references to Petrarch or Cicero does not itself indicate that Machiavelli was at odds with humanism. Rather, it was how Machiavelli employed these references that casts doubt over how much he shared with the humanist “state of mind.” Consider the passage from Petrarch’s \textit{Italia Mia}\textsuperscript{38} found at the end of Machiavelli’s famous concluding chapter of \textit{The Prince}.

\begin{quote}
Virtue will take up arms against fury,
and make the battle short,
because the ancient valour in Italian hearts
is not yet dead.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

Petrarch’s saying that virtue will combat fury, was a call to ancient virtues – peacemaking, moderation, the quiet life and magnanimity – to combat the vices of the Italian despots or \textit{signori}, whose wars against one another invited foreign invasions.\textsuperscript{40}

Yet \textit{The Prince} as a whole, and certainly the exhortation and call to arms in chapter

\textsuperscript{35} Once in \textit{The Prince} (26) and once in the \textit{Florentine Histories} (6.29).

\textsuperscript{36} This claim is found in Machiavelli’s famous letter to Vettori, December 10, 1513, a letter which begins with a quotation from Petrarch’s \textit{Triumph of Eternity}: “never late were favours divine”; \textit{CW} 927-928, \textit{Op.} 1158-1159.

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Discourses} 1.4, 1.33, 1.52.

\textsuperscript{38} Canzone 16.13-16.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{The Prince}, Harvey C. Mansfield, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): Chapter 26, page 105; \textit{CW} 96, \textit{Op.} 298. From herein, direct quotations from \textit{The Prince} will be taken from Mansfield’s translation with chapter number followed by page number (\textit{Prince} 26, 105) followed by the \textit{CW} and \textit{Op.} references.

\textsuperscript{40} Mansfield, \textit{Machiavelli’s Virtùe}, p. 34.
twenty-six, was far from extolling Petrarch’s kind of ancient virtue; on the contrary, the
priority of magnanimity, moderation and the quiet life for Machiavelli only exacerbated
the political crisis in Italy.

Machiavelli’s use of Cicero also forcefully shows his departure from much of
humanist thought. In an explicit reference in the Discourses, Machiavelli scolded
Cicero’s lack of foresight in failing to see how his urging of the Roman Senate to move
against Mark Antony would in fact strengthen him, and spell the end of the Roman
Republic.\textsuperscript{41} A more poignant example (although an implicit reference) of Machiavelli’s
attack on the ancient humanist hero came in his inversion of Cicero’s judgement that
“force and fraud” are bestial, suited to the lion and fox but not human beings, and that
“fraud is the more contemptible.”\textsuperscript{42} Humanists sided with Cicero. Another great Italian
forefather of humanism agreed with Cicero: Dante’s visionary journey through Hell
passed through the six circle reserved for violent sinners, followed by the fraudulent
sinners in the seventh circle.\textsuperscript{43} Yet in one of the most infamous passages of The Prince,
Machiavelli stood Cicero on his head: “since a prince is compelled of necessity to know
well how to use the beast, he should pick the fox and the lion,” and of the two the beasts
“the one who has known best how to use the fox has come out best.”\textsuperscript{44} The Prince was
an inverted On Duties: Cicero’s vice was Machiavelli’s virtue.

\textsuperscript{41} Discourses 1.52.

\textsuperscript{42} De Officiis 1.8; from the Walter Miller translation, On Duties (Cambridge, Massachusetts:

\textsuperscript{43} Inferno, Canto 11.

\textsuperscript{44} The Prince, 18, 69-70; CW 64-65; Op. 283-284.
Machiavelli’s opposition to Petrarch and Cicero was not simply an ethical dispute: it revealed his criticism of humanism and his assessment of the political crisis of the sixteenth century. Humanism did not offer a comprehensive political theory, but it did insist that high culture would make for better politics. The humanist education in ancient texts taught a curriculum of rhetoric, history and moral philosophy that was aimed, among other things, at forming good princes. Thus it was no coincidence that many humanists before and after Machiavelli had written essays and treatises on the education of princes.

Machiavelli’s princely education – *The Prince* – was utterly bereft of any idea that education in rhetoric, history, or moral philosophy made a good prince. To be sure, Machiavelli’s writings contained rhetoric, history (both ancient and modern) and elements of moral philosophy, but they subverted the humanist project by questioning its success. By using humanism’s own trademarks of rhetoric, ancient history, and moral philosophy against it, Machiavelli offered a powerful critique: humanism failed to produce good princes, failed to cultivate an art of politics, and thus failed to address the political crisis of the age. Moreover, for Machiavelli these Renaissance thinkers not only failed to address the political crisis of the age, they had exacerbated it.

Permeating Machiavelli’s major works of prose was an unyielding criticism of humanism and its detrimental political effects. Two examples from *The Prince* and *The Art of War* show the breadth of the problem of humanism for Machiavelli in sixteenth

---


century politics. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli presented an acute anti-humanist argument in favour of expediency and necessity over constraining principles of political good or justice. In *The Art of War*, Machiavelli presented the lack of military knowledge as a symptom of humanism’s negative political influence.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli’s criticism of humanism and its exacerbation of the political crisis of the age began in the very first pages of the book where he stated his scheme of regime classification. Glaringly, Machiavelli purged his classifications of any reference to goodness or justice: regimes were either principalities or republics, and they were either old or new.\(^47\) The contrast to ancient classifications was stark. Polybius, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero all conceived of an axis by which regimes of similar form (rule by the one, the few or the many) were divided between those which ruled with a view to justice and the common good, and those which ruled unjustly to the benefit of those in power.

Machiavelli’s classifications, as the reader quickly discovers, were not very firm categories. “Old” regimes, such as hereditary principalities, maintained themselves if they did not “depart from the order of [their] ancestors”; “the natural prince,” wrote Machiavelli, “has less cause and less necessity to offend” and “it is fitting that he will be more loved.”\(^48\) Yet a hereditary principality could last only as long as its line was living – which was often not long. Machiavelli advised in the following chapter that those who acquire such states and want to hold them must eliminate the “blood line of their ancient prince” and maintain the laws of the old state so as to maintain the appearance of

\(^{47}\) *The Prince*, 1.

\(^{48}\) *The Prince*, 2, 6-7; *CW* 11-12; *Op.* 258.
continuity with the old regime. Moreover, Machiavelli later argued that is better to be feared than loved, and thus a hereditary prince, though “it is fitting that he be more loved” must by necessity strive to be feared, since “men have less hesitation to offend one who makes himself loved than who makes himself feared.” Thus Machiavelli blurred the distinction between “old” and “new” principalities.

Machiavelli’s rejection of the good or just regime as a measure or classification revealed both his disagreement with ancient political thought and his criticism of Renaissance humanism. Humanism’s revival of ancient political thought, with the aim of resolving the political crisis of the age, was for Machiavelli destined to fail. The seeds of self-defeat were sown in the very project of reviving ancient Aristotelian or Ciceronian thought: the humanists, like Aristotle and Cicero long before them, ultimately considered statesmanship to be about cultivating the good and just regime, while Machiavelli insisted such a project failed politically because it obscured what was necessary and expedient for regimes to be founded and maintained.

Against humanism’s pedagogy of classical virtue, Machiavelli advised that a prince “if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good,” for as he argued earlier in the chapter, “a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good.” In the next chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli provided a striking illustration. Liberality, a virtue so highly praised by ancients like Cicero and the Renaissance humanists, was in practise

---

49 *The Prince*, 3, 9; *CW* 14; *Op.* 259.

50 *The Prince*, 17, 66; *CW* 62; *Op.* 282.

51 *The Prince*, 15, 61; *CW* 58; *Op.* 280.
dangerous to one’s rule. Machiavelli did not challenge the virtue wholesale. It was good to be considered liberal; however, a prince ought to guard against being contemptible and hated, “and liberality leads to both.”53 The Prince argued that vice could be expedient. In On Duties, Cicero argued that “no cruelty can be expedient; for cruelty is most abhorrent to human nature, whose lead we must follow.”54 Conversely, Machiavelli endorsed “cruelty well used,” done out of necessity for security and turned to use for the subjects of the principality.55 The appearance of possessing a virtue was optimal, but its pursuit for its own sake, in Machiavelli’s view, failed not only to make a prince seem to be virtuous, but damaged his rule and authority. Thus humanism’s endorsement of classical virtue for Machiavelli only exacerbated the crisis of the sixteenth century.

The Art of War provided a critique of humanism but also an appeal to it, both with the goal of resolving the political crisis of the age. The Art of War appealed to “civic humanism” through the linking of military virtue and service to civic life and citizenship. Some scholars maintain that the work contained one of Machiavelli’s most concise statements of what he wished to revive from the ancient Romans, and thus what vision he shared with humanism’s revival of classical civilization.

Precisely what it was he wished to revive from classical politics is stated more clearly in The Art of War than in any other of his works: “To honour and reward excellence, not to despise poverty, to esteem the methods and regulations of military discipline, to oblige the citizens to love one another, to live without factions, to esteem private less than public good, and other like things that could easily fit in with our times.”56

---

52 Erasmus devoted a small section to generosity and liberality, with very different conclusions, in his Education of a Christian Prince; see the Neil M. Cheshire and Michael J. Heath translation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 77-79.

53 The Prince, Ch. 16, 62 & 65; CW 59 & 61; Op. 280 & 281.

54 Cicero, De Officiis, III, XI, 4; 315.

55 The Prince, Ch. 8, 37-38; CW 38; Op. 270.

To what degree the *Art of War* was in line with the political movement known as civic humanism continues to be debated, but there nevertheless was an appeal to those who saw the political crisis of the age as in part a loss of military virtue and civic participation.

However, the *Art of War* did contain a criticism of literary or philosophic humanism’s influence on the age. In the preface to the work, Machiavelli wrote that in his age “military orders are altogether corrupt and separated by great lengths from ancient modes,” and the reason, according to the preface, has been the rise of “sinister opinions” regarding all things military. In the preface, Machiavelli did not identify the origin of the “sinister opinions” or upon what they were based. However, early in the dialogue of the *Art of War* Machiavelli, through his interlocuters, implied that the fault was in the contemporary revival of the ancients which upheld the “delicate” and “soft life” examples of the ancients for imitation over the harsh life of the “modes and orders of military discipline.” For Machiavelli, idleness (*ozio*) was the product of humanism; the *Art of War* was his answer to *ozio* and its effects on military virtues. Thus followed in the *Art of War* a subtle critique of the Renaissance fascination with ancient philosophy, art, and


58 *Art of War*, Preface, 4, Christopher Lynch, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); CW 567; Op. 301. All subsequent quotations from the *Art of War* are taken from Lynch’s translation with book number followed by sentence number.

59 *Art of War*, 1, 10-11; CW 571-572; Op. 304.

60 Eg. *Art of War*, 1, 29; 2, 59.
literature, but the concomitant neglect of imitating the ancients in “grave and great actions.”

As these examples from *The Prince* and the *Art of War* demonstrate, Machiavelli mounted powerful criticisms against humanism and its attempt to rebuild high civilization and restore stability and honour to civic life. In sum, the criticisms amounted to an indictment of humanism’s effects on politics: its preoccupation with classical virtues for princes or the neglect of warfare and military strategy did not alleviate the political crisis of the sixteenth century, and in Machiavelli’s thinking failed to bring Europe closer to the rebirth of high civilization towards which it aimed.

**Christian Education and the Want of an Art of Politics**

Though humanist political thought had failed to restore great regimes to Italy, and arguably had even exacerbated the crisis of the sixteenth century, it was not in his thinking a primary cause of the century’s political crisis. Rather the roots grew deep into the civilization of Renaissance Europe. The want of an art of politics was due foremost to the lack of good men, and the lack of good men was due to the effects of the Christian religion. In Machiavelli’s thinking, Christian education was the truly destructive foe of the art of politics.

In the preface to the *Art of War*, Machiavelli argued that “sinister opinions” were responsible for the poor state of Italian militaries. Thus began the work’s subtle but powerful attack on Christianity and its effect on forming citizens and soldiers in the age of the Renaissance. The use of the same phrase much later in the fourth book is

---

61 *Art of War*, 1, 12; *CW* 572; Op. 304.
revealing. There the question arose how a military commander can make fleeing soldiers fight by speaking to them.

Fabrizio: To persuade or dissuade a few of a thing is very easy. For if words are not enough, you can use authority or force. But the difficulty is in removing from the multitude a sinister opinion that is also contrary either to the common good or to your opinion. There one can use only words that are heard by all, wishing to persuade all of them together.  

Fabrizio was concerned with the conditioning of soldiers such that they have a salutary fear to obey, battle well, and avoid defeat, but also such that they engage in battle wholeheartedly and with courage. Among the means for persuading fleeing soldiers to fight was religion; “religion,” Fabrizio remarked, “and the oath that was given to them when they went to serve in the military, was very valuable in keeping the ancient soldiers disposed.”  

Fear of not only men but also God “made every enterprise easy for ancient captains.” Yet as Fabrizio explained in the second book of the Art of War, Christianity did not produce this salutary effect for military orders. After the barbarian inundation of Europe, ancient military virtue was lost in part because “today’s mode of living, on account of the Christian religion, does not impose that necessity to defend oneself that there was in antiquity.”  

This critique in the Art of War brings to light Machiavelli’s sustained assault on Christianity for its role in the political crisis of the sixteenth century. His revolt against the Christian faith is unmistakeable; amongst otherwise disagreeing interpretations, most scholars consider Machiavelli to some degree an opponent of Christianity and the Church. Quentin Skinner saw an indictment against Christianity for promoting values

---

62 Art of War, IV 137, 98; CW 661; Op. 354.
63 Art of War, IV 141, 98; CW 661; Op. 354.
64 Art of War, 2, 305, 59-60; CW 623; Op. 332-333.
that undermine civic life.\textsuperscript{65} Mark Hulliung argued that for Machiavelli Italy’s political turmoil was caused in part by the effects of the Christian religion.\textsuperscript{66} Clifford Orwin looked to Machiavelli as a founder of a new political morality of “collective aggrandizement” wholly at odds with the Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{67} Leo Strauss’s interpretation made Machiavelli to be the founder of modernity and a blasphemer and a propagandist against Christianity.\textsuperscript{68} Harvey Mansfield argued that Machiavelli’s universal beginnings of cities in the \textit{Discourses} are tantamount to a rejection of God and religion in political foundings.\textsuperscript{69} Vickie Sullivan’s recent study of Machiavelli not only affirmed his rejection of Christianity, but also questioned whether he truly saw political utility in religion – Christian or pagan – at all.\textsuperscript{70} Other interpreters saw him attacking Christianity while extolling paganism, such as biographer Pasquale Villari who argued that of his contemporaries “Machiavelli himself was still a greater pagan,”\textsuperscript{71} or Isaiah Berlin who saw Machiavelli’s revolt as a conflict between two moralities, pagan and Christian.\textsuperscript{72}


\textsuperscript{66} Mark Hulliung, \textit{Citizen Machiavelli}, pp. 68, 247.

\textsuperscript{67} Orwin, “Machiavelli’s Unchristian Charity,” pp. 1217-1228.

\textsuperscript{68} Leo Strauss, \textit{Thoughts on Machiavelli}; idem, “What is Political Philosophy?” pp. 9-55.


\textsuperscript{71} Pasquale Villari, \textit{The Life and Times of Niccolo Machiavelli, Volume II}, Trans. Linda Villari (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929): 92

\textsuperscript{72} Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” 54.
Some interpreters of Machiavelli have questioned the severity with which he revolted against Christianity. Most notable and convincing has been Sebastien de Grazia’s Pulitzer prize-winning biography, *Machiavelli in Hell*, which justified the harsh political teachings (and their sanction of harsh deeds) by reconciling them to “common good” political ends. For De Grazia, Machiavelli’s teachings only appear to sanction evil, but remained morally compatible with a “reformed” (not Reformed) Christianity.\(^73\) Dante Germino ably presented several pertinent reservations against the anti-Christian interpretation, particularly his attitude to Christianity in light of the “Exhortation to Penitence” and other writings.\(^74\) Departing somewhat from De Grazia, several scholars argue that Machiavelli’s political teaching co-opts parts of the faith and upholds a significant role for Providence without completely undermining the Christian religion.\(^75\) Yet even these dissenting voices in Machiavelli interpretation cannot deny that to some degree his political thought contained a critique of the faith and Church.

Although disputing to what degree, most scholars concede that Machiavelli attacked the Christian religion for its political effects in his age. Indeed, for Machiavelli the political crisis of the sixteenth century was caused in many ways by the effects of Christianity. He argued that the Christian religion promoted qualities opposed to political expediency: it hid the effective truths about conflicts of power; it obscured the political


lessons of history; it promoted a view of the cosmos at odds with understanding regime
growth and decay; it nurtured a religiosity that undermined political order; it condemned
as vice the virtues necessary for political success. Christianity, as Machiavelli saw it,
suppressed the art of politics and caused the political crisis of the sixteenth century.

In the Second Chapter of the Second Book of the *Discourses* Machiavelli blamed
the Christian religion for the disarray that was Italian politics, and contrasted it with the
pagan cultivation of worldly greatness.

Thinking then whence it can arise that in those ancient times peoples were more lovers of
freedom than these, I believe it arises from the same cause that makes men less strong
now, which I believe is the difference between our education and the ancient, founded on
the difference between our religion and the ancient. For our religion, having shown the
truth and the true way, makes us esteem less the honour of the world, whereas the
Gentiles, esteeming it very much and having placed the highest good in it, were more
ferocious in their actions.

For Machiavelli not only was “our religion” to blame for a failed education, but the
“Gentiles,” i.e. pagan Romans, better educated their citizenry to value political and
military service. Furthermore, he expanded the charge by subsequently listing the faults
of the Christian education: it glorified the humble and the contemplative men over the
active men; it placed the highest good in humility and abjectness; it asked one to endure
suffering rather than avenge it. As Machiavelli explained, the consequence of this
education had been to render the world defenseless to criminal men, who clashed in wars
over raw power. For Machiavelli, the upheaval in sixteenth century Italy had little to do
with “economics, morals, principles of social justice, ideas concerning political
organization, spiritual movements or religious factions”; rather, these wars were

---

76 *Discourses*, 2.2, 131; *CW* 330-331; *Op.* 149. All subsequent quotations from the *Discourses* are
Mansfield’s translation, cited by book number (followed by a period), chapter number, and page number.

77 *Discourses*, 2.2, 131; *CW* 331; *Op.* 149.
generally concerned with naked power, with battles “of stronger power and better
military organization in ruthless victory over a weaker and militarily less well-equipped
power.”\(^78\) For Machiavelli, the political crisis resulted from the failure of Christian
education by allowing the ambitious few to fight for supremacy, because it devalued
political action and praised otherworldly ends.

Machiavelli’s indictment of Christianity sometimes appeared muted and guarded,
but this did not detract from his relentless attack on the faith’s undesirable effects on the
politics of his age. In the subsequent lines of *Discourses* 2.2, Machiavelli stated that the
failure of the Christian education arose from some of its interpreters: “it arises without a
doubt more from the cowardice of the men who have interpreted our religion according to
idleness and not according to virtue.”\(^79\) By criticizing some of the interpreters of religion,
Machiavelli criticized the Church. Moreover, the attack was ambiguous enough to
appear to be a criticism of particular “interpreters” rather than a full assault on the
Christian religion. He indicated there could be a certain malleability in the faith
conducive to a revived art of politics.

For if they considered how it permits us the exultation and defence of the fatherland, they
would see that it wishes us to love and honour it and to prepare ourselves to be such that
we can defend it. These educations and false interpretations thus bring it about that not
as many republics are seen in the world as were seen in antiquity; nor, as a consequence,
is as much love of freedom seen in peoples as was then.\(^80\)

By blaming the political crisis of the age on the interpreters of the Christian religion,
Machiavelli was able to appear as though he was addressing a problematic political

\(^78\) Eric Voegelin, “Machiavelli’s Prince: Background and Formation,” *Review of Politics*, 13
(1951): 147.

\(^79\) *Discourses* 2.2, 132; *CW* 331; *Op.* 149.

\(^80\) *Discourses* 2.2, 132; *CW* 331; *Op.* 150.
tendency or teaching in Christendom, rather than indulging in an outright hostility to Christianity as such.

How did “Christian education” fail? For Machiavelli, it failed to promote or even complement an art of politics. Scattered throughout Machiavelli’s writings are examples of political knowledge that has been lost or neglected through this education. In some ways this political knowledge seems radically anti-Christian; in other ways it seems less than a wholesale rejection of Christianity. At the very least, Machiavelli’s indictment of Christianity for the political crisis of the age was forceful, even in the most seemingly benign instances. Take for example his version of regime cycles. At the beginning of the Discourses he gave an account for the origins of justice and regimes, somewhat like Polybius’ account from Book Six of the Histories with some subtle but significant variations. This conception of cyclical time reappeared in the Machiavellian corpus. In the fifth book of the Florentine Histories he again described a world in motion from order to disorder and from disorder back to order: “virtue gives birth to quiet, quiet to leisure, leisure to disorder, disorder to ruin; and similarly, from ruin, order is born; from order, virtue; and from virtue, glory and good fortune.” Machiavelli’s regime cycles revealed something about his conception of the cosmos and the place of human action and politics within it: the natural cycles of politics mirrored the cycles of nature. This

81 For example, this is the broad argument in Anthony Parel, The Machiavellian Cosmos. Interestingly, and in contrast to most interpretations of his underlying philosophy, Parel also claims that Machiavelli supports his political science with pre-modern science that is more akin to pagan and Aristotelian thought than to modern science or to Christianity.

82 This is a large part of Sebastian De Grazia’s argument in Machiavelli in Hell. Chapter 10 provides a particularly good contrast to Parel’s argument.

83 Florentine Histories, 5.1, 185; CW 1232; Op. 738.
was not a universe created *ex nihilo* by the Judeo-Christian God.\textsuperscript{84} Since there was no place for the God of Christianity in Machiavelli’s cycles of politics, the “Christian education” would always promote vision of the cosmos at odds with understanding politics correctly.

For Machiavelli, a manifestation of this cosmological distinction was Christianity’s neglect of political teachings in its histories. In the Preface to the *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli admitted that there have been “very diligent” accounts of the wars of Florence with foreign princes, but these were sparse accounts about the causes of division; thus the lessons on the dissolution or successful maintenance of a city were lost. For Machiavelli, it was imperative that this ignorance be quashed; for him, the resolution to the political crisis of his age depended on it. Florence’s histories would serve quite well.

… if no other lesson is useful to the citizens who govern republics, it is that which shows the causes of the hatreds and divisions within the city, so that when they have become wise through the dangers of others, they may be able to maintain themselves united. And if every example of a republic is moving, those which one reads concerning one’s own are much more so and much more useful; and if in any other republic there were ever notable divisions, those of Florence are most notable.\textsuperscript{85}

Machiavelli believed his *Florentine Histories* to be unique in that it dispensed the political teachings on factions in republics. “Those who hope that a republic can be united” argued Machiavelli, “are very much deceived in this hope.”\textsuperscript{86} Yet as Florence’s divisions had shown, some divisions are harmful and others helpful. Florence’s harmful divisions were sects supporting either the papacy or Holy Roman Emperor. Helpful

\textsuperscript{84} Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos*, Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{85} *Florentine Histories*, Preface, 6; *CW* 1031; *Op*. 738.

\textsuperscript{86} *Florentine Histories*, 7.1, 276; *CW* 1336; *Op*. 632.
divisions were the ineradicable and perennial “two humors.” These humors originated from the conflict in republics between the powerful and the people, “for since the people want to live according to the laws and the powerful want to command them, it is not possible for them to understand together.”\textsuperscript{87} Although earlier in the \textit{Florentine Histories} Machiavelli argued the division was helpful, he wrote in the third book that “the grave and natural enmities that exist between the men of the people and the nobles… are the cause of all evils that arise in cities.”\textsuperscript{88} Yet in Machiavelli’s thinking, the Florentine humors created war and exiles, whereas the Roman humors created disputes and the law. The difference between Florence and Rome was that Rome understood that divisions could never be eradicated and that the division, if balanced well, could provide for the strength of the republic. But in Florence, under the influence of the “Christian education,” the factions in the city fought to eradicate each other, forming sects and parties, and thus undermining republican government. Christian education, through the neglect of political teachings in the histories, led to the frequent change in government and the failure to make good laws and good orders. For Machiavelli, Italy’s political crisis rested largely on the lack of good laws and orders, and this undermined the well-being of republics: “cities, and especially those not well ordered that are administered under the name of republic, frequently change their governments and their states not between liberty and servitude, as many believe, but between servitude and license.”\textsuperscript{89} The failure of the Christian education, insofar as it neglected the teachings on division

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Florentine Histories}, 2.12, 64; \textit{CW} 1093-1094; \textit{Op}. 666.

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Florentine Histories}, 3.1, 105; \textit{CW} 1140; \textit{Op}. 690.

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Florentine Histories}, 4.1, 146; \textit{CW} 1187; \textit{Op}. 715.
and good orders, only yielded to ineffectual leadership, the domination of despots, the
neglect of an art of politics, and thus the political crisis of the age.

Machiavelli’s objection to the political effects of Christianity pervaded his major
works of prose. However, the critique remained at a level of generality, without
criticisms of particular institutions, or specific people. The major exception was the
institution of the papacy. Though rarely blunt, Machiavelli’s overall treatment of the
papacy demonstrated his belief that that institution, more than any other, could not wield
its political authority, hindered others from doing so, and contributed most disastrously to
the political crisis of his age.

The Papacy and the Political Crisis of the Sixteenth Century

Machiavelli’s first sustained discussion of the papacy was in the eleventh chapter
of The Prince. While the chapter treated the anomaly of ecclesiastical principalities
against the background of Machiavelli’s other classifications, its criticism came to rest on
the papacy’s rise to power in temporal affairs, on the institutional limitations that
effectively prevented its rise to virtue, and worse still, on how it kept Italy divided.
Machiavelli began the chapter with a description of the anomaly of the ecclesiastical
states.

They are acquired either by virtue or by fortune and are maintained without the one or the
other, for they are sustained by orders that have grown old with religion, which have been
so powerful and of such a kind that they keep their princes in the state however they
proceed and live. These alone have states, and do not defend them; they have subjects,
and do not govern them; and the states, though undefended, are not taken from them; the
subjects, though ungoverned, do not care, and they neither think of becoming estranged
from such princes nor can they. Thus, only these principalities are secure and
prosperous. But as they subsist by superior causes, to which the human mind does not
His praise of the ecclesiastical principalities for their security and prosperity was surely ironic; nowhere did he demonstrate that Providence was responsible for the maintenance of the Papal States to the exclusion of others.

What remained of his description of the ecclesiastical principalities is also questionable, for throughout Machiavelli’s own Florentine Histories were examples of ecclesiastical principalities governing their subjects, defending and losing their territories and being disrupted by internal revolts and rebellions.\(^91\) In this very chapter of The Prince Machiavelli discussed Pope Julius II (1503-1513), who consolidated and expanded the Church’s holdings with his military campaigns. Ecclesiastical principalities were never as static or stable as Machiavelli described them in Chapter Eleven.\(^92\) What then was Machiavelli’s purpose in this chapter? Ostensibly written about “ecclesiastical principalities” – a dubious category – the chapter turned into a discourse on the papacy.

In The Prince, Machiavelli appeared to commend several popes; of Alexander VI he wrote, “of all the popes there have ever been he showed how far a pope could prevail with money and forces.”\(^93\) With his son Valentino (Cesare Borgia), Alexander VI made the Church great, later facilitating the exploits and consolidation of papal lands under Julius II. Machiavelli even went so far as to praise the contemporary pope Leo X (1513-1521) and to tell him the possibilities a powerful papacy gave him: “one may hope that if

---

\(^90\) The Prince, 11, 45; CW 44; Op. 273-274.

\(^91\) Especially Chapter 8 and the papal states under Sixtus IV.

\(^92\) For the history of the papal state see Peter Partner, The Lands of St. Peter; the Papal State in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance.

\(^93\) The Prince, 11, 46; CW 47; Op. 274.
the others made it great with arms, he, with his goodness and infinite other virtues, can make it very great and venerable.” But these praises and possibilities did not overshadow the criticism Machiavelli brought against the papacy: it was an institution of spiritual authority laying claim over great temporal power that was concurrently constrained in its practice of virtù. As he briefly outlined in The Prince, the papacy’s claim to temporal power had risen in Italy to the point that the other powers were suspicious of it. They kept the papacy weak by preserving factional conflicts in the College of Cardinals and throughout various other papal jurisdictions. Moreover, the brevity of the average reign of a pope prevented the destruction of these factions. For Machiavelli, these were among the heavy limits on the exercise of temporal power for the papacy. He noted that “although a spirited pope, like Sixtus IV (1471-1484) sometimes rose up, still fortune or wisdom could never release him from these inconveniences.”

Failing in virtue was not the only fault of the papacy. Elsewhere in the Discourses he attributed the decline in the Christian states and republics to corrupt pontiffs. Claiming that the disdain of divine cult (whether pagan or Christian) indicated the ruin of a province, he wrote “nor can anyone make a better conjecture as to its decline than to see those peoples who are closest to the Roman church, the head of our religion, have less religion.” For Machiavelli, the wicked examples of the papal court made Italy

---

94 Ibid., 47.

95 The Prince, 11, 47; CW 45; Op. 274.

96 Discourses, 1.12, 37; CW 228; Op. 96.
lose its devotion and religion, which brought with it “infinite inconveniences and infinite disorders.”

Yet even corruption was not the primary charge Machiavelli wished to bring against the papacy. There was a “yet greater” cause to criticize it, a criticism Machiavelli succinctly summarized in Book One, Chapter Twelve of the Discourses: it kept Italy divided. The papacy was a spiritual institution that delved in temporal power to the detriment of the political well-being of Italy. Italy did not resemble France or Spain because of the popes. The pontiff caused the Italian cities to waver between warring foreign alliances. The papacy was never so strong so as to seize all of Italy, nor too weak so as to be unable to call in foreign powers for its defense against growing Italian powers. Thus it kept Italy and her cities perennially divided and unable to rise to greatness.

Nowhere else in his works is the critique of the papacy more apparent than in the Florentine Histories. Ironically, this very book was commissioned by Pope Leo X and dedicated to Pope Clement VII (1523-1534), both from Florence’s Medici family. Despite this fact, Machiavelli’s criticism of the papacy hardly seems muted (although neither is his praise of the Medicis). The First Book is both abundant and explicit in linking the papacy with the political crisis of the age. Yet this criticism was not an argument against institutionalized Christianity per se. Although one was obviously implied, neither was there a direct criticism that challenged the various claims to temporal power that many popes had made in previous ages. Otherwise we could expect to see a serious treatment of Pope Gregory VII, Pope Innocent III and Pope Gregory IX.

---

97 Discourses, 1.12, 38; CW 228; Op. 96.
and the forged “Donation of Constantine,” yet they are barely or not at all mentioned.\footnote{98} Generally Machiavelli’s criticism centered upon the papacy’s destruction of Italy resulting from its pervasive involvement in temporal affairs.

The First Book of the \textit{Florentine Histories} contains a sweeping tour through Italian political history from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Fourteenth Century. Prominently displayed in the book are the popes and their detrimental effects on Italian politics. In the letter dedicatory to the \textit{Florentine Histories}, Machiavelli promised Pope Clement VII that he would see how disaster befell Italy after Rome’s disintegration and how “the pontiff, the Venetians, the Kingdom of Naples, and the duchy of Milan took the first ranks and commands in the land.”\footnote{99} Indeed, Machiavelli explained how the pontiff first took command in the land. In chapter nine he accounted for the rise of the papacy first as a spiritual power: they were “revered by men for the holiness of their lives and for the miracles, and their examples so extended the Christian religion that princes had necessarily to submit to it so as to dispel the great confusion abroad in the world.”\footnote{100} But this spiritual authority did not give the papacy its political power. The decisive moment in the rise to political power for Machiavelli came with Theordoric’s\footnote{101} decision to move his seat from Rome to Ravenna, thereby leaving Rome without a prince. Filling the vacuum, the popes became Rome’s \textit{de facto} princes, gaining obedience from the people, 

\footnote{98}{Gregory VII (1073-1085) is mentioned in 1.15-16, Innocent III (1198-1216) is included in 1.20, but neither Gregory IX (1227-1241) nor the “Donation of Constantine” is mentioned at all. For the importance of these popes in the claims for temporal power, see Walter Ullman, \textit{The Growth Of Papal Government in the Middle Ages} (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1955) and Brian Tierney, \textit{The Crisis of Church and State 1050-1300} (Engelwood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964).}

\footnote{99}{\textit{Florentine Histories}, Dedicatory, 3; \textit{CW} 1029; \textit{Op.} 631.}

\footnote{100}{\textit{Florentine Histories}, 1.9, 19; \textit{CW} 1045; \textit{Op.} 640.}

\footnote{101}{King of Ostrogoths and Italy, late Fifth Century.}
securing partnerships with the Eastern Empire through the Lombards, and later when the Eastern Empire fell, securing Rome against the Lombards by aligning her with France. While the papacy filled the necessary political function in Rome’s times of crises, Machiavelli was quick to lay his charge against it.

So henceforward, all the wars waged by the barbarians in Italy were for the most part caused by pontiffs, and all the barbarians who invaded were most often called in by them. This mode of proceeding continues still in our times; it is this that has kept and keeps Italy disunited and infirm.  

Machiavelli concluded that any history of Italy’s divided politics was in fact a history of papal politics.

Therefore, in describing what has happened from those times until our own, no more will be shown about the ruin of the Empire, which is all in dust, but rather the expansion of the pontiffs and of the other principalities that governed Italy until the arrival of Charles VIII will be shown. And you will see how the popes – first through censures, then by censures and arms together, mixed with indulgences – were terrible and awesome; and how, for having used them both badly, they have lost the one altogether and as regards the other remain at the discretion of others.  

In the Florentine Histories, Machiavelli was unequivocal: the papacy was most responsible for the disunity of Italy. This argument was sustained throughout the First Book as Machiavelli traced the growth of papal power through Gregory III and Pepin II of France and the start of the Holy Roman Empire and Charlemagne.  

As expected, Machiavelli paid heed to the complex relationship between pope and emperor in much of Book One, as he observed

\[102\] Florentine Histories, 1.9, 20; CW 1046; Op. 640.

\[103\] Florentine Histories, 1.9, 20; CW 1046; Op. 640.

\[104\] Florentine Histories, 1.10 and 1.11 respectively. Gregory III was Pope from 731-734. Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Leo III (795-816) in 800. Curiously here and throughout Book One, Machiavelli frequently erred in historical fact about certain popes and events. For example, in 1.11 he confounded two visits of Charlemagne to Rome and mistakenly asserted that Pope “Sergius” (presumably he means Sergius III, 904-911) had started the tradition of changing his name when elected, but John II many centuries prior (533-535) was the first to do so.
“the pope had more or less authority in Rome and in all Italy according to whether he had the favor of the emperors or of those who were more powerful there.” This complex relationship between the emperors and the papacy was often a cause of division and foreign intervention in Italy. Machiavelli’s example in Chapter Thirteen was the restoration of Pope Gregory V to the pontificate by the intervention of emperor Otto III after Gregory was driven out of Rome by popular revolt. In the aftermath, Machiavelli noted that Gregory deprived the papacy of the ability to create emperors and gave it to six “princes” in Germany.

For Machiavelli, this development cut to the heart of the problem of the papacy. Popes could at once wield incredible influence over monarchs and laymen alike but at the same time were utterly limited by the peculiar nature of the institution and thus prevented from being politically efficacious. As Machiavelli described in Chapter Fourteen, not always having a disposable force and effective control over Rome meant at times popes found themselves in conflict with the Romans: “in times when the popes with their censures made the whole west tremble, they had the Roman people in rebellion, and neither one of them had any other intention than to take away reputation and authority from the other.” Thus the papacy was mired in political affairs with two intractable obstacles in the people of their lands (especially Rome), and the emperors and monarchs

105 Florentine Histories, 1.13, 24; CW 1050; Op. 643.

106 Gregory V (996-999) was a foreign (German) pope, a fact which largely inspired the revolt against him. See Richard McBrien, The Lives of the Popes.

107 The power was given to three bishops (Mainz, Treves and Cologne) and three princes (Brandenburg, Palatine and Saxony).

108 Florentine Histories, 1.14, 25; CW 1051; Op. 643. This conflict was a contributing factor to the restriction of papal elections to cardinal-bishops (and thus away from direct Roman influence) under the pontificate of Nicholas II (1058-1061).
of Europe. The schism faced by Alexander II (1061-1073) and the attempted overthrow of Gregory VII were derived from these intractable political difficulties that continually faced the papacy. Any attempts to reform or disallow lay investiture distilled the conflict between pope and civil authority creating the Guelf and Ghibelline parties “for the sake of which Italy, when it lacked barbarian invasions, was torn apart by internal wars.”

Yet as Machiavelli noted, the papacy could still assert considerable authority over civil authorities despite the entrenched conflict of powers. The dispute between Pope Alexander III (1159-1181) and England’s King Henry II serves as a famous example. For the murder of Thomas à Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury who had protested lay investiture, Alexander III imposed a heavy penance upon Henry II, including a public apology and military support in Jerusalem, even though the cardinals the pope sent to investigate had “not found the king manifestly guilty.” But this same pope who could impose penance on an English king had to flee from Rome multiple times because of popular revolts inspired by imperial partisans. After death when his body was to be buried in the Lateran, the Roman citizens desecrated it beforehand.

… all these things were accepted by Henry: thus did such a king submit to a judgment to which today a private man would be ashamed to submit. Nonetheless, while the pope had so much authority among princes far away, he could not make himself obeyed by the Romans, whom he could not entreat to let him stay in Rome even though he promised he would not busy himself with anything but ecclesiastical things: thus are appearances feared more when they are far away than when nearby.

---

109 Florentine Histories, 1.15, 26; CW 1052; Op. 644.

110 Florentine Histories, 1.19, 30; CW 1056; Op. 646. Becket’s murder took place in 1172. Despite wanting to stop Henry’s encroachments on ecclesiastical appointments, Alexander could not strongly oppose him for fear of the king allying with a hostile emperor. The murder of Beckett gave Alexander considerable leverage in controlling lay investiture without losing the allegiance of an important monarch. See Duffy, Saints and Sinners, pp. 109-110.

111 Ibid., 1.19, 30.

112 Florentine Histories, 1.19, 30; CW 1057; Op. 646.
Machiavelli demonstrated how a pope can wield such enormous influence over a monarch and yet be so politically limited by other aspects of the papacy.

Could the political problems of the papacy be overcome? In Machiavelli’s sweeping history of Italy through the middle ages, the popes who tried to consolidate their power and gain temporal authority only divided Italy further and undermined their own bid for supremacy.

Thus the pontiffs, now for the sake of religion, now for their own ambition, never ceased calling new men into Italy and inciting new wars; and after they had made one prince powerful, they repented it and sought his ruin. Nor would they allow any province that they out of weakness were unable to possess to be possessed by others. And the princes feared them because, whether fighting or fleeing, they always won, unless they had been oppressed with some deceit, as were Boniface VIII and some others who under the color of friendship were captured by the emperors. 

Machiavelli cited Pope Nicholas III (1277-1280) as one who tried to abate the emperor’s power through what resembled Machiavellian virtue. A pontiff with a reputation for nepotism and avarice, 

Yet his scheming could not transcend the political problems endemic to the papacy. Neither could the ambitious reign of Boniface VIII (1295-1303) consolidate the spiritual authority with civil authority under papal control.

Fierce and relentless, Boniface tried to settle Roman conflict by eliminating the Colonna family (even declaring a “crusade” against it), waged wars with Philip IV of France, attempted to restore allied kings to their thrones in Italy and undermined those he

---

113 Florentine Histories, 1.23, 34; CW 1061; Op. 648-649.

114 See Dante, Divine Comedy, Inferno, 19.61ff.

115 Florentine Histories, 1.23, 35; CW 1062; Op. 649.
opposed, and most remarkably proclaimed supreme spiritual and temporal power in his bull *Unam Sanctum*.\(^{116}\) However, Machiavelli’s criticism of Boniface VIII was not against these claims; his criticism of Boniface rested on the fact that the pontiff’s ambitious attempts to strengthen his political power only ended up weakening him and dividing Italy.\(^{117}\)

Machiavelli’s attack on the papacy and its effects in the political crisis of his age was most clearly shown in his treatment of several Renaissance popes. Consider Machiavelli’s treatment of Julius II. In several places, he scolded his use of auxiliary arms,\(^{118}\) noted his deceptive appearance of liberality,\(^{119}\) and judged his impetuosity.\(^{120}\) His overall assessment of Julius’s pontificate was devoid of any treatment of the moral questions that a “warrior pope” would pose.\(^{121}\) He appeared to judge Julius exclusively on his military, political, and prudential shortcomings. However, Machiavelli’s judgment aside, the reign of Julius II for the reassertion and restoration of papal power was one of relative success.\(^{122}\) Julius consolidated papal territories, fought the influence of nepotism, and diminished the impact of factionalism in papal lands; “in all essential respects,”

---

\(^{116}\) Duffy, *Saints and Sinners*, 119-122. The bull was most likely seen by all as hollow in its claims to temporal power as it was written during at the height of propaganda war with Philip of France when the papacy was very weak (see Duffy, 121).

\(^{117}\) *Florentine Histories*, 1.25.

\(^{118}\) *The Prince*, 13.

\(^{119}\) *The Prince*, 16.

\(^{120}\) *The Prince* 25; *Discourses* 3.9, 3.44.

\(^{121}\) Contrast Machiavelli to *The Praise of Folly* (1509) and *Julius Exclusus* (1517 – after the pope’s death) by the Catholic humanist Erasmus. In the satire *Julius Exclusus*, Julius is accused of virtually all types of crimes and is featured pigheadedly justifying his war-mongering and materialistic reign before St. Peter who refuses to admit him into heaven.

\(^{122}\) See the role of Julius in the section “The Quandary of the Papacy” in Chapter One above.
wrote Burckhardt, “he was the saviour of the papacy.”¹²³ Machiavelli’s cool treatment of Julius might have been due to this very fact: Julius strengthened an institution that had help bring Italy into political crisis, and he had hoped that the institution might be destroyed or brought to political oblivion.

Machiavelli’s hope for the demise of the papacy was shown clearly by his treatment in *The Prince* of Pope Alexander VI and his illegitimate son Cesare Borgia. Machiavelli praised Alexander for his successful gains on behalf of the papal states (though these were less significant than Julius’s gains); his admiration for the exploits of Cesare are infamous. Whereas Julius restored the institution to stability, Alexander and Cesare had nearly brought it to destruction. They had stacked the College of Cardinals with family and allies with the aim of securing Cesare’s future election as pope. Cesare had conquered many key territories and was about to consolidate his power when Alexander died an untimely death and Cesare himself also became ill; “[Cesare],” wrote Machiavelli, “could not have conducted himself otherwise and the only things in the way of his designs were the brevity of Alexander’s life and his own sickness.”¹²⁴ For Machiavelli, Cesare’s only imprudence – though a massive miscalculation – was his support for Julius as papal successor (after the very brief reign of Pius III), effectively shutting him from the control of the papacy, and saving the office from certain chaos.¹²⁵ Thus when Cesare took measures that hurt the papacy, Machiavelli praised him; when Cesare’s support for Julius shut himself out of the papacy and thereby strengthened the

---

¹²³ Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 90.

¹²⁴ *The Prince*, 7, 32-33; *CW* 34; *Op.* 268.

¹²⁵ *The Prince*, 7, 33; *CW* 34; *Op.* 269.
institution, Machiavelli blamed him. He also faulted Julius whenever the pontiff took measures to strengthen the papal principality. Thus, Machiavelli consistently preferred the demise of the papacy.

Machiavelli’s presentation of Sixtus IV in the Florentine Histories was emblematic of his criticism of the institution and its role in the political crisis of the age. Sixtus was a failed prince; he attempted to consolidate power for his family and control Italy, but ended up, in Machiavelli’s account, only causing more division than unity. Sixtus IV is the only pope in Machiavelli’s writings who was given a harsh assessment of pedigree and character, a pope of “very base and vile condition.”

Machiavelli also wrote that it was Sixtus “who [first] began to show how much a pontiff could do and how many things formerly called errors could be hidden under pontifical authority.”

Alongside his notoriety, Sixtus was a pope with great ambitions to control Italy, but the papacy impeded him; he was a pope who strove to transform his pontificate into an Italian kingship, but was constantly thwarted by imperial and republican powers suspicious of any papal control outside ecclesiastical affairs.

---

126 Florentine Histories, 7.22, 301; CW 1365; Op. 807. Part of his notoriety included nepotism. He appointed one son (hidden under a different name) and a nephew (who became Pope Julius II) cardinals. Elsewhere, after the Pazzi Conspiracy, Machiavelli has more harsh words for the pontiff: “And since the pope had shown himself to be a wolf and not a shepherd, so as not to be devoured as guilty, they justified their cause, by every mode they could and filled all Italy with the treachery done against their state, showing the impiety of the pontiff and his injustice and that the pontificate that he had seized wickedly he exercised wickedly. For he had sent those whom he had elevated to the highest prelacies (Cardinal Sansoni and Archbishop Salviati), in the company of traitors and parricides, to commit such treachery in the church, in the middle of divine office, at the celebration of the sacrament; and afterward, because he had not succeeded in killing the citizens, changing the state of their city, and plundering it as he pleased, he interdicted it and threatened and offended it with pontifical maldictions. But if God was just, if acts of violence were displeasing to Him, then those of his vicar must have displeased Him, and He must be glad that offended men, finding no refuge in that place, would have recourse to Him. Therefore, not only did the Florentines not accept the interdict and obey it, but they forced priests to celebrate the divine office, and they called a council in Florence of all the Tuscan prelates who were subject to their empire, in which they made an appeal against the injuries of the pontiff to the future council...” Florentine Histories, 8.11, 330-331; CW 1398-1399; Op. 825.

127 Florentine Histories, 7.22, 301; CW 1365; Op. 807.
For Machiavelli, Sixtus’s involvement in the Pazzi Conspiracy in Florence demonstrated his inability to transform the papacy into kingship.\textsuperscript{128} The conspiracy attempted to eliminate the dominant Medici (Guiliano and Lorenzo) in republican Florence, who were opponents of the pope and allies of the emperor. The conspiracy failed to eliminate Lorenzo, and Florence rallied behind the Medici. The pope then excommunicated Florence “so that the Florentines might feel spiritual wounds in addition to their temporal ones” and he went to war against the city and its allies.\textsuperscript{129} This war became costly and pointless. The pope impoverished and alienated his own allies and ultimately demonstrated for Machiavelli that “the shortness of life of popes, the change through succession, the slight fear that the Church has of princes, and the few scruples it has in adopting courses, require that a secular prince cannot have entire confidence in a pontiff or safely share his fortune with him.”\textsuperscript{130} In order to gain power over Italy for him and his family, Sixtus needed allies. Yet his attempt to transform the papacy created a reluctance to ally with the pope: “for in wars and dangers, whoever is a friend of the pope will be accompanied in victories and be alone in defeats, since the pontiff is sustained and defended by spiritual power and reputation.”\textsuperscript{131}

Seeing as Machiavelli was such an ardent opponent of the political affairs of the papacy and its effects on the age, the Eleventh Chapter of \textit{The Prince} presents a problem. There Machiavelli asserted the hope that the Medici Pope Leo X could with his

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textit{Florentine Histories}, 8.1-22.}
\footnote{\textit{Florentine Histories}, 8.10, 328; \textit{CW} 1396; \textit{Op.} 823.}
\footnote{\textit{Florentine Histories}, 8.17, 338; \textit{CW} 1406; \textit{Op.} 829.}
\footnote{\textit{Florentine Histories}, 8.17, 338; \textit{CW} 1406-1407; \textit{Op.} 829.}
\end{footnotes}
“goodness and infinite other virtues” make the pontificate “great and venerable.”

Would Leo somehow transcend the political crisis that was in part a creation of the papacy? Considering the dedicatory letter and Twenty-Sixth Chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli’s call to Leo did not signal a hope that the papacy itself could resolve the political crisis of the sixteenth century. Looking at the praise of Lorenzo the Great and Cosimo in the *Florentine Histories*, the dedication of *The Prince* to the latter day Lorenzo and the appeal to a “new Moses” in the Twenty-Sixth chapter, Machiavelli’s hope in Leo was based in his family, not in his ecclesiastic seat. In Leo X a Medici Florentine came to the seat of St. Peter at the same time that the Medicis controlled Florence; thus rare coincidence of family and power (like the Borgias before them) had come again to Italy. With the same family in power in Florence and in the papacy (as well as the coinciding weakening emperor) the political difficulties of the papacy could be eradicated and the institution radically weakened (and perhaps even destroyed) so that temporal authority could be consolidated, and as Machiavelli hoped, the practice of the art of politics would return to sixteenth century Italy.

Machiavelli experienced the early sixteenth century as a time of political crisis. His native Florence and all of Italy had shown the great need for an art of politics. Papal, imperial, and foreign regal designs on Italian territories coupled with the warring Italian republics, kingdoms, and civic empires, each with their own internal and external pressures, had rendered Italy a veritable political chaos in need of reviving a political art capable of founding and maintaining regimes. For Machiavelli, the chaos of Italian politics had several causes. The humanist movement, despite its aims to revive the high

---

132 *The Prince*, 11, 47; CW 46; Op. 274.
civilization, not only failed to ameliorate but even exacerbated the political crisis. For Machiavelli, the effects of Christianity on politics and political thought had weakened men such that the art of politics could not be taught or learned. Moreover, the papacy’s involvement in temporal affairs also thwarted the return of an art of politics to sixteenth century Europe. After recognizing and diagnosing these barriers and problems of his age, Machiavelli could begin his project of imparting the art of politics.
CHAPTER THREE:

LUTHER AND THE CRISIS OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century was not confined to Italy; Germany too had its share of political and ecclesial disarray. Competing claims of pope and emperor, the dissolution of dual sovereignty, and a waning unity of Western Christendom, created a European crisis that was particularly acute in the Holy Roman Empire. For Luther, the crisis was first spiritual rather than political. Thus it could be that the crisis of the age which was manifest to Machiavelli as one of Italian politics, first appeared to Luther as one of the Church in Germany. Yet Luther’s assessment of the spiritual crisis had political implications as forceful as Machiavelli’s infamous assessment of the age. And so, what began for Luther as matters seemingly restricted to theology and eternal salvation, quickly became the basis of a political theory.

Machiavelli’s assessment of his age was from the outset rife with political ideas. It was not so with Luther. In fact, as a major point of contrast between them, Luther’s career as a church reformer begins in a seemingly apolitical and thoroughly theological way. Luther’s foremost task in his early career was discerning the relationship between himself and God, and the certainty of his salvation. Yet within a decade of the controversy over indulgences, Luther had well begun to criticize the political authorities of his day. From seemingly apolitical theological ideas, Luther developed a political theory that would have him boast “not since the time of the apostles have the temporal
sword and temporal government been so clearly described or so highly praised by me.”¹

Luther clearly believed that his political ideas were significant; in fact, for him they were inextricably joined to the purification of the Church. His writings show that resolving the crisis of the age was both an ecclesial and secular project. But his political theory developed only after his reformation “discovery” had led him to perceive a theological crisis in the Church. Therefore, before considering the convergence of Machiavelli and Luther’s political ideas, an account must be given of how an Augustinian monk preoccupied with theology developed a political theory that would converge with the ideas of a Florentine diplomat preoccupied with the art of politics.

**Luther and the Reformation**

As scholarship on both Luther and the Reformation period is vast and various, a brief treatment on the perils of analyzing Luther ought to be presented in the interests of greater precision. First, we must strive to keep distinguished Martin Luther’s life and thought from the sixteenth and seventeenth century schism (and its political, social and economic upheaval) known as the Reformation. This point might seem rather obvious. Luther was but one sixteenth century reformer (albeit the first among many) who would be severed from the See of Rome; afterwards, he would lead one of many “evangelical” movements, reforming Church, government and society alike, in a process some

---

historians call “confessionalization” in early modern Europe. Yet it is a distinction often blurred in the popular accounts of the reformer and his influence upon the Reformation.

Few figures have sustained the publicity paid to Luther, and this publicity has endured from the sixteenth century to our own twenty-first. Thus it is no surprise that Luther has been appropriated in multifarious ways. Luther has been seen as a friend of the new science, a natural law theologian, a Renaissance writer, a champion of modern individual liberty, a champion of medieval political thought, neither a medieval nor modern, an ancestor of National Socialism, an advocate of neither the nation nor

---

2 The seminal work on the paradigm of confessionalization was Wolfgang Reinhard’s “Zwang zur Konfessionalisierung? Prolegomena zu einer Theorie des konfessionellen Zeitalters,” Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung, 10 (1983). Reinhard’s confessionalization kept religious groups (confessions) as central factors in broader social, political and cultural change in Reformation Europe.

3 In Fall and Winter 2003-04 for example, interest in Luther inspired the major motion picture Luther, two new widely published English biographies (James Nestingen, Martin Luther: A Life, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003; Martin Marty, Martin Luther, New York: Penguin, 2004) and a front page feature article in the German news magazine Der Spiegel (December 15, 2003).

4 Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther’s World of Thought (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958): Chapter Nine.


10 Rudolf Thiel, Luther (Berlin: Neff, 1941); Otto Scheel, “Der Volksgendanke bei Luther,” Historische Zeitschrift, 161 (1940). The argument of Luther’s contribution to Nazism has not only been made by Nazi scholars reinventing German icons in the reign of the Third Reich; see William M. McGovern, From Luther to Hitler: the Story of Fascist-Nazi Political Philosophy (Boston: Houghton-
modern state,\textsuperscript{11} a consistent political theorist\textsuperscript{12} and an utterly inconsistent, overestimated and contradictory one.\textsuperscript{13} Even in discarding manifest biases of many of the above accounts, a careful academic analysis of Luther’s thought apart from the Reformation in general is a daunting task. Twenty-first century interpreters of Luther cannot but interpret him in light of the Reformation and his influence upon it. Therefore, the inevitable difficulty of interpreting his political theory, just as his life and work in general, is that we shall always interpret from the vantage point of knowing his role in a more comprehensive history of the Reformation which Luther himself could not possibly have had. As one scholar observed, this problem of interpreting Luther’s thought arises “not because the historian knows too little but because the historian knows too much.”\textsuperscript{14}

Great care must be taken in order to understand – as far as it is possible – Luther’s political ideas as he understood them himself. Thus, a distance must be maintained from the analysis of the reformer’s own thought and the “Lutheran” Reformation of the sixteenth century in general, while also holding a critical engagement between Luther’s writings and the historical, and theological sources that informed them.

\textsuperscript{11} Harold J. Grimm, “Luther’s Conception of Territorial and National Loyalty,” \textit{Church History}, 17, (1948).

\textsuperscript{12} W. D. James Cargill Thompson, \textit{The Political Thought of Martin Luther} (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1984).


Second, in any attempt to understand Luther as he understood himself, we encounter several problems in studying his own works. One is the tendency to render his ideas static and unchanging. Changing positions or inconsistent ideas are often forced into agreement with other positions or ignored in efforts to make a clearer picture of the “true” Luther. To treat Luther’s thought in this way, is to invite significant error into one’s analysis. There is no reason to suppose that Luther’s political ideas must be consistent over time if they are to be taken seriously. Some changes were inevitable: Luther was highly engaged with his ideas on the tumultuous politics of his time. Indeed, he shifted his position on many crucial matters throughout his life and career. As a famous example, and one most important for political theory, Luther relented on the issue of evangelical resistance to Imperial forces. Whereas Luther had always strictly rejected armed resistance to the Emperor in defense of faith, at the Torgau meeting in 1530 and thereafter, he began to support military defense of what became the Schmalkaldic League.  

In a more gradual mode of change, but one equally as politically charged, Luther’s thoughts on the papacy can be traced in its different stages through his early life and career. Since Luther’s political ideas shifted significantly over time, one must resist the temptation to assimilate these differences into a consistent whole.

Another problem one faces in analyzing Luther’s thought is the difficulty in definitively treating certain subjects when faced with the sheer volume of his life’s work.

---

15 There are many accounts of this momentous change in Luther’s thought. Among the most provocative and insightful is Mark U. Edwards Jr., Luther’s Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-46 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983).

The standard German collection of Luther’s writings, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*,\(^\text{17}\) is comprised of over one hundred volumes averaging hundreds of pages each. The standard English translations of Luther’s writings are found in the series *Luther’s Works (LW)*.\(^\text{18}\) Though composed of fifty-five volumes, it is not nearly as exhaustive as the *Weimarer Ausgabe (WA)*, omitting many of the original works in the German language volumes. Adding to the volume of the collected works are the enormous breadth of subjects, forms and styles of the writings: from polemical tracts to theological treatises, Biblical commentaries to hymns, Luther was compelled to write on a whole litany of subjects in a wide variety of literary forms. Even with relatively unlimited time, uncovering and analyzing his political theory is a very daunting task.\(^\text{19}\)

The focus here will be mostly on the earlier writings prior to 1530. These writings of his early career are generally more relevant to our understanding of his political theory than are the later writings. Luther’s early writings, particularly those of the 1520s, are more explicit in their theoretical foundations. The reason for this clarity is simple enough: Luther’s theology had major political implications that had not yet been elaborated. Upon recognizing these political implications and developing his new political theory, Luther in his early writings was more inclined to ground his political ideas theologically than the more polemical and entrenched writings of his later career.

---

\(^\text{17}\) Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1993. It is commonly referred to as the *Weimarer Ausgabe.*


\(^\text{19}\) Several significant advances have been made in compiling indices and databases of the original works of Luther. The University of Tübingen has compiled indices of the *WA*. Boston College has provided the *Index Verborum*, an online database of 325 of Luther’s writings all written between 1516 through 1525. The University of Chicago has provided an online database for the Luther Bible.
Primarily selecting works written prior to 1530 does not deny the value of his later writings. Luther scholarship has often neglected the later works, although there have been several studies to overcome this neglect. Luther was a prolific writer to the end of his life, and many important works, including some of his most accomplished biblical commentary, were written post-1530. The labours spent writing during these later years are even more impressive considering his intense career as a reformer, his continued teaching, and the addition of several more children to his family. Moreover, many of the post-1530 writings were acutely political.

More than Luther and the evangelical movement had originally anticipated, the reform of the Church began to be a central issue in German princely politics throughout the magisterial reform. Yet, by and large, Luther’s later writings became less expository of his political theory as they became entrenched in his polemical – often violent and scatological – attacks against his enemies and his apologies for the magisterial reform.

Where there are later writings relevant to Luther’s political theory, exceptions will be made. Luther’s struggle with the sanction of armed resistance to the emperor in 1530 (and thereafter) cannot be overlooked in a thorough study of his political theory; indeed, it is one of the most controversial aspects of Luther’s career as a reformer. Thus, the writings post-1530 that elaborate Luther’s guarded endorsement of Protestant armed

20In this regard, Mark U. Edwards’s study _Luther’s Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-46_ is invaluable.


22 Two examples of these polemical writings are _On the Jews and Their Lies (1543), LW 47, 121-306, WA 53, 417-552_, and _Against the Roman Papacy, An Institution of the Devil (1544), LW 41, 257-376, WA 54, 206-299._
resistance must be analyzed. Foremost among these writings is *Doctor Martin Luther’s Warning to His Dear German People*\(^{23}\) written in 1531. Exceptions must also be made for later biblical commentaries exposing his political ideas. An outstanding example of such biblical interpretation is the *Commentary on Psalm 101*,\(^{24}\) based on a psalm, Luther claimed, which praised and thanked God for secular authorities.\(^{25}\)

Luther’s soteriological quest for certainty led to the formation of his political theory. Thus the development of his political theory, in response to the theological-political crisis of the age, can be seen in three stages corresponding to his theological development in the early Reformation. This quest can be divided into three periods of Luther’s early career. In the first period, he appeared unconcerned with the status of temporal government. Luther was preoccupied with the question over the certainty of grace and many of the accompanying questions regarding the relationship between God and human beings. Predating Luther’s conflict with ecclesial authorities, this period contained the theological struggles over the knowledge of God, ethics, and justification that would occupy Luther’s writings throughout much of his life. While these struggles were antecedent to diagnosing the theological-political crisis of the age and developing a robust political theory, they provided the foundation upon which Luther would build his critique of the Church and defend an invigorated temporal government.

\(^{23}\) LW 47, 3-55. WA 30 (III), 276-320.

\(^{24}\) LW 13, 143-224. WA 51, 200-264.

\(^{25}\) LW 13, 146. WA 51, 200.
In the second period, Luther began to believe there was a theological crisis in his time, though at first this crisis was not yet to him political. This period began with his criticism of certain theological teachings and authorities, but not of the papacy. Soon after, Luther entered debate about the selling of indulgences. Yet at this point, a pivotal shift for Luther’s subsequent political thought occurred: while his criticism of indulgences appeared as an unsurprising, relatively small theological dispute, the debate quickly began to focus on the status of authority and sovereignty. What began as an indulgence controversy from a Biblical scholar in Wittenberg in 1517 became a serious challenge to ecclesial authority during the debates of the subsequent years. Luther charged that a crisis enveloped the church, and made his indictment cover not only corruptions in its offices, but also, as *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* had made clear, the core of its sacramental life.

In the third period, not long before the Diet of Worms and overlapping the second period, the theological crisis also became a political one, and thus Luther began develop a robust theory of temporal government. For Luther the crisis became political when he challenged wholesale the papal claims to temporal authority. In his *Open Letter to the German Nobility*, the crisis of justification and of the usurpation of temporal powers in ecclesial authorities was seen as both a theological and a political crisis. Luther’s stance against a corrupted Church had major implications for governing authorities, which became clear at the Diet of Worms. Furthermore, Luther questioned the relationship of an ethical life to salvation. Undoubtedly these fundamental questions loomed large for sixteenth century political theory, and soon Luther was called upon to elaborate his political thought.
Luther and the Search For Grace

How could the soteriological struggles of an Augustinian monk be possibly related to the theories of government in the sixteenth century? Luther’s theological wrestling had major political implications. Since his search for grace led him to a theology of justification by faith, Luther challenged the ethical foundations of his day. Thus his theology challenged the ethics of political life and action of his day, and resulted in a new political theory founded on his theology.

But it would be a long but crucial development to this new political theory. In attempting to trace the origins and influences of Luther’s search for grace, and ultimately to his diagnosis of a sixteenth century crisis, we encounter the problem of multiple and sometimes conflicting influences that Luther met at the University of Erfurt and amongst the cloistered Augustinians. Yet still these influences helped Luther recognize the crisis in his age and restore temporal government to a place of honor that he believed had been lost.

The first intellectual current flowing in Luther’s early life, and later influencing his political thought, was the movement known as “humanism.” Yet just as humanism is difficult to define for Renaissance scholarship, precisely defining humanism in the context of the Reformation has proven equally as difficult.26 The famous nineteenth century historian Jacob Burckhardt identified humanism with the development of

individualism and secularism in the Italian Renaissance. Reformation scholars have argued that humanism was an essentially Christian movement; others have argued that it was an essentially literary one. Humanism has also been seen as a movement conflicting with scholasticism, but this position is questionable. As one might guess, how one interprets the movement crucially affects how it is seen in relation to sixteenth century political thought.

Regardless of how humanism is defined, there is no evidence that Luther had any interest in humanism itself; yet, it is very clear that he greatly benefited from its influence. Humanism renewed the study of philology, Hebrew and New Testament Greek; for Luther (and many others, including Erasmus) this liberated the scripture from the sometimes misleading Latin translations. Just as Italian humanism influenced Machiavelli’s interest in classical texts, so too did it direct Luther to study of the church fathers, particularly the Greek fathers, who hitherto were long unread in the Western Christianity.

Furthermore, humanism brought a novel approach to the study of texts. Taking the Bible as an example, humanism sought to find the meaning of scripture less in


28 Respectively argued, for example by Giuseppe Tofannin, Storia dell’umanesimo II: I’umanesimo italiano (Bologna, 1964) and P. O. Kristeller, Renaissance Thought and Its Sources (New York: 1979).


30 See Spitz, L. W., Luther and German Humanism (Brookfield, Vermont: Variorium, 1996).
passages and maxims extracted from the text, and more in the overall context of the book. In short it brought a textual criticism to Biblical scholarship that contemporaries believed could give them access to meanings and contexts long obscured by medieval scholarship. For Luther, it provided him with the tools of his theological and political revolution: ancient languages, rhetoric, and textual criticism. While these tools were available to so many others of the sixteenth century, they endowed Luther with valuable resources to ground his own thought.  

Humanism gave Luther the tools to criticize the theology and political theory of his age. Through humanism’s influence in literary criticism and renewed interest in ancient texts, Luther could at once claim to be using modern thinking but also to be retrieving something ancient (such as Scripture and patristics) that had been lost. Humanism, in short, allowed Luther to ground his theological and political criticisms solidly in Scripture and the Western tradition without deferring to contemporary scholasticism, which he found so wanting.

The Observant movement also affected Luther’s formation, influenced his search for grace, and affected his political and theological thinking. It had arisen out of monastic reform in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Essentially, “Observant” monasteries called their members to strictly observe their order’s rule. The call to strict observance was in part inspired by the real and perceived corruptions of the monastic and mendicant orders; however, the growth of the Observant movement was due to their popular spiritual appeal. Throughout the middle ages, monasteries were the sources of great spiritual resources for the community, and the Observant movement re-asserted the

31 For a overview of humanism in the Reformation, particularly seeing it as providing the “tools” to reform rather than the ideas themselves, see Richard Rex, “Humanism”, The Reformation World, Andrew Pettegree, Ed. (London: Routledge, 2000): 51-70.
special place of monastic life. Vital services of intercession (such as masses for the dead), pastoral services, and various lay participation in sacred affairs were found amongst monastic communities. The Observant monasteries often revitalized monastic life as the popular medieval ideal of a holy life; these orders often grew in numbers where “conventuals” – non-Observant orders – did not, and also inspired laity to embody monastic ideals in everyday life.32 The Brethren of the Common Life in Holland, Thomas van Kempen’s *Imitation of Christ*, and the *devotio moderna* were all offshoots of the movement.33

By the end of the fifteenth century, however, the Observant movement – including its lay followers – had been fully integrated into the monastic system.34 In orders such as the Augustinians, the Observants had reformed many of its monasteries in Europe, including Germany. However, conflict between the Conventual and Observant monasteries continued to cause quarrels within religious orders. Adding further complication, the difficulties of the sixteenth century brought another problem: the Observants themselves did not agree on the best way to reform. All could agree that the Church was in decline and in great need, but the dispute was over what to do. In Luther’s order the choices were between withdrawing from the world and from what was perceived as a secularized church, or reaching out to laity and clergy to launch a reform of the entire Church.35

32 Cameron, *The European Reformation*, pp 41-43.
34 Cameron, *The European Reformation*, p. 62.
35 Oberman, *Luther*, p. 141.
Through the Observant movement Luther was first introduced to the debate over church reform. When Luther joined the monastery in Erfurt, he joined a reformed German Augustinian congregation, an Observant monastery of the rule of St. Augustine. This Erfurt monastery came to the fore of an Observant dispute in 1510. John Staupitz (who would later become Luther’s mentor) became both the provincial of the order in the Saxon province, and also vicar general of the order. The union of the two offices would otherwise for us be insignificant, if it not had been embroiled in the issues of church and monastic reform. Staupitz was both an Observant and sympathetic to church reform through the order. The dispute became so polarized that only an appeal to Rome would settle it. In early February 1511, Luther and another Augustinian were sent to Rome to appeal to the pope; Julius II ordered them to obey Staupitz.

Though the exact influence of the Observant movement upon Luther’s thought is difficult to know, two general points of its effect on his theology and political thought can be made. First, in a very concrete sense, the Observant movement brought him to Rome and the seat of papal authority for his first and only time. This would be a journey that Luther would later look back on as formative in his evangelical movement and his political criticism of the papacy. Second, and more broadly, it brought Luther to the renewed vigor of strict Augustinian observance. Such a life underscored the relationship of ethical life to righteousness, a relationship that would profoundly influence his theology and ultimately his political theory. Luther would later claim that he was an

“irreproachable monk”\textsuperscript{37} but also that the “most pious monk is the worst scoundrel.”\textsuperscript{38}

For the Observant movement, the scoundrel monk was the problem. Rules of monastic orders ideally made men of God and nurtured holy lives; corrupted monks were those who failed to live the rule. In part through his monastic experience Luther later concluded otherwise: perfect monks – however good – were still scoundrels before God.

Another important intellectual influence on Luther’s theological and political thought was the debate over the metaphysical status of universal categories in relation to particulars. Consider the idea of a dog, and then some particular dog. Do only particular dogs exist or also some universal category of dogs? This was a contentious question between the “realists” and “nominalists” in late medieval scholasticism. Centuries before Luther, the realists (later identified as the \textit{via antiqua}, in following Thomas Aquinas or Duns Scotus, affirmed the real existence of universals. In contrast, the late medieval movement, the \textit{via moderna} of the nominalists, who followed William of Ockham and several others, argued that only particulars existed.\textsuperscript{39} Towards the beginning of the sixteenth century, the \textit{via moderna}, the heirs to the nominalist position, debated with another intellectual movement now known as the \textit{schola Augustiniana moderna}. Unlike the metaphysical arguments between the \textit{via antiqua} and the \textit{via moderna}, one of the contentious issues between the \textit{via moderna} and the \textit{schola Augustiniana moderna} was of large theological significance: justification. The doctrine of the \textit{via moderna} asserted that the covenant between God and human beings established the necessary conditions of

\textsuperscript{37} “irreprehensibilis monachus”, \textit{Preface to the Complete Edition to Luther’s Latin Writings, LW} 34, 336. \textit{WA} 54, 186.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Table Talk LW} 54, 4422, 340. \textit{WATR} 3, 4422.

salvation. Broadly these conditions involved living a good life and rejecting evil, or in other words, doing good works. With such a teaching on justification, the *via moderna* was accused of being Pelagian.\(^{40}\) However, the *via moderna* also insisted that good works did not merit salvation *per se*; rather, good works merited justification only by the grace of God through the covenant.\(^ {41}\)

The *schola Augustiniana moderna* agreed with much of the nominalist position; but against the *via moderna*, the *schola Augustiniana moderna* denied outright that human beings could in any way initiate their own justification. Gregory of Rimini, a member of the Order of the Hermits of St. Augustine (the “Augustinian Order”) was considered the father of the movement.\(^ {42}\) He argued that the power to resist sin and turn to righteousness was entirely an action of God. In appropriating Gregory’s theology, the *schola Augustiniana moderna* saw themselves as reviving the soteriology of Augustine, and in disputing with the *via moderna*, disputing the Pelagian heresy.

This depiction risks being too stark and oversimplified: late medieval theologians were not easily classified into neat, antithetical groups. One scholar wrote that the theologians of supposed opposite schools “often cited with approval those with whom, in principle they should have disagreed; and then failed to cite – or even apparently be

---

\(^{40}\) After the ancient opponent of St. Augustine, Pelagius. Through church councils of the fifth and sixth centuries, his views were considered heretical.

\(^{41}\) McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, p. 76.

\(^{42}\) Though the school had begun much earlier in fourteenth century Oxford as a reaction to the nominalist stronghold of the university. Thomas Bradwardine, later to become Archbishop of Canterbury, and John Wycliffe were fathers of the movement. Gregory has always been considered a nominalist. Until recently, Gregory had been considered part of the *via moderna*, but Heiko Oberman, in “Headwaters of the Reformation: Initia Lutheri – Initia Reformationis”, *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974) argued that what was called the *via Gregorii* was in fact not the *via moderna* but the *schola Augustiniana moderna* based upon Gregory’s theology. Alister McGrath criticizes Oberman in *Reformation Thought*, pp. 79-80.
aware of – some of their natural allies." Nevertheless, contentions about justification were very much alive in Luther’s University of Erfurt and in his religious order, and undoubtedly Luther’s theology and political thought was influenced by them. For example, Gabriel Biel, a prominent nominalist of the via moderna, was the author of Commentary on the Canon of the Mass, a book Luther had studied and absorbed for his ordination. Though Luther had respected Biel’s work, he would argue in his Disputation Against Scholastic Theology that Biel’s notions of the will and justification were contrary to the Gospel. This view would become a cornerstone in his assessment of the crisis of the age and his political theory. But certainly Luther did not begin his academic career with this view. The story of Luther’s discovery of justification, and all its concomitant effects in assessing the crisis of the sixteenth century and developing his political theory, began with this seemingly obscure matter in medieval nominalism.

More generally there were two ideas associated with nominalism that influenced Luther’s early thought, his academic career, and his search for grace. The first of these was a major component of nominalism’s philosophical opposition to the via antiqua: the subordination of reason to experience. Whereas Aquinas and Scotus lifted what was reasonable above the experiential in the discernment of reality, the nominalists looked to experience itself to discern what was real. Luther clearly was on the nominalist side of

44 Although there is no evidence that Luther read Gregory of Rimini prior to 1519.
45 LW 31, 9. WA 1, 224.
46 Oberman, Luther, p. 120.
this debate. Often Luther’s objections to the “reason” of the scholastics were based on experiential arguments. Like many of his contemporaries, he scoffed at scholastic debates concerning matters far removed from any correlate in human experience.

The second nominalist idea that influenced Luther’s theology and political thought was the distinction between God’s Word and human reason. With this idea, nominalism again distinguished itself from the via antiqua and earlier scholasticism. Broadly speaking, the via antiqua considered reason and revelation to be complementary guides in matters of salvation. For many scholastics of the via antiqua, human experience preceded revelation, and thus revelation was interpreted through reason. Nominalism asserted that God’s Word was the sole guide to salvation and that experience and reason confirmed and followed it. This distinction would play a major part in Luther’s political theory.

Luther’s theology and political theory, as a response to the theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century, was firmly rooted in his search for grace which began sometime in the first few years of his teaching career. On the recommendation of Staupitz, Luther was appointed to the chair of biblical studies at the recently founded and otherwise unremarkable University of Wittenberg. Luther’s charge was to lecture on various biblical texts which included the Psalms (1513-1515), Romans (1515-1516), Galatians (1516-1517), Hebrews (1517-1518) and once again the Psalms (1519-1521).

This does not mean however, that Aquinas and Luther were so radically opposed on grace, free will and justification, as might be supposed. Many scholars argue that “scholasticism” for Luther was in fact objectionable on Thomistic grounds, yet Luther only knew Aquinas via these same “scholastics”. Joseph Lortz, Die Reformation in Deutschland (Friedburg, 1962); Dennis Janz, Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983) and Luther on Thomas Aquinas (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1989); Bruce D. Marshall, “Faith and Reason Reconsidered: Aquinas and Luther on Deciding What is True,” The Thomist, 63 (1999): 1-48; David C. Steinmetz, “Luther Among the Anti-Thomists,” Luther in Context (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002):47-58.
In Luther’s first lectures on the Psalms, the *Dictata super Psalterium*,\(^48\) the theology of justification strikingly resembles that of the *via moderna*: in his convenant with humanity, God is obliged to justify anyone who meets certain minimum preconditions.\(^49\) However, neither the young Luther nor the *via moderna* espoused a theology of justification based on human merit *per se*. The human being who met the preconditions was justified not by the merits of his own efforts, but by the liberality of God through his graceful covenant.\(^50\) For Luther in these lectures, the central precondition was humility, for it motivated a longing for God’s grace.\(^51\) Yet the sinner took the initiative in his own salvation, and this small effort resulted in the obligation of God under his covenant to justify the sinner. The Word of God (in this case the Psalms) led the sinner to see his own need for divine grace and turn toward God to call on his mercy and salvation.

However, sometime during his early teaching career in Wittenberg, Luther spawned a theological revolution on justification. No longer did Luther see the sinner as the initiator of his salvation.\(^52\) Luther’s shift from the justification of the *via moderna* to

\(^{48}\) *LW* 10, 11. *WA* 3, 4, 1-414. These lectures were based on Luther’s notes on a wide-margined Psalter and separate extensive notes on each Psalm. It is difficult to tell when the notes were made, and how Luther may have revised them in later publications. See Alister McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985): 74-75.

\(^{49}\) McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, p. 106; for an elaborated account of Luther’s early theology of justification, see McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 72-92.

\(^{50}\) McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 88.


\(^{52}\) McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, pp. 141-147. When this change took place continues to be debated. Every year between 1509-1519 has been at one time considered by various twentieth century scholars to be a pivotal period in Luther’s thinking, although some recent scholarship has persuasively argued that the radical shift occurred sometime around 1515-1516.
his justification by faith was propelled by his discovery of the meaning of *iustia Dei*, or the “righteousness of God.”

The texts of Luther’s early lectures – the Psalms and Paul’s letters to the Romans – use the phrase abundantly. Before Luther’s discovery, his interpretation of the phrase squarely sided with the *via moderna*’s understanding of the righteousness of God as the righteousness with which God punishes the sinner. If the sinner met the precondition for justification, then he was justified; if not, and thereby remained unrighteous, he met the wrath of a judging God. Late in his life, Luther recalled how terrifying this righteousness seemed; it had even caused him to secretly hate God.

I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, “As if indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with righteousness and wrath!”

This harsh view of Christ as judge was often at the root of Luther’s excruciating *Anfechtungen*, his spiritual wrestling with God. Luther struggled with the *iustia Dei* both as a general barrier to humankind’s salvation, and as a personal one. What if human beings were not capable of meeting the preconditions of justification? What if human

---

53 Though used abundantly in scholarship, it is problematic to label Luther’s reinterpretation of justification as a “discovery.” Much of Luther’s theology of justification is compatible with major Christian theologians throughout the ages, such as Paul, Augustine and arguably Aquinas. Luther’s views on the matter also today brings much ecumenical agreement; see the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000). The “discovery” therefore, might more appropriately be called a recovery.

54 *LW* 34, 328-329. *WA* 54, 178. The Preface to the *Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings* was written in 1545, less than a year before Luther’s death. Given both Luther’s age, and the amount of time passed after his pre-Reformation struggles, the Preface does not provide an accurate account of the chronology of events. However, there is no reason to doubt the veracity of Luther’s claim included above.

55 For a helpful account of Luther’s *Anfechtungen* and his struggle with Christ as final judge, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation*, pp. 76-82. According to Philip Melanchthon, Luther experienced these *Anfechtungen* all his life: *History of the Life and Acts of Dr. Martin Luther*, Thomas D. Franzel, trans., as in *Luther’s Lives* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002): 16.
beings are too laden with sin to fulfill the demands of the covenant? Concurrently, Luther doubted his own abilities. Despite living as a “monk beyond reproach” he agonized over whether he was contrite enough for his sins, whether he had humbled himself enough for the justification of God. Luther searched for the grace of God but could not reconcile it with the righteousness of God that appeared as a punishing righteousness.

Luther’s understanding of the \textit{iustia Dei} was radically transformed in the early years of his university teaching career, before his posting of the famous ninety-five theses in 1517. Most likely by the end of 1515, Luther came to understand the \textit{iustia Dei} as the work of God freely given to human beings, rendering them worthy of justification by faith alone.\footnote{McGrath, \textit{Luther's Theology of the Cross}, pp. 131-132.} Through the personal struggles and the study of scripture, Luther’s problem over justification had vanished: the sinner did not have to meet the preconditions for justification, because, by faith in Christ’s death and resurrection, as an unmerited gift from God, he was already justified.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely “In the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.”\footnote{\textit{LW} 34, 329.  \textit{WA} 54, 178.}

Luther’s search for grace brought him back to the very phrase that had moved him to start.
Luther’s search for grace in his early life and career appear far removed from political matters and even further removed from political theory. This appearance is misleading, for the idea of justification lay at the core of all Christian belief and doctrine. It was the basic cornerstone in the relationship between God and humankind, disclosing the attributes of both God and humanity. For institutional Christianity, justification supports all the doctrines of the sacraments, of church’s ministry in the world, and even the nature and limits of secular power. Luther’s theology of justification was no “ivory tower” issue, but was one at the heart of Christian belief and practice. It had major ecclesial and political implications. Insofar as Luther’s “justification by faith” challenged various ecclesial and political powers of the early sixteenth century, these implications would be explosive.

**Luther and the Crisis of the Church**

Within a few years of his reformation discovery, Luther found himself at the center of a storm that would be heard throughout Western Christendom, rattling Church and temporal government to their foundations. By his reformation “discovery” Luther would come to see the sixteenth century as an age of crisis, beckoning him not only to purify the Church, but also elevate the status of temporal government to one of honor and autonomy that due to erroneous theology had been long denied. Thus for Luther the crisis of the Church was not to remain in the Church, for among greatest of ecclesial errors was the entanglement of Church authority in temporal government which stripped it of its divinely ordained purpose.
Luther’s diagnosis of the theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century began with the sale of indulgences. Indulgences were a part of a large system of penance in the late medieval Church. An indulgence was the Church-sanctioned reduction or commutation of penitential acts and temporal punishment for sin. An indulgence could be granted to anyone who was contrite and acted accordingly through either prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, almsgiving, payments or any combination thereof. The theology of indulgences was never quite settled. Though indulgences could reduce or commute penance and punishments on earth, they also became applicable to divine punishment. The practice of indulgences in the late medieval age was closely connected to the fear of the harsh judgment of God, and in particular, the fear of purgatory. The authority over indulgences was assigned to the pope because he could dispense the treasury of surplus merit of Christ and the saints; and so, only the pope could proclaim a “plenary” (covering all penance) indulgence. On March 31, 1515, Pope Leo X had made such a proclamation.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, indulgences had become a major source of papal revenue; indeed, Leo’s indulgence proclamation was expected to finance the rebuilding of St. Peter’s Basilica. These indulgences were to be sold in Germany following the election of Albrecht of Magdeburg to the archbishopric of Mainz, see of the primate of Germany. Since the archdiocese of Mainz had changed incumbents several times in a short number of years, large debts were owed to Rome for confirmation and

58 See Heinrich Boehmer, Road to Reformation: Martin Luther to the Year 1521, John W. Doberstein and Theodore Tappert, trans. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1946):167-168. Just how much purgatory was feared in the minds of ordinary people in the late middle ages is contentious. One recent study of medieval Florence suggests that the fear of purgatory was an engine for the city’s prosperity in the twelfth century; see Dameron, George W., Florence and its Church in the Age of Dante (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).
pallium fees. Albrecht’s election to the episcopacy would cost even more. Against

canon law, he was both too young and already held two church offices (including another
archbishopric) and thus had to pay the appropriate fees for papal dispensation from these
laws. Financed by the Fugger banking house, Albrecht settled on an arrangement

through which the proceeds from indulgences in Germany would be split between the
debt owed to the Fuggers and to the papacy. ⁵⁹

From the perspective of our age, too familiar with financial scandals, one might

expect Luther’s initial objections to the indulgences (or those of any objector) to begin

with the disreputable and exorbitant financial operations they supported. Luther did no

such thing; he was not even aware of the Fugger bank’s involvement in the indulgence
traffic until much later. ⁶⁰ From the outset, Luther’s objections were theological. Only

later would Luther consider the scandalous financial system they supported an apt

corollary to the questionable theology they promoted. The exclusively theological basis

for Luther’s objections to the sale of indulgences can be seen well before the rise of

controversy in 1517. As early as 1515 and 1516, just as he was working out the meaning

of the  iustia Dei and also lecturing on Paul’s letter to the Romans, Luther was also

beginning to challenge aspects of the penitential system based upon a theology of merit,

foremost of which was the sale of indulgences. ⁶¹ Preceding the controversy in October of

1517, Luther seemed aware that though his challenge was theological, there could be

major implications from questioning the merits of the indulgence trade. Yet his Treatise


⁵⁹ Brecht,  Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521, pp. 178-179.

⁶⁰ Against Hanswurst,  LW 41, 232. WA 51, 539.

⁶¹ See for example Luther’s objection in his commentary on Romans to indulgence preachers who assured salvation,  LW 25, 503. WA 56, 417.
on Indulgences,\textsuperscript{62} most likely written before the publication of the theses, directly challenged no ecclesial authority, affirmed some of the theology of indulgences, and overall possessed a tone of caution and piety.\textsuperscript{63}

Even with his publication of his \textit{Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences} (commonly known as his Ninety-Five Theses), Luther was scarcely aware of the potential controversy that his criticisms would evoke.\textsuperscript{64} In publishing the theses, Luther did not intend to challenge either church authority or practice in whole or even in part. In his letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz on October 31, 1517, the tone is pious and gentle, imploring the archbishop to correct only the false understandings and false preaching of indulgences, and says nothing about the pope or scholastic scholars.\textsuperscript{65} At the end of his life, Luther maintained that his theses did not even challenge indulgences themselves, but only their misuse, and that furthermore the theses were in the end intended to defend the papacy.\textsuperscript{66}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} \textit{WABr} 12, 5-9.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Brecht, \textit{Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521}, 188-189.
\item \textsuperscript{64} In the last fifty years there has been considerable debate whether Luther’s famous posting of the theses on the All Saints Cathedral door in Wittenberg had in fact occurred. The seminal arguments in this debate are Hanz Volz, \textit{Martin Luthers Thesenanschläg und dessen Vorgeschichte} (Weimar: Hermann Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1959) and Erwin Iserloh, \textit{The Theses Were Not Posted: Luther Between Reform and Reformation} (London: G. Chapman, 1968). Whether or not the posting occurred has little to do with Luther’s forthcoming challenge to ecclesial authority and his subsequent political theory. For even if Luther had publicly posted his theses on the church door, this was an ordinary, mundane act rather than one of challenge or rebellion. Furthermore, since his theses were theses (and thus an invitation to debate) and written in Latin, it is clear that Luther’s intended audience were the academics and theologians of Wittenberg, and not the common person, nor even directly the church hierarchy.
\item \textsuperscript{66} \textit{WADB} 11 (II), 104; \textit{WATR} 5, 5346, 5349. Cf. Brecht, \textit{Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521}, 198. Obviously the veracity of Luther’s claim is subject to debate. But Luther could not claim that he was not challenging the common understanding of confession. Undoubtedly the theses questioned the sacrament of penance in its current practice and supporting theology. For this point we need not look
\end{itemize}
Yet beginning with the theses through the early debates up to Leipzig, Luther increasingly found himself at odds with ecclesial authority, and increasingly involved in the political affairs of the Holy Roman Empire. Despite what Luther had intended with the theses, several prominent theologians immediately took issue with them, considering them to be an attack on papal supremacy. Among the first to do so was Sylvester Mazzolini Prierias, a Dominican who had been given the title and position “Master of the Sacred Palace” by Pope Leo X in 1515. A mere three days after he had first read the theses in the winter of 1518, Prierias declared them to be heretical. The title of Prierias’s condemnatory work, *Dialogue Concerning the Power of the Pope*, revealed the reason. In his eyes, Luther’s theses denied papal authority. The simple logic was based on Prierias’s doctrine of papal infallibility: the pope was infallible when he acted in his capacity as pope. Since the Church could determine matters of faith and morals, and the pope was its highest authority, to oppose church practices such as indulgences was to challenge faith, morals and pope alike, and thus to become a heretic. Essentially for Prierias, calling into question the sale of indulgences was to question the very foundation of the Church.  

Though Luther had not yet mentioned him by name, Luther’s theses and sermons clearly attacked the commissary of the indulgences, John Tetzel. Like Prierias, Tetzel’s

---


reaction to Luther was to charge heresy for challenging papal authority. Tetzel’s theses\textsuperscript{69} in response to Luther’s *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace*\textsuperscript{70} affirmed that the pope could not err, nor could he even be questioned, for to do so was heresy.

Even John Eck, a theologian at Ingolstadt and a onetime friend of Luther, accused him of heresy by the end of the winter of 1518. Unlike Tetzel, Eck was no theological lightweight. His first work against Luther, *Obelisks*, and Luther’s equally forceful response in *Asterisks*,\textsuperscript{71} demonstrate the broad range of differences that would soon divide Luther and the early evangelical movement from scholastics like Eck. In the end Eck concurred with the earlier opponents Prierias and Tetzel, that Luther’s primary heresy was calling the pope into question. For Eck, Tetzel, and Prierias, the controversy over indulgences was essentially a conflict over authority, and not about the theology of justification.

In the debates of the following years, Luther became convinced that there was a theological crisis within the Church. At Heidelberg in April 1518, Luther makes no mention of papal authority.\textsuperscript{72} Yet during the proceedings at Augsburg and the debate at Leipzig, Luther could not escape the subject. At the October 1518 Imperial Diet of Augsburg, where Luther was examined by Cardinal Cajetan – the papal legate attending

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{69} D. Martini Lutheri Opera latina varii argumenti, Volume One, pp. 306-312.
\item \textsuperscript{70} WA 1, 243-246. This sermon was preached and published in March of 1518, nearly five months after the publication of the theses.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Both works contained in WA 1, 281-314.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Though Luther was warned by Staupitz to avoid controversial subjects and concentrate on free will, sin and grace. The events at Heidelberg occurred during a triennial meeting of the Eremite Augustinians; the *Heidelberg Disputation* was Luther’s account of the events, LW 31, 35-70. WA 1, 353-374.
\end{itemize}
the diet\textsuperscript{73} – papal authority and particularly Luther’s opinion on the papal bull *Extravagante*\textsuperscript{74} were foremost on Cajetan’s agenda. So too did the Leipzig debate of July 1519 become focused on papal power and authority. Though Luther had prepared thirteen theses for the disputation with John Eck, the last thesis on the primacy of the papacy became the most contentious and the one most emphasized by Eck.\textsuperscript{75}

The debate at Leipzig was a turning point for Luther’s theology and ultimately his political thought. At Leipzig, Luther clearly and publicly stated his conception of the church and affirmed the Word of God as the final authority in matters of doctrine and faith. Against Eck, Luther argued that both popes and councils have erred. The “epochal significance” of the Leipzig debate lay in its debate over the primacy of the papacy, “which never before in the history of Christianity had occurred in this magnitude.”\textsuperscript{76} Luther’s stance at Leipzig on the fallibility of the pope would in large part soon produce his excommunication; any hopes of reconciliation with Rome had thereafter vanished. Beginning with Leipzig, Luther began to understand the scope of the conflict. Massive ecclesial and political implications would have to be considered, and Luther began to diagnose a pervasive crisis in the Church.

By 1520 the crisis of the Church had become clear to Luther. That year he would publish several of his most famous writings, including an indictment of the Western

\textsuperscript{73} Cajetan attended the diet to gain approval for a crusade indulgence against the Turks, but was flatly refused.

\textsuperscript{74} The common name of the papal bull *Unigenitus* of Pope Clement VI in 1343. This bull was cited against thesis fifty-eight of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, in which Luther “had asserted contrary to it that the merits of Christ did not constitute the treasury of merits of indulgences” *LW* 31, 261.

\textsuperscript{75} *LW* 31, 307-325. *WA* 2, 158-161.

\textsuperscript{76} Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521*, p. 317.
church’s most sacred practices, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Luther’s opponents received this writing as conclusive proof of his heresy. In Johannes Cochlaeus’s opinion, the proof was irrefutable: in the document Luther ferociously insulted the Church, challenged the pope and sympathized with past heretics, such as the Hussites. So notorious had the work become that in 1521 King Henry VIII of England attacked the work with a work of his own, *Defense of the Seven Sacraments*. Whereas even up to 1520 many of his enemies were prepared to grant concessions to his positions, *The Babylonian Captivity* signaled Luther’s decisive, irreparable break with the See of Rome, and the unshakeable conclusion that the early sixteenth century was in a deep theological crisis.

First, *The Babylonian Captivity* was very harsh in its tone and unrelenting in its attack on church authority. For Luther’s own writings, the level of attack was unprecedented. Though the *Babylonian Captivity* contained and developed his earlier ideas on the Church and sacraments, it did not hold back its major implications for the priesthood, monasticism, and the papacy. Against the priesthood as a separate, holier caste in the Western world, Luther insisted on the “priesthood of all believers” through baptism. Against prevailing doctrines, Luther insisted that papal authority was based on

---

77 *LW* 36, 3-126. *WA* 6, 497-573.

78 Johannes Cochlaeus, *The Deeds and Writings of Martin Luther from the year of the Lord 1517 to the year 1546 related chronologically to all posterity by Johannes Cochlaeus*, Elizabeth Vandiver, Ralph Keen and Thomas D. Frazel, Trans., *Luther’s Lives* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2003): 78. The Hussites were the followers of Jan Hus, a fifteenth century Czech reformer, who among other things, sought to have a distinctly Czech church and allow the laity the Eucharist in both kinds.

79 A work that earned the king the title “Defender of the Faith” from Pope Leo X that year.

80 *LW* 36, 57-81; 106-117. *WA* 6, 526-543; 560-567.
human authority, not divine. In fact, he went so far as to assert that its claims to divine authority turned the papacy into the “kingdom of Babylon and the power of Nimrod.”

Second, in the *Babylonian Captivity* it became clear that Luther was comprehensively challenging the legitimacy of a sacramental system through which the Church promised eternal salvation to all its members, from cradle to grave. He denied the sacramental status of unction, holy orders, and confirmation. He also denied marriage as a sacrament and made bold recommendations for its change in practice. He emphasized the relationship between baptism and what he called “Christian liberty.” Luther made abundantly clear how deeply he objected to the current practice and understanding of penance (which, considering the indulgence controversy, was not surprising). The first and most extensive discussion in the *Babylonian Captivity*, however, were his criticisms of the mass. Luther at once questioned the withholding of one kind from the laity, the scholastic theology of transubstantiation that obscured the “Word” and promise of God, and finally the perversion of the mass into a “good work.”

More than a theological objection to a few of the Church’s practices, Luther’s *Babylonian Captivity* demonstrates when he first identified a pervasive crisis in the sixteenth century Church. As the title of the work suggested, for Luther this was no small event. For Luther, like the Israelites captive in Babylon, God’s people in sixteenth

---


82 *LW*, 36, 91-92; 106-123. *WA* 6, 549-550; 561-571


84 *LW*, 36, 57-74, esp. 70. *WA* 6, 526-538.


century Christendom were being led astray from the Word of God through the corruptions of the papacy and many other ecclesial institutions. The crisis loomed so large for Luther that he began to believe that these were the end times, and that the papacy was the antichrist. What had begun as a seemingly small theological issue led Luther to uncover an alarming crisis of the Church, against which he was compelled to fight. But more than this, he also began to believe that the crisis was even more pervasive: it even affected temporal government.

Luther and the Crisis of Political Authority

As soon as the indulgence controversy had been changed into a debate on papal authority, major political effects became inevitable. If, for example, we take as veritable Johannes Tetzel’s insistence that the Ninety-Five Theses were heresy on the grounds of denying papal infallibility, the political implications for governing authorities would be clear. A heretic, aside from his eternal and ecclesial status, was also a non-citizen or outlaw, truly a person beyond the laws, obligations, duties and protections of his governing authorities. For the good of temporal order (to say nothing about the good of the Church or of eternal salvation), heresy had to be curbed and eliminated as much as governing authorities were able. Thus, a governing authority (such as a German prince) that had the ability to restrain heresy or to bring a heretic to justice – but did not act – would himself be open to the charge of heresy. Such was the unenviable position of Frederick the Wise, Imperial Elector of Saxony when the opponents of Luther began accusing the monk of heresy.
Thus Luther’s diagnosis of the crisis within the Church inevitably became a political one. In 1520, only months before he composed *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, the political implications of Luther’s challenge began to be seen through his theological criticisms of the Church. In one of his most famous writings (and indeed one of the most famous of the Reformation in general), Luther began to expound, in response to what he deemed a theological crisis of his time, a programmatic reform of the Church alongside the concomitant political changes such reform would bring. Luther wrote *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* in June of 1520.

The dedication of such an important treatise at first seems strange. Although the work exhorts its readers to political change, Luther dedicates the work to the German nobility rather than to political authorities properly speaking. Why would such a monumentally important political writing not be directly addressed first to those in political offices? As always for Luther, the answer was grounded in his theology. First, though he was coming to see that the sixteenth century crisis was also political, Luther was foremost concerned about the crisis in the Church. Luther never concerned himself over political matters *per se*, and so *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility* while also speaking to a correlating political crisis, was first written against the corruption of the Church and the preaching of the Word of God. Second, by 1520 Luther had settled on the idea of the “priesthood of all believers,” a doctrine, roughly speaking, that posited all baptized Christians, lay or clergy, on equal footing with one another. With this doctrine,

---

87 *LW* 44, 115-217. *WA* 6, 404-469.

88 See Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521*, p. 369, ff.
Luther believed that corruptions in the Church could be dispelled by the efforts of the laity, especially when the Church hierarchy was found wanting. The German nobility was in what Luther considered to be an ideal position to push for reforms in the Church. *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility* boldly proposed these reforms whilst warning against the recalcitrance of Christian nobles to act against Rome.

For Luther amongst the worst corruptions of the Church were the claims of spiritual authorities to powers they had no sanction to wield or possess. In the *Open Letter to the German Nobility*, Luther took aim at the claims of the papacy. Luther rightly believed that the papacy would be a formidable opponent to the cause of reform, as it had already shown itself to be.\(^89\) Moreover, the powers the papacy wielded also served as defenses against reforms, and in the first sections of the treatise, Luther attacked these claims.

The “three walls” with which the “Romanists” buttressed the papacy, were the claim to superiority of the pope over any temporal power, the exclusive jurisdiction of the pope to interpret scripture, and the exclusive authority of the pope to summon a church council. Luther dealt with each “wall” in turn. Against the first claim of the papacy, that its spiritual authority was superior to the temporal, Luther charged that the “spiritual estate” was itself pure invention.\(^90\) Asserting his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, Luther denied temporal authority to the church hierarchy, claiming a radical equality amongst the laity and clergy alike. For Luther, priest, bishop and even pope

\(^{89}\) Up to 1520, Luther had been engaged in several debates, usually quite acerbic and polemical, with many defenders of the papacy against Luther’s hoped for reforms.

\(^{90}\) *LW* 44, 127. *WA* 6, 407. This was a radical claim that called a millennium of social and legal practice into question.
were simply officeholders, charged with the administration of the Word of God and the sacraments; they had no superiority of wisdom nor any divine sanction to lord their authority over temporal powers.\footnote{LW 44, 130. WA 6, 409.} Against the “second wall” of the papacy, the sole right to interpret the Bible, Luther countered first with the Bible itself. There was no sanction in scripture to justify such papal exclusivity. Rather it seemed to Luther that the Bible invited the opposite: it called for Scripture to be received and understood communally.\footnote{LW 44, 133-136. WA 6, 411-412.} Once again the priesthood of the baptized underscored Luther’s objections. “The third wall falls,” wrote Luther, “when the first two are down.”\footnote{LW 44, 136. WA 6, 413.} Luther quickly dealt with the third claim that only a pope could call a church council and again summoned the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all Christians. In a few brief pages, Luther had attacked the most powerful institution of Christendom and its major justifications for authority.\footnote{Just how accurately the “three walls” of the \textit{Open Letter to the Christian Nobility} reflect the dominant arguments of papalists of Luther’s day is difficult to discern. For example, on the “third wall” issue of conciliarism, the Western church of Luther’s time was by no means solidly papalist. Within a decade before the indulgence controversy, Pope Julius II and the Council of Pisa (beginning in October 1511, convened by King Louis XII of France with the intentions of deposing the pope) had spurned yet another debate over the authority of the pope versus the authority of a council. While Luther is responding to a certain brand of papalism that had taken great issue with his calls for reform, this papalism did not represent the defenders of papalism nor an overall consensus on papal authority in the Western Church. See H. Burns and Omas M. Izbicki, Eds., \textit{Conciliarism and Papalism} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), in particular the translation of \textit{Auctoritas papae et concilii sive ecclesiae comparata}, by Tomasso de Vio (Cajetan), a key opponent of Luther’s.}

Yet Luther did not finish there. Following his attack on the three walls of the papacy, Luther argued for a whole litany of reforms, startling in their breadth and powerful in their justifications. Luther proposed that no new mendicant orders be formed
and existing ones be amalgamated. He called for the abolition of mandatory celibacy in the clergy. He called for drastic reduction or the end of masses for the dead (one of the major sources of church revenue in the sixteenth century). He advocated more disciplined popular religion by the reduction of festivals and the abolition of certain shrines and chapels. He called for an end to begging and recommended that cities should care for their own poor through community chests and civic redistribution to the poor. He called for a change in grades or degrees within which marriage is forbidden. In short, Luther’s proposals affected many significant facets of early sixteenth century life.

But even more than these religious and social reforms, An Open Letter demanded a massive change in temporal government. Luther began the work with an attack on papal supremacy over temporal affairs, but following his attacks on the “three walls” of the papacy, he went much further. For Luther it was not simply that the papacy had no grounds to claim superior authority in political affairs over the civil powers; rather, he denied to the papacy and to the church any claims to temporal authority whatsoever. “In fact,” Luther wrote, “the pope’s office should be nothing else but to weep and pray for Christendom and to set an example of utter humility.”

---

95 LW 44, 172-175. WA 6, 438-440.
96 LW 44, 175-179. WA 6, 440-443.
97 LW 44, 191. WA 6, 451.
98 LW 44, 182-183; 185-187. WA 6, 445-446; 447-449.
100 LW 44, 183-184. WA 6, 446-447.
101 LW, 44, 140. WA 6, 415.
clear how far the papacy was from fulfilling such a role. He considered that the wearing of the triple crown and the kissing of the pontiff’s feet were ostentatious and worldly symbols of imperial power, not at all the humble symbols of a pastoral servant. He also railed against the massive papal bureaucracy and its court. Luther recommended what in the early sixteenth century – even in a theological-political crisis – seemed impossible: a drastic reduction in the papal bureaucratic machine (and thereby the reduction of the huge financial system contrived to support it), a renunciation of its temporal powers, and a relinquishing of the papal states.

Luther’s attack on the papacy was not inspired simply by corruptions, nor even an isolated argument on the papacy and temporal powers. Luther’s attack was based upon an acute sense of theological and political crisis. The Church was failing the faithful and neglecting the Word of God in matters spiritual, and for Luther there was an alarming corollary. Contrary to the Word, the Church had usurped temporal authority from the ordained powers and assumed it for itself. Thus for Luther the theological crisis of the sixteenth century had also become political.

Arguing that the pope had no jurisdiction over temporal affairs was nothing new. A fine pedigree of scholars, theologians, poets, and saints had taken this position many times in Western Christendom; in this sense, Luther was the latecomer to a group that included Marsilius of Padua and Dante Alighieri. What made Luther’s thought a rare specimen was its origins in a theology which seemed at first, to be apolitical, and yet

---

102 The wearing the triple crown or tiara dates back to the twelfth century, at the apex of papal temporal power. The tiara had always been used to crown popes up until Paul VI (1963-1978) sold the tiara and gave the money to the poor. See Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners*, pp. 139, 365.

ended up commanding Luther to construct a political theory very early in his Reformation career. The need for this political theory is implicit in the *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*; by the trial at Worms the need became explicit and pressing.

Luther’s trial at Worms remains one of the most famous events of European history, and so it is at first difficult to believe that the imperial diet had any other business aside from the “Luther affair.” However, like any other diet, most of the time and agenda of Worms was taken up with the multifarious matters of imperial governance, including the imperial supreme court, police procedures, the Emperor’s relations with the Pope, economic matters and foreign policy; the question about Luther was not even originally on the agenda. ¹⁰⁴ Yet the political powers of Imperial Germany could not ignore the Luther controversy as they met in the spring of 1521. It was at the Diet of Worms that the political implications of Luther’s stance became clear and the accompanying need for a Lutheran political theory became pressing.

Prior to Worms, in Pope Leo X’s bull *Exsurge Domine* and during the ensuing controversy of the autumn and winter months, Luther had been condemned a heretic by the church authorities. Though a heretic would have been expected to be swiftly executed by secular authorities, the current secular authorities, under the influence of Frederick the Wise over the emperor, decided to give Luther a hearing at the diet and even guarantee him safe passage there and back by imperial escort. ¹⁰⁵ As the trial enfolded, it became clear that its purpose was not to give Luther a forum for simply

---

¹⁰⁴ Martin Brecht, *Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521*, p. 433.

¹⁰⁵ There was solid legal basis for a hearing: as of diet proceedings of 1519, the Emperor guaranteed a hearing to any citizen before being put under imperial ban. *Deutsche Reichstagsakten unter Kaiser Karl V.* (Gotha: Historische Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1893): 1, 873, 9-14.
explaining himself (as the imperial invitation led him to believe) but to allow him to recant or suffer imperial ban. Though asking for a day to ponder the situation, Luther famously did not recant. Later, Charles V’s Edict of Worms imposed the imperial ban.

Though many political authorities at Worms tried to avoid an imperial ban through intense negotiations in the days following Luther’s defiance, their efforts failed. At the very least, many temporal powers feared that Luther’s execution might curb a needed and welcomed reform in the Church. The imperial ban thus put several secular powers in a difficult position, squeezed between the efforts to reform and the promotion of heresy.

Yet the trial and Edict of Worms asked even more fundamental questions to political leaders. What were their duties and prerogatives as temporal authorities over their citizenry? To what degree were they bound to the authority of the emperor or of the pope? Throughout the medieval period these were perennial questions. But the case of Luther, the desire for genuine ecclesial reform and the convoluted political structure of the Holy Roman Empire made these questions acutely pressing for the German princes. The relative weakness of the empire and the papacy over temporal authorities had in part led to the theological-political crisis, and so the princes were not without considerable freedom to act. Some princes held much sway and leverage. The prime example was Frederick the Wise, whom after the emperor’s edict against Luther was issued, for several years negotiated his way around it, rendering impotent a condemnatory imperial edict in

106 Heiko Oberman, Luther: Man Between God and the Devil, p. 39.

107 Luther’s petition for a day reprieve has sometimes been interpreted as a lack of nerve. Martin Brecht argues to the contrary: he believes Luther did not anticipate being asked to wholly confess or recant his writings (Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521, p. 455). Cf., LW 48, 202. WABr 2, 305.
the very territory which housed the condemned heretic. But this evasion did not settle many questions.

Just as Luther and Worms had revived fundamental questions for the powers of the temporal authorities, so too did it revive questions about the relationship between citizen and temporal authority. What were the duties of a Christian citizen to the prince or government? Luther’s early work scarcely answered the question; in fact, it had only encouraged it. Luther had obviously questioned the merits of many Christian practices for the righteousness of the sinner before God. Luther’s position on justification, therefore, questioned the merits of ethical life for salvation. The political implications for the citizen were massive.

By 1521 Luther held the unshakeable conviction that a theological-political crisis gripped his age. A false understanding of God’s grace and justification pervaded Church leadership and practices. Temporal authority was being usurped by spiritual authority. Luther’s first major response to the crisis, as the *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility* and the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* demonstrate, was extensive church reform. But there was more work to be done. The crisis of the sixteenth century was also political: viable church reform necessitated political reform. If the evangelical movement was to survive, the exigent questions about temporal authorities and their citizens had to be answered. Luther had diagnosed great political problems, but he had yet to put forth his political thought. Yet it was forthcoming: the theological-political crisis compelled him to re-theorize politics.
CHAPTER FOUR:
MACHIAVELLI AND THE ART OF POLITICS

It was in Renaissance Italy, Jacob Burckhardt argued, that the “state” became a “work of art” and that Machiavelli was one of its greatest artists.¹ Yet unlike the great painters and sculptors of his day, Machiavelli’s art of politics did not bring him popular acclaim. Whereas Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli, and Michelangelo Buonarroti enjoyed many private, papal, princely, and civic commissions for their work, Machiavelli’s employments for his political art were scarce and piecemeal. Only the *Art of War* and the *Mandragola* (works written under patronage) were known in his lifetime; the two most significant political works, *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, were published posthumously and were written during his exile from political life.

In Machiavelli’s day, people were wont to love ancient sculptures but neglect the political lessons of ancient Rome. The intellectual and cultural movement known as humanism was one of the influences to blame. Humanism, as each of Machiavelli’s major works of prose argued, exacerbated the political crisis of the age by elevating artistic, literary, and philosophic accomplishments of the ancient world to the detriment of political thought and practice. According to Machiavelli, blame for the crisis of the age was also placed on the effects of Christianity. To him the faith had suppressed the cultivation of good political men and of the virtù necessary to founding and maintaining

¹ Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, p. 71ff.
principalities and republics. The papacy also figured highly as a cause of the political crisis of the sixteenth century. For Machiavelli, the institution kept Italy divided, usurped temporal powers throughout much of Italy and Europe, even though by its very nature as a spiritual office, it could never adequately found or maintain principalities and republics.

The common problem for Machiavelli was that humanism and the papacy promoted ways of looking at the world that obscured political reality. Through education in ancient philosophy and literature, and through a recreation of their own literature and philosophy, the humanists sought to revive ancient virtues (such as liberality) in political life. Christianity, as Machiavelli saw it, necessitated the belief in a spiritual reality beyond the mundane world of politics, thereby humbling the role of politics while affirming virtues and vocations often at odds with political necessity. Under these influences, Machiavelli argued, political thought became less and less about what politics was *qua* politics, and more about what, in view of the humanist’s or Christian’s overarching concerns, politics ought to be.

For Machiavelli, governing by ideas beyond political experience necessitated that the reality of politics would be obscured and the practice of politics undermined. What then to Machiavelli was political “reality”? He looked to experience: according to the practical lessons of the ancients and of his own Florentines, political reality was a world in which morality was often neither useful nor expedient for the founding or maintenance of government. In accordance with this reality, Machiavelli’s art of politics was the art of founding and maintaining regimes, an art devoid of overarching conceptions of the good or best regime, or the kingdom of heaven, and wholly based upon the reality of politics.
The essence of his political science was summed up in the fifteenth chapter of The Prince; “imagined republics” were rejected in favor of the “effectual truth.” At stake in the juxtaposition, for example – though virtually unmentioned throughout Machiavelli’s works – were the merits of Plato’s political philosophy, and the greatest of “imagined republics,” the Republic. His objection was not simply that Socrates’ “city in speech” was impractical; in itself such a criticism would have put Machiavelli in company with some of Plato’s most prominent students, Aristotle and Cicero. Rather, Machiavelli’s primary objection was that the “city in speech” and all other “imagined republics” were creations contrived from visions of what politics ought to be, to the detriment of effective government.

Plato’s Republic began as a dialogue on justice and why one ought to live a just life. Socrates introduced the city in speech in the second book of the Republic after the interlocuters had questioned whether the just life was the best life. By watching a city coming into being in speech, Socrates claimed, he and his companions would also see justice and injustice coming into being. For Plato, there was an analogy between the city and the individual: just as the city in speech needed balance between the philosophers, warriors, and artisans, so did the person need order between the rational, passionate, and appetitive parts of the soul. Thus the questions of justice and living the just life were ultimately for Plato metaphysical and epistemological questions, but undoubtedly also political ones. Yet for Plato the rule of wisdom constitutive of the best regime was not

---

2 For example, Plato and Aristotle are each mentioned once in the Discourses: III.6.16, III 26.2.


4 Plato, Republic, 369a.
very likely. As the “divided line” illustrated, ultimate reality lay far beyond sense perception; the myth of the cave related the difficulty the philosopher would have in harmonizing the city and subordinating it to wisdom.\(^5\) The imagined city of Plato’s *Republic* was in part a multi-faceted pedagogical tool: though the rule of the philosopher-king was unlikely, through the dialogue on the best regime Socrates compelled his interlocuters to order the city as they ought to order their souls, to promote justice in the city as much as they ought to live a just life. The art of statecraft in Plato’s *Republic* was to form the just city as the just soul, to order political reality based on ultimate reality and what it ought to be.

Machiavelli’s “effectual truth” was opposed to the imagined republics because it jettisoned the metaphysics that girded them. It was not that Machiavelli sought to replace Plato’s metaphysics with his own; rather he rejected the notion that metaphysical considerations had any bearing on the art of politics. Only in a negative sense did they: insofar as metaphysics inspired imagined republics and obscured political realities it impeded the art of politics.

In rejecting the imagined republics, Machiavelli set himself against much of the political philosophy of antiquity and the middle ages. Yet Machiavelli’s art of politics also appealed to the political examples from the same ancient world he in other ways renounced. Consider his *Discourses*. As the full title of the work suggested, it took much of its substance from the first ten books of Titus Livy’s *History of Rome*; overall, the work showed an obvious appeal to the authority of the ancient historian as well as to the politics of ancient Rome. Yet in the very first paragraph of the preface to the first

\(^5\) *Republic*, Books VII and VIII respectively.
book, Machiavelli likened his book to “a path as yet untrodden by anyone,” a finding of “new modes and orders,” and a labor no less dangerous than seeking “unknown waters and lands.”

An ambivalence about the ancients characterized Machiavelli’s art of politics: at once he made it appear in part a revival and an innovation. His ambivalence mimicked the architecture in the Italian Renaissance in which there was something new, yet also “no break with tradition, no resurrection of principles which had been entirely abandoned.” Gothic architecture had not taken root in most of Italy; Renaissance architecture was seen as both an innovation of new forms and a continuation of the classical ideas which were manifest in public spaces and influential on Renaissance architects. Likewise, Machiavelli certainly claimed to be doing something new, yet there was also a claim that his political project had a connection to ancient political practice. At once Machiavelli claimed to be sailing in uncharted waters, yet to be arguing for the imitation of the ancients against those in his day who thought it impossible, “as if heaven, sun, elements, men had varied in motion, order, and power from what they were in antiquity.” But the ambivalence was only an appearance. Machiavelli praised the ancients in order that he might improve on them. By presenting his project as a revival of ancient political practice, Machiavelli appealed to his age’s fascination with antiquity, thus making his teaching more palatable and less radical.

---

6 Discourses, 1, Preface, 5. CW 190, Op. 76.


8 Discourses, 1, Preface, 6. CW 191; Op. 76.
Yet Machiavelli’s departures from Titus Livy in the *Discourses* demonstrated that his project was much less a revival of ancient political ideas and much more a departure from them. Compare Livy and Machiavelli on tumults and internal divisions within a republic. For Livy, tumults and internal divisions in Rome between the nobles and the plebs were a cause of great strife and were often a threat to its very survival. However for Machiavelli, this same conflict between the nobles and plebs favored Rome’s common good. Early in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli wrote, “I do not wish to fail to discourse of the tumults in Rome from the death of the Tarquins to the creation of the tribunes.”9 In contrast to Livy, for whom this period was a reign of confusion, Machiavelli argued that the tumults between the nobles and plebs were the “first cause of keeping Rome free.”10 Machiavelli’s argument was unmistakably novel; he was alone in endorsing internal partisan conflict – the parties are often identified in his major prose works as the “two humors” – as useful and good.11

In some of the more particular departures from Livy’s *History of Rome*, Machiavelli also showed himself far from being a mere reviver of ancient teaching. A poignant example was his take on how Romulus had secured sole power in the founding of Rome. In his account of Romulus’ murder of his brother Remus, Livy attributed it to the “same source which had divided their grandfather and Amulius: jealousy and ambition.”12 Yet Machiavelli explicitly disagreed: what Romulus “did was for the

---


common good and not for his own ambition.”¹³ His disagreement with Livy came from consideration of the maxim he states in the same chapter: “that it never or rarely happens than any republic or kingdom is ordered well from the beginning or reformed altogether anew outside its old orders unless it is ordered by one individual.”¹⁴ Machiavelli looked at Livy’s history through lenses tinted with his new art of politics. Livy was a source and basis for the political histories of Rome, but this fact did not preclude Machiavelli from using much of Livy’s substance and improving and remolding it where Livy failed to align to the new modes and orders.

For Machiavelli, Christianity was to blame for much of the political crisis of the sixteenth century. But in a few instances, his writings showed that just as Livy could be subtly altered to teach the art of politics, sacred scripture could also be manipulated so as to help teach lessons in political reality. In the thirteenth chapter of The Prince, a chapter devoted to the use of auxiliary, mixed, and one’s own soldiers, Machiavelli used the Biblical example of David’s defeat of Goliath¹⁵ to demonstrate an argument. Machiavelli was unequivocal in support of one’s own arms: “I conclude, thus, that without its own arms no principality is secure; indeed it is wholly obliged to fortune since it does not have virtue to defend itself in adversity.”¹⁶ For Machiavelli, David’s defeat of Goliath illustrated his principle: Saul had earlier given David his arms to defeat the challenger, but David, “as soon as he had them on, refused, saying that with them he could not give a

---

¹³ *Discourses*, 1.9, 29; CW 218; Op. 91.

¹⁴ *Discourses*, 1.9, 29; CW 218; Op. 91.

¹⁵ 1 Samuel 17:38-51.

¹⁶ *The Prince*, 13, 57; CW 54; Op. 278.
good account of himself, and so he would rather meet the enemy with his sling and his knife.”

Machiavelli’s example recast the meaning of David’s triumph. Arguably the account of David’s deed in *The Prince* was similar enough to the Bible to be passably accurate; though David claimed that with Saul’s armor he could not walk and was unused to it, he retained a staff during the fight, and slew Goliath with a sword he took from the Philistine’s own sheath, Machiavelli’s version in itself showed no obvious betrayal of the meaning of his biblical source. But in the context of this chapter on the use of one’s own arms, the meaning of David’s defeat of Goliath was unmistakably altered. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that David’s victory was not simply his own victory. From the moment David appears in 1 Samuel, the reader is told that “the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward”; thus the victory over Goliath was a victory for the Lord and His chosen people so that, as David himself proclaimed, “all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel.” By contrast, Machiavelli’s David was

---

17 *The Prince*, 13, 56; CW 53; *Op.* 278.

18 1 Samuel 17:39, 40, and 51, respectively.

19 Some scholars have argued that it did, especially since in Machiavelli’s version, he implied that David had a knife from the beginning; see Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue*, 188; Sullivan, *Machiavelli’s Three Romes*, 145. Others have found the difference odd, but not very meaningful; see translator Gennaro Sasso’s *Il Principe e altri scritti* (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1963): 128, n. 20. Allan Gilbert implied that Machiavelli might have simply conflated depictions of David’s triumph of Goliath from contemporary art into the biblical story; CW 53. It is possible that period Florentine sculpture might have influenced Machiavelli’s account. Donatello’s *David*, likely commissioned by Cosimo de’ Medici for the Medici Palace (mid-fifteenth century) and Andrea Del Verrocchio’s *David*, commissioned by Lorenzo de’ Medici for the Medici Palace (1470s) and later sold to the Signoria of the city, both depict a heroic David over the slain head of Goliath with a sword in hand; see Hartt and Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art, Fifth Edition*, pp. 285, 369.

victorious because he relied on his own arms; the shepherd defeated Goliath not because the Lord had anointed him, but because he was self-reliant.\textsuperscript{21}

Against the pernicious political teachings of humanism, Christianity, and the papacy, Machiavelli aimed to teach political reality to his ailing age through his “new modes and orders.” These “new modes and orders” of Machiavelli’s art of politics were foremost contained in the \textit{Discourses} and \textit{The Prince}. These were Machiavelli’s explicitly political works of prose. Even though the prose works \textit{Florentine Histories} and the \textit{Art of War}, many letters, poems, and plays such as the \textit{Mandragola} and \textit{Clizia} could be fruitfully gleaned for Machiavelli’s political theory, none compared to the depth and scope of the political teachings in the \textit{Discourses} and \textit{The Prince}.

Machiavelli explicitly claimed that each of these two works contained the sum of his political teachings. But this fact presents us with a major problem in Machiavelli interpretation: the relationship between the \textit{Discourses} and \textit{The Prince}. In the dedicatory letter of the \textit{Discourses}, Machiavelli wrote to his friends that in the book “I have expressed as much as I know and have learned through a long practice and continual reading in worldly things.”\textsuperscript{22} Similarly in \textit{The Prince}, Machiavelli claimed that it contained “all that I have learned and understood in so many years and with so many hardships to myself.”\textsuperscript{23} Obviously there was a tension between both claims: if the \textit{Discourses} exhibited as much as he knew and \textit{The Prince} all that he had learned, there


\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Discourses}, Dedicatory Letter, 3; \textit{CW} 188; \textit{Op.} 75.

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{The Prince}, Dedicatory Letter, 4; \textit{CW} 10; \textit{Op.} 257.
was the glaring fact that the two books were vastly different from one another, in length, in topics, and in substance.

The relation between the *Discourses* and *The Prince* remains enigmatic. Even dating the books has proven difficult; neither book was published until after Machiavelli’s death; *The Prince* appears to have a references to the *Discourses*, the *Discourses* contains references to *The Prince*, and finally, various references (dates, letters and the dedicatory) set the composition of *The Prince* to 1513, while the *Discourses* contains references to events as late as 1517. Moreover, though *The Prince* was even in the sixteenth century considered a manual for tyrants and the *Discourses* a defense of civic liberty, both interpretations have been misleading: *The Prince* has often been noted for its hidden republicanism and the *Discourses* for its hidden endorsement of princes, and perhaps even tyrants, when the necessity in the founding or maintaining of republics demands them. Faced with the *Discourses*, *The Prince* and Machiavelli’s claim that they contained ‘all he knows’ about politics from his reading and experience, scholars have opted to think that either between *The Prince* and the *Discourses* Machiavelli changed his mind, or that the two works, in some way, were not as incongruent as they have appeared.

24 *The Prince*, 2; 8.


In a manner both simple and often overlooked, the *Discourses* and *The Prince* were consistent in presenting Machiavelli’s teaching on political reality as it responded to the political crisis of the sixteenth century. *The Prince* and the *Discourses* both contained all Machiavelli knew because they imparted similar teachings on political reality. “The effectual truth of the thing,” to use Machiavelli’s phrase, is the measure by which the teachings of the *Discourses* and *The Prince* can be rendered complementary, and unify Machiavelli’s project of reviving an art of politics in the politically weakened sixteenth century.

In *The Prince*, the effectual truth came through lessons on regimes, and on founders and princes. According to Machiavelli, regimes would be perpetually in emergent situations, always with two battling “humors,” perennially concerned about war and defense. Founders and princes, if they were to survive, had to cultivate Machiavellian virtue, guard themselves against fortune, and appear to be good whilst acknowledging that under necessity they must at times be vicious. In the *Discourses*, the effectual truth came through lessons in which ancient political science and the importance of religion was rejected, and republics were best understood through ambition, the two “humors,” and the impetus to expand. *The Prince* and the *Discourses* together taught the art of politics, an art built on Machiavelli’s effective truth against the blight of imagined republics, and the ignorance of political reality in his age.

**The Art of Politics and The Prince**

In writing *The Prince*, Machiavelli claimed that he had hoped to “write something useful to whoever understands it” and thus it seemed to him “more fitting to go to the
effectual truth of the thing than the imagination of it.”

This claim did not come until the fifteenth chapter, approximately the middle of the book, when Machiavelli turned his attention to “see what the modes and government of a prince should be with subjects and friends.” Despite this fact, the claim was a fitting characterization of *The Prince* in general; lessons in the “effectual truth,” as Machiavelli saw it, permeated the work from the first to last chapter. These lessons in effect added up to Machiavelli’s art of politics, an art bereft of imagined republics, but responsive to the political crisis of the sixteenth century.

The lessons in effectual truth in *The Prince* came in two categories: first on regimes, and second on princes or founders. The effectual truth about regimes in *The Prince* was comprised of several key lessons sorely needed in his age of political crisis. The first lesson was on the founding of regimes: Machiavelli insisted on the force of necessity during the founding, and then blurred the distinctions between newly founded regimes and old established ones. In effect, Machiavelli’s lesson was that every regime must be continuously refounded. A second major lesson on regimes was the perennial struggle, in any given regime, between the two humors of its populace. Yet unlike political theorists before him, Machiavelli’s lesson was not that the humors ought to be (or even could be) suppressed or eradicated; rather, their conflict was a source of vitality for the regime, and if arranged well, a source of stability for princely power. The third lesson on regimes, again setting Machiavelli apart from previous thought, was on a regime arming itself and preparing for and engaging in warfare. Each lesson on regimes

---

28 *The Prince*, 15, 61; *CW* 57; *Op*. 280.
addressed a certain ignorance of political reality in Machiavelli’s age; his teaching on the effectual truths of regimes sought to dispel this ignorance and revive an art of politics.

The effectual truth about founders and princes in *The Prince* was also comprised of several key lessons, again aimed at teaching political reality to an age weakened by destructive political influences. First, Machiavelli defined virtue as the ability and disposition of a prince to be self-reliant and decisive in everything from warfare to diplomatic strategy to the treatment of subjects. To Machiavelli, against the teachings of humanism and the Church, virtue was not the doing well of things considered good, but knowing, under political necessity, how not to be good. Second, Machiavelli gave lessons on the effects of fortune in the founding or maintaining a regime. Fortune lent nothing to the practice of virtue by itself, except that by observing fortune’s ill effects, the importance of acquiring Machiavellian virtue became imperative. Third, Machiavelli taught that though this virtue was to be acquired, the appearance of classical and Christian virtue was important to maintain. Against the wisdom of the Church and the politics of humanism, Machiavelli countenanced that the appearance of these traditional virtues was better than their true possession. With these lessons on regimes and princes, *The Prince* imparted an art of politics based on what Machiavelli considered were the effectual truths about political reality.

Early in *The Prince*, Machiavelli gave a lesson on the effectual truth regarding the founding and maintaining of regimes. The lesson came in the midst of an exposition of his classification of old and new regimes, a distinction that proved not to be very strict. According to him, the old or hereditary principalities were considerably less difficult to maintain than the new or “mixed” regimes. Yet in the end, the effectual truth about the
founding and maintenance of principalities was the same: in all principalities, whether old or new, there was always bound to be an emergent situation – if not at the given moment, then in the imminent future – that a prince would have to skillfully deal with in order to hold on to power.

In his writings, there were few principles which Machiavelli believed always to be true; yet the third chapter “On Mixed Principalities” contained one that lay at the heart of Machiavelli’s lesson on regimes. He considered this important lesson neglected by humanism and Christianity each of which had a skewed understanding of political reality.

And truly it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire, and always, when men do it who can, they will be praised or not blamed; but when they cannot, and want to do it anyway, here lie the error and the blame.29

Machiavelli accepted the desire to acquire as ordinary and natural; thus it could not be denied, ignored, or eradicated, and its influence in political affairs was a given. Moreover, it was the engine of politics; in his illustrative examples from the third chapter, taken from ancient Rome or his contemporary world, the ambition for acquisition was invariably at the core of political action. Louis XII of France acquired Lombardy because he “wanted to begin by gaining a foothold in Italy” against Spain, just as “King Louis,” Machiavelli wrote, “was brought into Italy by the ambition of the Venetians.”30

Since the ambition to acquire was always at the root of political action, Machiavelli’s lesson in the effectual truth in founding and maintaining regimes was that ambition to acquire, if successful, had to be guided by an art of politics which understood and recognized this ambition in others and guarded itself against it. Yet in the acquisition

29 The Prince, 3, 14; CW 18; Op. 261.
30 The Prince, 3, 13; CW 17; Op. 261.
of new principalities, the conquering princes would often forget to consider the desire to acquire in his new subjects; hence Machiavelli warned, “men willingly change their masters in the belief that they will fare better.”\textsuperscript{31} A conquering prince will inevitably offend his new subjects. Thus, enemies in the new principality would be counted not only among those offended in seizing power, but also among “those who have put you there because you cannot satisfy them in the mode they had presumed and because you cannot use strong medicines against them, since you are obligated to them.”\textsuperscript{32} For Machiavelli, there was a pertinent and recent example: not recognizing the desire to acquire in his new subjects led Louis XII to lose his hold on Milan.

Of the litany of errors Machiavelli attributed to Louis XII in his attempt to gain territory in Italy, two stand out in the chapter as particularly unwise: the giving of aid to Pope Alexander VI for the seizing of Romagna and the division of the Kingdom of Naples between himself and the king of Spain. Doubtless these were errors from a purely strategic point of view of the best interests of France. The strengthening of an Italian power and the invitation to share Naples with a formidable foreign power, especially to the detriment of all France’s smaller and vulnerable Italian allies, would sooner rather than later threaten its own conquest, despite any brief respite from conflict that these policies might afford.

However, there were reasons that made the French king’s errors particularly egregious: he appeared to Machiavelli to have sacrificed his own conquests in Italy on behalf of principles alien to the effectual truth. Louis represented the failings of the age

\textsuperscript{31} The Prince, 3, 8; CW 12; Op. 258.

\textsuperscript{32} The Prince, 3, 8; CW 13; Op. 258.
to understand political reality: ignoring the effectual truth, he undermined his own regime. In his aid to the pope, Louis failed to see that he “was weakening himself [and] stripping himself of his friends and those that had jumped into his lap.”

Yet out of respect and loyalty for the Church, the papacy, and gratitude to Pope Alexander himself “for dissolving his marriage and for the hat of Rouen,” Louis’s allegiance greatly increased the Church’s temporal power at the expense of his own. In dividing Naples with Spain, Louis XII sought to avoid war. So long as France had the desire to acquire and retain a holding in Italy, Machiavelli implied that war with Spain was inevitable; thus the option available to Louis XII was not between war and peace, but between a war that he would have to fight either to his advantage or his disadvantage. By Machiavelli’s account, Louis XII well understood the ambition to acquire and had acted on it. Yet he had failed to understand the corollary, that he must recognize the same ambition in others and thus not yield his own political interests to ideas which obscured this effectual truth about the founding and maintaining of regimes.

Under the influence of Christianity and humanism, the political wisdom of Machiavelli’s day taught that divisions within a regime had to be suppressed. For Machiavelli, this was yet another example of how pernicious political teachings had obscured political reality in his age. Machiavelli disputed the received political wisdom as contrary to the effectual truth. In the ninth chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli argued that in every city there were found two diverse humors: the people, who desired “neither

---

33 *The Prince*, 3, 14; *CW* 18; *Op.* 261.

34 *The Prince*, 3,15; *CW* 19; *Op.* 262. Pope Alexander had granted an annulment to Louis XII in his marriage to Jeanne de Valois, and granted a cardinalate (hence the “hat”) to one of his ministers and bishops.
to be commanded nor oppressed by the great,” and the great who desired to “command and oppress the people.”

One of Machiavelli’s effectual truths was that the prince was much more secure in trusting the people rather than the great. The prince who maintains his principality with the aid of the great “finds himself prince with many around him who appear to be his equals, and because of this he can neither command them nor manage them to suit himself.” The people, however, more readily obey and are easily pleased: rather than desiring to rule, they merely wish not to be oppressed, thus their desire can be satisfied without considerable injury to others.

At first hearing, Machiavelli’s chapter “Of the Civil Principality” might sound echoes of Aristotle’s polity; both Machiavelli and Aristotle agreed that the source of the most powerful conflict in a regime was between the nobles and the people, and so stability would come in somehow controlling their desired ends. But there the similarities ended. Aristotle’s polity united oligarchy and democracy, making a stable regime by promoting the mean between the desire for wealth and power and the desire for freedom. By cultivating the middle way, Aristotle’s polity aimed to curb and suppress faction. Machiavelli did not seek a middle way or still less an elimination of the two humors; in fact, their conflict was not only a vital force in the regime, but also, if skillfully exploited, a solid cornerstone upon which to rest the prince’s power.

Further distancing himself from Aristotle, Machiavelli recommended that the prince beware of the nobles and befriend the people. It was not because the people were

---

35 *The Prince*, 9, 39; *CW* 39; *Op.* 271.

36 *The Prince*, 9, 39; *CW* 39; *Op.* 271.

particularly virtuous or trustworthy, but because their desires were most easily satisfied: they only desired protection. Conversely, the great were always to be suspected: their desire was for power. For Machiavelli, the great were always oligarchs, and thus by definition could not rule for the common good. In Machiavelli’s assessment, a prince could only trust the great who were “obligated in everything to [the prince’s] fortune.”\(^{38}\) But how common were these men amongst the great? How often would these people, brought to power and wealth only by the prince, remain obligated to him in a time of adversity, especially since, as Machiavelli himself concluded, that true loyalty was adverse to political efficacy? Machiavelli warned against trusting the great in a time of adversity; though this warning was against those who were “not obligated” to the prince, implicitly it was applicable to all of the great of his court. Machiavelli later recommended that it was good for a prince to appear to be loyal and to use this appearance for the benefit of his self-interest.\(^{39}\) Considering this lesson that behind the appearance of loyalty was self-interest, a prince had no reason to trust the loyalty or obligations of the great as anything less than self-interested, and certainly not revealing men to be reliably in his favor.

Machiavelli’s lesson on founding and maintaining a principality by the favor of the people was not only concerned with desire and ambition itself; in the tenth chapter Machiavelli argued that the popular desire not to be oppressed could well provide, if astutely exploited, a solid foundation for the security of the regime. For Machiavelli, a prince who maintained his regime on the favor of the people rather than of the great

---

\(^{38}\) *The Prince*, 9.

\(^{39}\) One of the many notorious lessons of the eighteenth chapter.
would be well protected: an army constituted by the people, with civic fortifications and large public stores, would endure attacks and sieges and be resilient from internal revolt. Under the condition of the well-fortified city and the citizen army, the ambitions of the prince and the desires of the people would coincide, thus “it should not be difficult for a prudent prince to keep the spirits of his citizens firm.”

For Machiavelli, one of the most destructive results of Christianity and humanism was a decline in the ability to fight wars. The Christian religion and humanism had considered warfare to be at best a necessary evil, an option of last resort when virtues failed. Machiavelli turned this understanding of warfare on its head. His third major lesson on the effective truth about regimes in *The Prince* taught that in the art of politics, the overarching concern of the prince – to the omission of all considerations of the good life or best regime – was the founding and maintaining of power through warfare. Warfare, Machiavelli explained, was waged in two kinds: “one with laws, the other with force.”

Earlier he argued that where power was maintained, both good laws and arms were inseparable: “there cannot be good laws where there are not good arms, and where there are good arms there must be good laws.” How were laws a means of warfare? What made laws good? Machiavelli provided no immediate answers to these questions, but instead insisted on leaving out the reasoning on laws and spoke of arms; only later would “good laws” as a means of warfare be clarified.

---

40 *The Prince*, 10, 44; *CW* 44; *Op.* 273.

41 *The Prince*, 18, 69; *CW* 64; *Op.* 283.

42 *The Prince*, 12, 48; *CW* 47; *Op.* 275.
Among Machiavelli’s lessons on arms and armies, foremost was his warning against the use of mercenary and auxiliary forces, a strategy of warfare employed by all too many regimes – including the papacy – of sixteenth century Italy. The litany of faults and vices in the use of mercenary and auxiliary armies was to Machiavelli manifested in every instance they were used; their deficiencies included a lack of discipline, a cowardice against the enemy, a boldness within your regime, and a lack of courage in adverse conditions. But for Machiavelli their worst fault – assuming that these mercenary or auxiliary arms were competent captains and soldiers was their ambition. “You cannot trust them,” Machiavelli wrote, “because they always aspire to their own greatness, either by oppressing you, who are their patron, or by oppressing others contrary to your intention.” This was the important lesson lost by humanist and Christian neglect of warfare. Princes and republics, in employing their own armies, avoided the problem of ambitious captains; in the case of a principality, the military command offices the prince would perform himself, or in the case of the republic, these duties would be delegated to a citizen bound by the laws and dictates of the republic. Thus, in contrast to the regimes protected by mercenaries and auxiliaries, “only princes and armed republics make very great progress.”

For Machiavelli, republics with their own arms were particularly resilient against enemies and internal revolts. Though The Prince was ostensibly about princes and principalities, Machiavelli spent much of his twelfth chapter on ancient and contemporary

---

43 The Prince, 12.

44 The Prince, 12, 49; CW 48; Op. 275.

45 The Prince, 12, 49; CW 48; Op. 275.

46 The Prince, 12, 50; CW 48; Op. 275.
republican examples. Rome, Sparta, and the Swiss cities provided examples of the success of a republic’s own arms; Venice, Florence, and Thebes showed the folly of republics employing mercenary and auxiliary armies. Yet principalities found their way into Machiavelli’s analysis when he turned his attention to his homeland. The lesson on mercenary armies was well illustrated by the actions of princes of his own Italy, including most prominently, the temporal and military policies of the papacy. The papacy and the Church, having temporal power yet no knowledge of arms, hired foreigners in order to protect their interests and holdings; ultimately this resulted in an Italy “overrun by Charles, taken as booty by Louis, violated by Ferdinand, and insulted by the Swiss.”

Considering his argument against mercenary armies, what Machiavelli meant by “good laws,” though never explicitly defined, becomes clearer. Good laws for him were a far cry from the good laws of Christian or humanist political teachings. Irrespective of princely or republican rule, “good laws” were coeval with regimes which could defend themselves from internal and external threats. As he had made abundantly clear, a regime made of “good laws” would defend itself with its own arms. Yet there was a broader sense in which “good laws” defended a regime: they controlled the ambitions of the great and the desires of the people, directed them outward, and thereby fortified the regime against internal enmities and external attack.

How “good laws” were related to good arms was subsequently developed in *The Prince*. In the eighteenth chapter, Machiavelli argued that warfare was waged both by

---

47 Curiously and in contrast to the *Discourses*, this was the only mention of the ancient city in *The Prince*.

force and by laws. Several chapters earlier, Machiavelli wrote that “a prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but the art of war and its orders and discipline.” Doubtless, this advice prioritized virtues in military command and strategy; Machiavelli insisted on the perpetual urgency of military strength in periods of both peace and adversity. Yet by the eighteenth chapter warfare was more than armed battles against foreign enemies: it was waged against all enemies of the regime, external and internal, and in whatever modes the prince or the republic. Thus as The Prince progressed and the definition of warfare expanded, the art of war became coterminous with the art of politics.

The use of “good laws” in the warfare against destructive forces was a major component of the art of politics. Machiavelli gave a poignant example of good laws and the battle they waged in the nineteenth chapter. France was an exemplary regime because it possessed an institution which secured the reign of the king against the clashing desires of the people and the ambitions of the great. Rather than a legislative assembly, the French parliament was a law court, a “third judge” designed by the monarchy “to be the one who would beat down the great and favor the [people] without blame for the king.” Good laws in France kept the regime from succumbing to internal strife, maintained the popular trust in the king, and quelled the nobility’s resentment of the monarch.

49 The Prince, 18.

50 The Prince, 14, 58; CW 55; Op. 278.

51 The Prince, 19, 75; CW 70; Op. 286.
Good laws to Machiavelli were those which promoted the stability of the regime through accepting the ambitions and desires of the great and the people as given, rather than laws and systems which attempted to eradicate, recreate, or transcend them. Good laws were built on the effectual truth about the founding and maintaining of regimes, works created only by knowledge of the art of politics. Hence for Machiavelli in his age of political crisis, there were scant “good laws” in the sixteenth century.

The second category of lessons in the effectual truth in *The Prince* is concerned with founders and princes. At the center of these lessons was Machiavelli’s redefined virtue, a concept far removed from humanist and Christian ideas, but nevertheless a universal standard by which founders and princes could be judged. First, Machiavelli sought to distinguish his virtue from the ancient and humanist forms. Second, Machiavelli sought to distinguish virtue from the Christian forms. Machiavelli’s princely virtue was a rejection of the substance of virtue as classically defined, but an advocacy acceptance of its appearance: the appearance of traditional virtue was better than the possession of them. Last, Machiavelli accounted for the failed principalities in Italy, and the political crisis of the sixteenth century, as a failure to heed to his standard of princely virtue in his art of politics.

“In altogether new principalities,” Machiavelli wrote, “where there is a new prince, one encounters more or less difficulty in maintaining them according to whether the one who acquires them is more or less virtuous.”52 Thus the sixth chapter introduced Machiavelli’s supreme test of virtue in the difficult task of introducing new orders to an acquired regime. Just as Machiavelli’s effectual truth about regimes was divorced from

52 *The Prince*, 6, 22; *CW* 25; *Op*. 264.
overarching ideas of the good or best regime, so too was the effectual truth about the
time of founders and princes divorced from humanist or Christian ideals of moral and
ethical greatness; for Machiavelli these perspectives had obscured the effectual truth
about princes and founders.

Machiavelli’s virtue, unlike humanist or Christian virtue, was wholly excellence
in the art of politics. It was manifested through the successful founding and maintenance
of a regime; thus a virtuous founder or prince would be renowned as a great man, both in
his present age and in posterity. Although such founders and princes might be reputed to
be virtuous in the classical or Christian sense, for Machiavelli this was a fruit of their
political virtue, not a constituent of it. His examples of virtue were telling of this crucial
distinction. In the sixth chapter of *The Prince*, four ancient men served Machiavelli as
examples of excellence: Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus. Moses’ appearance
amongst these “most excellent” founders and princes unequivocally showed the departure
from virtue as it was broadly understood in Judeo-Christian thought. Doubtless, Moses
was a great example of certain ancient virtues of revealed religion: he was faithful and
humble towards God, led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, and served as a conduit
for God’s law to his chosen people. Machiavelli appeared to admit that Moses was a
special case that “one should not reason about” since “he was a mere executor of things
that had been ordered for him by God” and therefore should be “admired if only for that
grace which made him deserving of speaking with God.”53 Yet Machiavelli did exactly
what he said one ought not to do: he reasoned about Moses’ political virtue independent
of his relationship to God. For Machiavelli, the “particular actions and orders” of the

other pagan founders and princes were no different from those of Moses; the Israelite’s true virtue was not composed of his faith or trust in God, but like Cyrus’ maintenance of his Persian regime, Moses’ virtue was entirely based on his actions and orders, especially the coercive ones, in founding and maintaining the nation of Israel. Moses’ virtue, in other words, was his excellent practice of the art of politics, quite comparable to other ancient princes, irrespective of divine favor.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli’s second lesson in the effectual truth about founders and princes was a lesson in appearances. His notion of virtue did not call for a wholesale rejection of classical or Christian virtue, for the appearance and reputation of such virtue remained important for the founding and especially the maintaining of principalities. Yet Machiavelli’s acceptance of the appearance of classical virtues did not entail an acceptance of their possession; on the contrary, a true possession of such virtues, in his mind, opposed the practice of the art of politics.

Consider Machiavelli’s treatment of cruelty in the seventeenth chapter of *The Prince*. A prince, Machiavelli argued, “should desire to be held merciful and not cruel.”54 However, in Machiavell’s thinking, mercy was not always used well and cruelty was not always detrimental to the ends of founding and maintaining regimes. Practicing mercy could often be cruel, and practicing cruelty could often be merciful. Machiavelli provided an astonishing example: the hidden mercy of Cesare Borgia. Cesare had gained the widespread reputation for cruelty in his campaigns throughout Italy. But Machiavelli argued that it was these very same actions that were at once behind his reputation for cruelty and also behind his restoration, unification, and pacification of the papal

---

54 *The Prince*, 17, 65; *CW* 61; *Op*. 281.
territories known as the Romagna. Cesare’s actions were more merciful than cruel because he had brought order to unwieldy territories. Machiavelli contrasted Cesare’s actions to those of his own Florence, which, for the sake of avoiding cruelty, had let the subject city of Pistoia destroy itself by factions; thus in the end the Florentine desire to avoid cruelty led to a cruel outcome. But he was not simply demonstrating that merciful actions could undermine the cause of mercy, or that cruel actions could be in fact merciful; rather, he was disputing the efficacy of mercy and cruelty as standards by which a prince would govern himself in the founding and maintaining of his regime. A prince who practiced mercy and avoided cruelty in his actions was turning himself from the effectual truth on virtue, and neglecting the art of politics.

For Machiavelli, this neglect had caused the princes of sixteenth century Italy to lose their own states. “And those defenses alone are good, are certain, and are lasting,” concluded Machiavelli, “that depend on you yourself and on your virtue.” Yet the princes of Machiavelli’s Italy did no such thing. They neglected the lessons about arms, about endearing themselves to the people and securing themselves against the great, and finally about virtue. Moreover, the princes of the age were ignorant as to the cause of their downfall; Machiavelli observed how they were wont to blame fortune rather than recognize their lack of political virtue.

55 The Prince, 17. Machiavelli’s examples may not have been apt. How much order Cesare Borgia brought to Romagna is debatable, even by Machiavelli’s own description of his actions in the seventh chapter. Machiavelli’s example of Pistoia in his argument on cruelty is also questionable; in the Discourses, Machiavelli wrote that the reason there was little enmity in Pistoia against Florence was that the Florentines treated the Pistoiese “like brothers” and citizens of other subject cities like enemies (Discourses, 2, 21).

56 The Prince, 24, 97; CW 89; Op. 295.
For Machiavelli, the political crisis of the age was caused at least in part by the political teachings of Christianity and the failures of humanism. In *The Prince*, through his lessons on the effectual truth concerning regimes and princes, Machiavelli attempted to dispel their influence and restore an art of politics. The political world of sixteenth century Italy was chaotic but it provided opportunity, an opportunity to found, consolidate and maintain an effective regime or principality, perhaps even an Italian empire, to one who understood the effectual truth about regimes and founders and princes. Machiavelli’s teaching on the effectual truth in *The Prince* was directed to an overarching end: a restoration of an art of politics which demanded no loyalty to transcendent or otherworldly truths but only upon the truths of a commonly experienced political reality.

**The Art of Politics and the *Discourses***

Machiavelli’s *Discourses* countered the political crisis of the sixteenth century by teaching the art of politics gleaned from the history of the world’s most successful regime, ancient Rome. Unlike the relatively straightforward *Prince*, the lessons of the *Discourses* in the effectual truths of politics were at least ostensibly based on events in the first ten books of Livy’s *History of Rome*. Yet, this fact did not prevent the *Discourses* from teaching an art of politics in the midst of an age in political crisis. The humanists of his day looked to ancient Rome as a model for a civilizational revival, yet in Machiavelli’s thinking these humanists had neglected the most important political lessons necessary for political glory. In the *Discourses* he appealed to the contemporary attraction to ancient Rome in order to teach his art of politics. Unlike many of his
contemporaries, however, Machiavelli argued that Rome’s greatness was its understanding of the effectual political truths in the founding and maintaining of regimes, particularly its understanding of the two humors, and not in its cultivation of classical virtues.

Machiavelli’s insistence on the “effectual truth” in teaching about politics was closely related to his fascination with Rome and his acclamation of the eternal city as a model for political study and imitation. Rome had also fascinated ancient political thinkers; Polybius and other great minds such as Cicero and Augustine were compelled to examine the great republic and empire and account for its power and influence in the world. But in contrast to the wisdom of the ancients and the Italian humanists, for Machiavelli Rome’s greatness was in its understanding of the effectual truths about politics.

At the beginning of the sixth book of the Histories, Polybius endeavored to explain how “in less than fifty-three years nearly the whole world was overcome and fell under the single dominion of Rome.” For Polybius, Rome’s greatness was due to its ability to cultivate and preserve the virtues. This judgment of a regime’s character, Polybius wrote, was no different from the judgment of character in a man: “the sole test of a perfect man [was] the power of bearing high-mindedly and bravely the most complete reverses of fortune, so it should be in our judgment of states.” The chief cause for Rome’s success was its constitution; yet Polybius conceded that it was a complex constitution, evading classification in the three typologies (monarchy,


58 Histories, 6, 2.
Polybius understood that the typologies were not exclusive, and that furthermore, they were not very stable: as his regime cycles had shown, each type of regime had a vicious counterpart into which it would inevitably degenerate.

Polybius argued that the best regime was a mixed regime: a state that combined the best virtues of the three types. Thus the Roman constitution combined the good character of kingship in the office of the consuls, aristocracy in the senate, and democracy in the powers given to the plebs. Therefore Rome remained stable in the face of the natural decay of political constitutions and in the face of turmoil a “remedy for the evil which [each regime] suffered.”

Against Polybius, humanism, and Christian political thought, Machiavelli argued that Rome’s greatness was not because of its cultivation of virtue. Instead of looking to the mixed regime, his first treatment of Rome in the Discourses turned to its founding. “Those who read what the beginning was of the city of Rome and by what legislators and how it was ordered,” Machiavelli wrote, “will not marvel that so much virtue was maintained for many centuries.” Contrary to the Polybian claim that kingship and aristocracy were very different (though similar in form) from tyranny and oligarchy, Machiavelli concluded that all the regime types were pernicious because of the “likeness that virtue and vice have in [each] case.” Machiavelli dismissed Polybius’ judgment that Roman greatness was in its promotion of virtue through the mixed regime.

Doubtless the mixed regime for Machiavelli had merit; however, the chief cause for

---

59 Histories, 6, 12-14.

60 Histories, 6, 18.

61 Discourses, 1.1, 7; CW 192; Op. 77.

62 Discourses, 1.2, 11; CW 197; Op. 79.
Rome’s success was not its preservation of the best of the three good types of regimes and the classical virtues they promoted. Rather, Rome’s free constitution had instituted good laws built upon good arms and knowing the effectual truths necessary for maintaining a regime.

Polybius, in his comparison of Rome and other regimes, claimed that there were two essential things in its well-being: custom and laws. His account was one adopted later by Christian and humanist political thought. For Polybius these customs and laws had a twofold purpose: to render the lives of citizens righteous and the character of the regime good and just.

So just as when we observe the laws and customs of a people to be good, we have no hesitation in pronouncing that the citizens and the state will consequently be good also, thus when we notice that men are covetous in their private lives and that their public actions are unjust, we are plainly justified in saying that their laws, their particular customs, and the state as a whole are bad.63

Furthermore, Polybius quietly connected the character of the regime to the well-being of the soul, as in the example of the constitution of Lycurgus. Spartan laws and customs, instituted by its constitution, promoted the invaluable virtues of “fortitude and temperance,” and when these virtues were “combined in one soul or city,” Polybius wrote, “evil will not readily originate within such men or peoples, nor will they be overmastered by their neighbors.”64 However, for Polybius (in contrast to Machiavelli), Sparta was not an expanding regime. For the ancient writer, Rome succeeded in maintaining good laws and customs, and preserving itself and the goodness of its people even in times of great turmoil.

63 Histories, 6, 47.

64 Histories, 6, 48.
At first glance, Machiavelli’s assessment of Rome and other regimes in the first six chapters of the *Discourses* appeared similar to the Polybian treatment. There seemed to be a philosophical convergence: Polybius’ reticence to introduce Plato’s ideal regime “unless it first [gave] an exhibition of its actual working”\(^6\) was superficially similar to Machiavelli’s rejection of “imagined republics.” Yet there was a major difference. Polybius dismissed Plato’s city in speech, because although it was praiseworthy, it must first be shown to have actually existed. Evidently Polybius, like Aristotle and Cicero, and later the Italian humanists, did not challenge the ideal state for its view to the good and virtue. But Machiavelli objected more to imaginary republics than in their impracticability; in the *Discourses* we see that Machiavelli took issue with this very vision of goodness and virtue, which in his thinking neglected the effectual truths necessary for founding and maintaining regimes.

Perspicuously, Machiavelli began his third chapter of the *Discourses* with a glaring avowal of one the effectual truths practiced by ancient Rome, but ignored by the philosophers.

As all those demonstrate who reason on a civil way of life, and as every history is full of examples, it is necessary to whoever disposes a republic and orders laws in it to presuppose that all men are bad, and that they always have to use the malignity of spirit whenever they have a free opportunity for it.\(^6\)

Machiavelli claimed that Livy’s *History of Rome* and his own study of the ancient republic demonstrated this effectual truth, and that a successful regime would be built upon it. For Machiavelli, it became a major factor in determining the strength of the Roman regime. For soon after Machiavelli opened the third chapter with the “malignity

\(^{65}\) *Histories*, 6, 47.

\(^{66}\) *Discourses*, 1.3, 15; *CW* 201; *Op*. 81.
of spirit” inherent in humankind, he provided a poignant example of the Roman regime’s strength. Machiavelli described how “it appeared that in Rome there was a very great union between the plebs and the Senate after the Tarquins were expelled” and the nobles had taken on a “popular spirit.” But the nobles did not act humanely to the plebs out of goodness or some virtuous disposition; Machiavelli argued that the nobles acted this way out of fear that the plebs would not take their side in a possible conflict with the Tarquins. Machiavelli argued that “men never work any good unless through necessity.” The Tarquinian conflict demonstrated to Machiavelli that Rome was constituted in such a way that tumult was the very engine of Roman success and political virtue. For Rome, the tumult between the plebs and the nobles, from its very foundation, made it great: “all the laws that [were] made in favor of freedom [arose] from their disunion.”

Machiavelli’s discussion of the plebs and nobles in the Discourses echoed his treatment of the “two humors” in the ninth chapter of The Prince. It is in Machiavelli’s treatment of the two humors that his answer to the political crisis of the sixteenth century becomes clear in the Discourses. Against humanism, Christianity, and many of the ancient sources, Machiavelli argued that the conflict between the humors was the source of greatness for Rome; the ignorance of the humors in Florence, and of sixteenth century Europe in general, was to Machiavelli the source of political weakness.

For Machiavelli, the word umore (humor) had several meanings. It could designate the desires natural to a certain group; it could mean a certain social group

---

67 Discourses, 1.3, 15; CW 201; Op. 82.
68 Discourses, 1.3, 15; CW 201; Op. 82. Cf. The Prince, 15.
69 Discourses, 1.4.
within a regime; it might designate the activities produced by the interaction between certain groups; sometimes it referred to conflicts between regimes; it could even be used with an evaluative term, like healthy or malignant, to describe the forces of good and evil in a regime. Most importantly for his political thought, and consistent with its use in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, Machiavelli used *umore* to classify regimes. In *The Prince* he wrote that out of the conflict of the two humors, “one of three effects occurs in cities: principality or liberty or license.” A principality or republic was a regime built so that the conflicting humors had positive effects; license designated the regime in which the humors were out of balance and thus produced ill effects.

Machiavelli’s notion of humors was derived from a long pedigree of medical science, from ancient Greek physicians such as Hippocrates and Galen to his own sixteenth century. Medical science through the ancient times up through the Renaissance considered the constitution of the human body to be made from various humors; in Galen’s view, for example, there were the four humors of blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile, the balance of which would affect pain, health, sickness, and wellness. Deficiency or excess of one humor in quantity, quality, potency or proportionality would affect one’s constitution. In ancient political thought, Plato, Aristotle, or Polybius looked upon a diseased regime as something analogous to a diseased body. Similarly, as disease of the body in the sixteenth century was understood in the disorder of the humors, Machiavelli understood political disease through analogous humors. In a living body, 

---


humors were active and in motion; a healthy body was not one in which the humors were stationary or stilled, but balanced in their interactions. Likewise in the *Discourses*, a healthy regime was not one in which the humors were quieted or eradicated, but one in which their moving desires and ambitions were brought together to energize the regime they constituted. Hence Machiavelli insisted that tumult between the humors in Rome had made it great; an artful constitution of the regime had allowed it to flourish. Tumult was healthy in a regime built upon the effectual truth.

In a disordered regime the humors wreaked destruction. The *Discourses* provided ample evidence of such excess and imbalance. For Machiavelli, so often accompanying these examples was a neglect of the effectual truths necessary to maintain regimes, a fault he thought all too apparent in the early sixteenth century. In the fifteenth chapter of the second part of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli offered examples of regimes that, through indecision, allowed ill humors to weaken them. One example Machiavelli got directly from Livy. In their war against the Romans, the Latins asked the Lavinians for aid, but the Lavinians deferred and delayed, coming “right outside the gate with their troops to give them help” only when the Latins had been defeated.73 Another example was one in recent Florentine memory, when King Louis XII of France was at war with Milan; Florence delayed ratification of a treaty with the king, on account of a humor in favor of the Duke of Milan, thereby compromising the city at the very moment when Louis was victorious over the forces of Duke Ludovico.

These delays in decision making were for Machiavelli sure signs of the want of an art of politics; it was an effectual truth that strategic decisions needed hard and fast

73 *Discourses* 2.15, 159; *CW* 362; *Op*. 165.
resolve, particularly in times of war, lest malignant humors hurt and destroy the regimes they affected. Machiavelli demonstrated the effects of the resolve in strategic decision making. At the onset of the war between the Latins and the Romans, Machiavelli cited the example of the Latin praetor Annius, who urged clarity and decisiveness in the Latin council’s deliberations; likewise, in midst of the Punic Wars, Apollonides warned his fellow Syracusans “to detest ambiguity and tardiness in taking up a policy.” Resolve quelled malignant humors.

Malignant humors could be so destructive that it was often necessary to crush their leaders. Just as the lesson on resolve had been forgotten, this effectual truth was neglected time and again to the detriment of many regimes, including his own Florence. Machiavelli warned his readers with the example of Piero Soderini, gonfalonier of Florence until the Medicis returned to power in the spring of 1512.

For besides believing that he could extinguish ill humors with patience and goodness and wear away some of the enmity to himself with rewards to someone, he judged (and often vouched for it with his friends) that if he wished to strike his opponents vigorously and to beat down his adversaries, he would have needed to take up extraordinary authority and break up civil equality together with the laws. Soderini ignored the effectual truth that it was necessary, if his regime was to survive, to “kill the sons of Brutus”; for “whoever makes a free state and does not kill the sons of Brutus,” Machiavelli wrote, “maintains himself for little time.” Out of respect for goodness and order, Soderini allowed an ill humor to grow far out of balance to the other humors, threatening the very existence of the regime itself. For Machiavelli this was a

74 Discourses 2.15, 159; CW 361; Op. 165.
massive mistake that ignored the necessary considerations in founding and maintaining regimes.

Given that Machiavelli used *umore* in several ways in the *Discourses*, it is not surprising to find that even his accounts of the two humors (the plebs and the nobles) were at times unclear. In the fifth chapter of the first book, they were presented such that they became scarcely distinguishable. Which humor was more ambitious or even which one the was the plebian and which one noble could be confused. For Machiavelli this confusion was highly instructive. Was the desire to maintain more ambitious than the desire to acquire? Machiavelli collapsed the distinction between the desires: the desire to maintain produced the same desire to acquire as in the other humor, for the fear of losing possessions would not seem secure until new possessions were acquired.\(^{77}\) What was clear was that “either one appetite or the other [could] be the cause of very great tumults,” and this was essentially because the ambitions of each humor were similarly dynamic and malleable.\(^{78}\) Machiavelli saw that fear and desire were universal passions among men,\(^{79}\) and thus ambitions would be manifested differently according to their different conditions; these conditions would dictate whether they feared for their possessions or were free to acquire without such concern. Machiavelli, as one scholar has noted, seemed to “view fear and desire as points on a continuum – one followed by and causally connected to the other.”\(^{80}\) Ambition for Machiavelli was ubiquitous and tempered only by conditions; these differing conditions amongst men created different

---

\(^{77}\) *Discourses*, 1.5. See Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s New Modes and Orders*, pp. 47-48.

\(^{78}\) *Discourses*, 1.5, 19; *CW* 206; *Op*. 84.

\(^{79}\) *Discourses*, 1.37.

\(^{80}\) Coby, *Machiavelli’s Romans*, p. 94.
humors. Hence Machiavelli could remark that “whoever considers present and ancient things easily knows that in all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same humors, and there have always been.”

Rome was the premier example of these “ancient things;” lessons about the humors and the constitution of a regime that could balance them came from her history. Underscoring much of the Discourses was Machiavelli’s argument that the tumults between the plebs and the nobles were the cause of Rome’s greatness. Indeed, there were examples, in ancient and latter-day times of strong states which had managed to severely restrict tumultuous faction; but Sparta and Venice were small, insular states that had eliminated conflicting humors at the cost of ever hoping to expand the state. Rome’s greatness and power in the world would have been sacrificed by purging tumult. Machiavelli argued that “one inconvenience can never be suppressed without another’s cropping up”; therefore, “if Rome wished to remove the causes of tumults, it removed too the causes of expansion.”

Allowing the tumultuous humors to exist, Rome’s constitution was able to “vent” excessive energy, often upon another citizen, so as not to bring itself to ruin. In Rome, good orders vented malignant humors.

For Machiavelli, even the fall of the Roman republic did not conflict with his argument that the enmities between the plebs and the nobles kept Rome free, though admittedly “the end of the Agrarian law [appeared] not to conform to this conclusion.”

But for Machiavelli, this remained only an appearance, as the contention over the law

---

81 Discourses 1.39, 83; CW 278; Op. 122.
82 Discourses, 1.6, 21; CW 209; Op. 85.
83 Discourses 1.7.
84 Discourses, 1.37, 80; CW 274; Op. 120.
took three hundred years to destroy the republic, and would have been sooner had the
good orders of Rome not vented the ambitions of the two humors. Thus ambition, which
for Machiavelli was ineradicable in human beings in all times and places, was used by
Rome to its advantage. The tumult was necessary to vent this ambition, otherwise the
republic would have succumbed to the ambitions, fears, and desires of the plebs and
nobles before the regime could have ever been great.

Machiavelli condensed the two humors into dynamic fear and desire, the
knowledge and handling of which became the measure of Rome’s strength and success.
For Machiavelli, the Roman regime was the model regime in understanding and dealing
with this dynamic of desire and fear. “Men are in motion and cannot stay steady,”
Machiavelli wrote; Rome was the regime which best understood and applied the
effectual truths that derived from this maxim. Machiavelli agreed with Polybius that
indeed the Roman regime was stable. Yet for Machiavelli its stability was due not to
maintaining and developing a good state through customs and laws based in a natural
inclination to virtue, but to understanding the dynamic humors and knowing ultimately
that men were bad and always use their “malignity of spirit.”

Machiavelli discouraged the emulation of imagined republics, yet the Roman
regime was as deft in the art of politics as regimes could be. Thus if one can speak of the
ideal regime in Machiavelli’s thought, it was Rome. Examining Machiavelli’s
*Discourses* and certainly his other works, there was a persistent counter-example:
Florence. Machiavelli’s home city was an unhealthy one. Just as the sick man was
thought to have an excess of phlegm or an inadequate amount of yellow bile without a

85 *Discourses* 1.6, 22; *CW* 210; *Op.* 86. Recall Machiavelli’s phrase in the *Florentine Histories*,
Preface, 6; *CW* 1031, *Op.* 633, “and if every example of a republic is moving….”
proper regimen to bring him to wellness, Florence’s humors waxed to excess or waned to inadequacy without good orders to bring the regime to health. Above all, Machiavelli aimed to combat Florence’s illness by teaching the effectual truths about founding and maintaining regimes and reviving an art of politics. The *Discourses* was a major part of that project.

For Machiavelli, the crisis of the sixteenth century was precipitated by humanism, which attempted to revive high civilization, and Christianity and the papacy, which subjugated temporal government under spiritual considerations often at odds with political necessity. In *The Prince* and the *Discourses* Machiavelli countered the political crisis of the sixteenth century with a sustained teaching on the effectual truths necessary for founding and maintaining regimes. Machiavelli’s art of politics was taught through the numerous and often overwhelming lessons of the *Discourses* and the brief but cunning lessons of *The Prince*. Yet even though his efforts to revive the art of politics opposed what he considered to be the inefficacious teachings of the Christian religion, Machiavelli’s political theory converged with the political thought of the great German Church reformer Martin Luther. Like Luther’s restoration of temporal government, Machiavelli’s art of politics stood against any kind of universalism in government, utopian politics, or any withdrawal from or denunciation of temporal government. Like Luther, Machiavelli saw political reality as imperfect and limited, a world which was at best morally ambiguous.
CHAPTER FIVE:
LUTHER AND THE RESTORATION OF POLITICS

For Luther political theory was no small task, no minor tangent to the gospel mission; matters of temporal government were vital to resolving the crisis of the sixteenth century. For a theologian who would never hold political office, Luther’s praise for temporal government was emphatic and unfeigned: he called it the “most precious jewel on earth”¹ and a gift as indispensable as life itself.² Luther also believed his contribution to political thought represented an important watershed shift. He boasted several times in different places that no one since ancient times (particularly the apostles) had such high praise or compelling ideas about temporal government as he.³ Luther’s boast, as exaggerated as it may be, was based in his belief that through his theological reform, he was restoring honor to temporal government that had long been removed by the sundry corruptions in both ecclesial and civil authorities. The restoration of temporal government to its proper place and dignity is an overarching and unifying theme in his political writings. With a robust role for temporal government, Luther set out to resolve the theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century.

¹ WA 30 I, 153.
² LW 46, 238; WA 30 II, 556.
³ LW 46, 95; WA 19, 624.
Luther conceived of temporal government within a dualism of “two regiments.” Both the spiritual and temporal government were part of God’s dominion on earth. Luther’s dualism thereby distinguished itself from other Christian dualisms: there was a kingdom of God and a Kingdom of Satan, but also a spiritual and a secular regiment within the Kingdom of God. For Luther the spiritual regiment was concerned only with the Word of God and the souls of human beings. The temporal regiment was concerned with the essential matters that remained, from property rights to civic order, from criminal laws to marriage and family.

Thus Luther envisioned a high purpose for temporal government: though the regiment did not impart grace, it was by God’s design vital for it. Though removed from the righteousness through justification, it nurtured its own kind of righteousness. Luther saw in both the ecclesial and civil authorities of his day a failure to respect this role for temporal government; in fact, for him this failure was at the center of the sixteenth century crisis.

Interpreting Luther’s Political Theory

Despite the importance of his political ideas, Luther was still not a political philosopher such as Aristotle or John Locke. One ought not to expect to find in Luther a comprehensive political philosophy; Luther never considered himself called to such a task. Without this drive to a comprehensive political philosophy, we are left with mostly

---

piecemeal thoughts and writings on political matters. Thus there are several challenges in interpreting Luther’s political theory.

One such challenge is that Luther’s thought and writings, even when concentrated on explicitly political matters, were invariably founded upon theological rather than philosophic ideas; he is often accused of being anti-philosophic and a disparager of human reason. Given that in the earliest of his publications Luther argued that “the whole Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light,” the accusations are not surprising.\(^5\)

Another interpretive problem for Luther’s political thought was the tendency of his writings to be more often directed towards a pastoral concern than to a problem of theory \textit{per se}. Of course this is not to suggest that these were mutually exclusive, or that pastoral matters for Luther were not bound up in, or did not lead to, theoretical problems. However, the treatises and letters relevant to Luther’s political thought frequently

\(^5\) LW 31, 12; WA 1, 224. G. K. Chesterton, in his well-known biography of Thomas Aquinas, judged Luther as the antithesis of Thomistic philosophy: “it was the very life of Lutheran teaching that Reason is utterly untrustworthy.” G. K. Chesterton, \textit{Saint Thomas Aquinas} (New York: Doubleday, 1956): 33. Jacques Maritain argued Luther to be a father of the modern self, an anti-intellectual man of will “wholly and systematically ruled by his affective and appetitive faculties.” Jacques Maritain, \textit{Three Reformers: Luther – Descartes – Rousseau} (London: Sheed and Ward, 1936): 28. Yet today, many scholars now believe that Luther and Aquinas were be much more in agreement on several key theological issues than previously thought. See Otto Hermann Pesch, \textit{Die Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin} (Mainz: Matthias-Grunewald-Verlag, 1967); Denis Janz, \textit{Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology} (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983). Janz has also provided a very helpful study on Aquinas in the writings of Luther, \textit{Luther on Thomas Aquinas: The Angelic Doctor in the Thought of the Reformer} (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1989). For a comparison of Aquinas and Luther on faith and reason, see Bruce A. Marshall, “Faith and Reason Reconsidered: Aquinas and Luther on Deciding What is True,” \textit{The Thomist} 63 (1999): 1-48. But this agreement centers on theology rather philosophy. Although, recent scholarship sees Luther’s thought as more intellectually grounded and philosophically knowledgeable than has often been considered, his thought is far from being reconcilable to the Aristotelianism of the scholastic philosophers. This position of course is not without its controversies. Most notable amongst the scholars grounding Luther’s thought in medieval philosophy was Heiko Oberman, especially two collections of essays, \textit{The Dawn of the Reformation} (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) and \textit{The Two Reformations} (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003).
addressed an immediate pastoral concern that directed his inquiry in a certain direction. An obvious example is the treatise *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved*. Though it is an excellent source for some of Luther’s political theory, the tension between Christian ethics and military service was the immediate pastoral concern that inspired it; overlooking this fact could skew the political interpretation in an unwarranted direction.

Another problem in interpreting Luther’s political writings (and arguably in his theological works as well) are various inconsistencies that foil simple overviews of his political ideas. A famous example was Luther’s change in policy over the right of resistance to the Holy Roman Emperor in 1530. In the interpretation of Luther’s political thought, the change has sometimes been considered a flat self-contradiction; other scholars have simply ignored the change altogether. Though the question of resistance has attracted German scholarship over the past century, comparatively few studies in English have grappled with its meaning for Luther’s political theory.

Yet another difficulty is that terms central to Luther’s political ideas were not always applied consistently. Even the crucial idea of the ‘two regimes’ can become

---

6 Luther’s Biblical commentaries are clear exceptions to this generalization.


8 This is in reference to the tendency of scholars of Luther’s political thought to concentrate on his early writings from the 1520s without reference to the significant political challenges and ideas Luther wrestled with in his last fifteen years. For example, the only recent English anthology of Luther’s political writings contains a mere single writing post-1530 (*Dr. Martin Luther’s Warning to His Dear German People*) : J. M. Porter, *Luther: Selected Political Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1974; Reprinted, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock: 2003).

confused to the inattentive student. Luther often used the German words Reich and Regiment (“kingdom” and “government” or “regiment”, respectively) to refer to different but much related things. In phrases such as the German Reich Gottes, Reich Christi, and the Latin regnum dei, Luther generally referred to the Kingdom of God and his sovereignty over all creation; the antonyms Teufels Reich, Reich der Welt, and regnum Satanae referred to the Kingdom of Satan. Yet these same phrases could also have referred not only to God’s authority over creation, but also the realm over which he ruled: thus Reich Gottes could mean the true Church of all the faithful or the Communion of Saints. Likewise the Teufels Reich could also mean all those who do not believe in Christ. But these names did not refer to what is known as Luther’s “two regiments,” though they were related. For within the Reich Gottes – under God’s dominion – God governed mankind with two regiments/authorities: das geistliche Regiment und das weltliche Regiment (the spiritual regiment and the secular or temporal regiment). At times Luther employed Reich to refer to either of these governments (das geistliche Reich or das weltliche Reich). Luther also used the words Oberkeit (authority) and Gewalt (power or force) for identifying the two regiments apparently without major conceptual distinctions, especially in the seminal political writing, Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed.11 These closely related ideas of the two kingdoms and two

10 Some scholars have even argued that Luther’s application is incoherent. See Hans Joachim Gaenssler, Evangelium und weltliches Schwert: Hintergrund, Entstehungsgeschichte, und Anlass von Luthers Scheidung zweier Reiche oder Regimenter (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1983) and Eike Wohlgast, Die wittenberger Theologie und die Politik der evangelischen Stände: Studien zu Luther Gutachten in politischen Fragen (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1977).

regiments as well as Luther’s imprecision have caused considerable disputes in scholarly interpretation of his political thought.\textsuperscript{12}

Aside from disputes about particular things Luther wrote, or various inconsistencies within or between works, there have been considerable disagreements in the last century about the nature and meaning of Luther’s political thought in general. English speaking scholars of the early twentieth century were often dismissive of Luther’s political ideas. J. W. Allen, in his overview of sixteenth century political theory, charged that Luther’s political ideas were “gravely misunderstood and his influence on political thought has been both misrepresented and very grossly exaggerated.”\textsuperscript{13} Allen’s criticism had J. N. Figgis in mind, who had argued that Luther had exalted the secular state and was a father of early modern absolutism.\textsuperscript{14} Seminal works such as R. H. Tawney’s \textit{Religion and the Rise of Capitalism} were equally as harsh as Allen; on Luther’s “social morality” Tawney argued “it is idle to scan them for coherent and consistent doctrine.”\textsuperscript{15}

Unsurprisingly, it was in Germany that Luther’s political ideas gained sustained scholarly interest and consideration. Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch inspired much scholarship with provocative studies on the relationship between modern civilization and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item W. D. J. Cargill Thompson’s article “The ‘Two Kingdoms’ and the ‘Two Regiments’: Some Problems of Luther’s \textit{Zwei-Reich-Lehre},” \textit{Studies in the Reformation} (London: Athlone Press, 1980): 43-59, has contributed much to clarify this interpretive difficulty. Cargill Thompson also briefly accounts for the scholarly disputes that have arisen over Luther’s imprecision.
\item J. W. Allen, \textit{A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century}, p. 15.
\item J. N. Figgis, \textit{Political Thought From Gerson to Grotius, 1414-1625} (London: Cambridge University Press, 1907).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Protestantism.\textsuperscript{16} Doubtless, these works had influence on Luther scholarship. Troeltsch’s *The Social Teaching of Christianity* stirred controversy by linking Luther to absolutist states and the glorification of authority.\textsuperscript{17} Against this view came Karl Holl, a professor of church history at the University of Berlin in the early twentieth century. Holl significantly contributed to the “Luther renaissance” in Protestant theology. With respect to Luther’s political ideas, Holl underscored Luther’s insistence that political authority was from God, and this fact excluded the right of revolution; but that this did not mean Luther advocated absolutist states, for political authority for him extended over “bodies” but not “souls.” For Holl this represented a nascent form of freedom of conscience.\textsuperscript{18}

By the mid-twentieth century, in the years preceding, during, and immediately after the Second World War, the study of Luther’s political thought continued with questions on Luther and authoritarianism, particularly with respect to the rise of the Third Reich. In a similar vein to what National Socialists had proudly defended less than a decade earlier, William McGovern in 1941 identified Luther’s strict obedience to princes as a precursor to fascism.\textsuperscript{19} Soon after, this thesis was soundly criticized. H. J. Grimm

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{16} Their groundbreaking efforts were respectively *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and *Protestantism and Progress* (although the German title of Troeltsch’s work was “the significance of the Reformation for the development of modern civilization”).
\item\textsuperscript{17} Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of Christianity, Volume 2*, O. Wyon, trans. (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1992). In this respect, Troeltsch linked Luther to Machiavelli.
\item\textsuperscript{19} William McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Fascist Political Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton, Mifflin, 1941).
\end{itemize}
argued that Luther neither revolted against the political institutions of the middle ages, nor contributed to modern territorial or national loyalty.  

After mid-century, the study of Luther’s political thought made great gains through the breakdown of confessional barriers, the scholarly gains of multiple fields of study, and the rising interest in the sixteenth century. Scholars began to consider the whole of Luther’s political ideas, both at the beginning and at the end of his life and career. Paul Althaus accounted for all of Luther’s theology and ethics in two accessible volumes solidly based on Luther’s writings. Groundbreaking historical studies aimed to identify the forces and ideas contributing to Luther’s theology and political ideas.

Yet even with the growth of interest in Luther’s ideas, and his firm placement in the canon of political thought, the meaning of his political ideas has continued to be a source of contention and debate. For this contention, we need look no further than the books of a few prominent political theorists. Sheldon Wolin’s Politics and Vision devoted a chapter to Luther’s political theory. At the outset, he argued that Luther’s major contribution to political thought was to “depoliticize religion” which in the end “served the cause of national particularism.” But as Luther’s Church became less political itself, it became increasingly political in its dependency on secular authority.

---


21 Paul Althaus, Die Theologie Martin Luthers (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1962) and Die Ethik Martin Luthers (Gütersloh, Mohn, 1965).

22 For example, A. G. Dickens, The German Nation and Martin Luther (London: Edward Arnold, 1974); Eric Gritsch, Martin – God’s Court Jester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

23 Sheldon Wolin, Politics and Vision, pp. 142-143.

24 Ibid., p. 147.
Wolin argued that Luther, through his rejection of monarchy and hierarchy in the Church, helped destroy certain forms of “political imagery” and meanwhile destroyed the cosmic integration of divine and political order that reigned in the middle ages.\textsuperscript{25} Wolin’s most sustained critique against Luther was for what he called the reformer’s bias against institutions. Luther ignored the role of religious institutions as political restraints. His theology emphasized the relationship between a person and God, and similarly his political theory emphasized the relationship between ruler and ruled.\textsuperscript{26}

Half of Quentin Skinner’s \textit{The Foundation of Modern Political Thought} was devoted to Luther’s political ideas and their influence in the sixteenth century. Skinner argued that in Luther’s thought there were two major political implications: first, that the Church possesses no jurisdictional powers, and second, as a corollary, that the secular government must wield them.\textsuperscript{27} Thus Skinner agreed with J. N. Figgis that Luther destroyed the “two swords,” as he stripped power away from the \textit{sacerdotium}. Skinner also argued that Luther’s political writings embodied two influential principles: the New Testament (especially Paul) was the final authority on political questions, and the political stance prescribed by the New Testament was one of complete submission to authorities.\textsuperscript{28} Skinner attempted to demonstrate in a later chapter that the main influence

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., pp. 154, 157.
  \item\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 162.
  \item\textsuperscript{27} Quentin Skinner, \textit{The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Volume Two: The Age of Reformation}, pp. 12-15.
  \item\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 19.
\end{itemize}
of Luther’s political thought was the encouraging and legitimizing of unified and absolutist monarchies.\footnote{This argument permeates the third chapter.}

Both Wolin and Skinner’s treatments of Luther have proven influential in the study of Luther’s political theory. Both scholars also demonstrated that the interpretation of Luther’s political ideas has by no means become settled, as various issues continue to be contentious to the present day. Their own interpretations were certainly not beyond criticism. Wolin criticized Luther’s distrust of institutions, yet failed to discuss what alternative institutions were available to Luther. Skinner argued that Luther insists on the final authority of the Bible, yet he cited not one of Luther’s Biblical commentaries. They also commonly asserted that Luther encouraged absolutism, without adequately explaining how this was so.

Out of all this scholarship, there has been an enduring oversight in the consideration of Luther’s political thought. Interpreters have failed to give a persuasive and concise account of the reformer’s boast that no one since the Apostolic age had written in such praise of temporal government as he.\footnote{LW 46, 163; WA 30 II, 107.  Luther adds the qualification “except, perhaps St. Augustine.”} They have covered many of his key political ideas, tied them to his theology, and often considered them in the immediate historical context; but rarely, it appears, have interpreters regarded Luther’s political thought as a restorative effort against the theological-political crisis of his age. Yet undeniably and emphatically this is how Luther saw it.

We need look no further than On the War Against the Turk – where the above boast occurred. In the introduction Luther gave his dismal assessment (though obviously
overstated) of political thought in the early sixteenth century. Luther was in the midst of explaining a statement he made in his *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, one explicitly condemned by Pope Leo X in his bull *Exsurge, Domine*, that fighting against the Turks was the same as resisting God’s punishment. But the text provided more than this context: Luther’s judgment about the sorry state of political thought underscores how he saw his own political thought as a restoration to honor and purpose that had since been lost in the crisis of the sixteenth century. For before boasting over his restoration, Luther sketched what he saw as the lack of sound political thinking in the early sixteenth century.

This was the state of things at the time: no one had taught, no one had heard, and no one knew anything about temporal government, whence it came, what its office and work were, or how it ought to serve God. The most learned men (I shall not name them) regarded temporal government as a heathen, human, ungodly thing, as though it jeopardized salvation to be in the ranks of the rulers. This is how the priests and monks drove kings and princes into the corner and persuaded them that to serve God they must undertake other works, such as hearing mass, saying prayers, endowing masses, etc. In a word, princes and lords who wanted to be pious men regarded their rank and office as of no value and did not consider it service of God.

Obviously, Luther believed his efforts to reform the Church partly satisfied this want, but certainly his explicitly political works combated it more directly. It is no surprise then that Luther followed this account of the sorry state of sixteenth century political ideas by mentioning *On Temporal Authority*, which by clear implication brought dignity back to political office. Luther added that Duke Frederick was so pleased at his office being thought of as divine service, that “he had the little book copied and put in a special

---

31 LW 31, 91-92. WA 1, 535-536. The papal objection was more likely due to the challenge of the pope’s authority to demand a “holy war” than to Luther identifying the Turks as God’s punishment. Luther was not alone in seeing the Turkish threat in this way. See John W. Bohnstedt, “The Infidel Scourge of God: The Turkish Menace as Seen by German Pamphleteers of the Reformation Era,” *Transcripts of the American Philosophical Society, Volume 58, Part 9* (1968).

32 LW 46, 163. WA 30 II, 107.
Luther’s boast was embellished, but not unfounded: as he saw it, his political thought was restoring the honor and purpose of temporal government to an age in the midst of a theological-political crisis.

Reforming a Theology of God and Humankind

Luther’s restoration of temporal authority to a status of honor and divine purpose was firmly grounded upon restoring ideas about God and humankind through his reformation discovery. Luther argued that the sixteenth century has lost sight of these orthodoxies which had led to a crisis in both ecclesial and secular regiments. Righting the wrong done to temporal government, Luther believed, necessitated that the sound theology of justification would bring his age to renew essential doctrines about God and humanity.

_De servo arbitrio_, more commonly known to us by its translated (and modified) title, _The Bondage of the Will_, aimed at explaining the nature of God’s will within Luther’s theology of justification. Though the work was inspired and formed by its immediate purpose, to refute the attacks by the world-renowned scholar, Erasmus of Rotterdam, its conclusions would provide Luther with a solid theological basis for restoring temporal government to its divine purpose in the midst of the crisis of his age.

---

33 Ibid.

The Bondage of the Will argued that God was the only truly creative agent in the world. Luther argued that God “foreknows nothing contingently, but that he forsees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will.”35 Since God was the only true creator, God’s gift to humanity – the promise of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ – was also the only true gift freely given. Thus human beings did not themselves merit this gift. In the first place, meriting the gift would render it no longer freely given and thus not a gift. In the second place, meriting salvation would be tantamount to denying that God was in fact God, for it would entail that God would be subject to human agency. For Luther, this error was pervasive in the sixteenth century; more than any other mistaken view of humankind or God, this one was the most responsible for the corruption of both the ecclesial and civil authorities.

The Bondage of the Will accuses Erasmus of exactly this error: by affirming that human beings possessed a free will he was denying God’s creativity and freedom and thereby denying God’s omnipresence and omnipotence. Luther saw in Erasmus’s affirmation of free will an attack on God’s gift of justification. To allow the free will of human beings to determine some part of justification was to deny it as a gift; it was to say, in Luther’s words, “that the Majesty that is the creator of all things must bow to one of the dregs of his creation.”36

Luther’s project to restore temporal government was also built upon an anthropology derived from his theology of justification. Luther’s theological anthropology had to both affirm the utter helplessness of human beings in meriting or

35 LW 33, 37; WA 18, 614.
36 LW 33, 206; WA 18, 730.
attaining their salvation, and defend temporal authority as a divine gift (rather than a human creation) worthy of honor and charged with a crucial purpose. Luther set himself to this task in the fall of 1520, after his polemical Babylonian Captivity of the Church but before his excommunication, when he penned Christian Liberty.\(^\text{37}\)

Christian Liberty began by defending two apparently contradictory propositions about the Christian person: a Christian is perfectly free, lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is also a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.\(^\text{38}\) How could these propositions hold true for the same person? For Luther the answer simply had to do with the duality of human nature. More precisely, it was that for Luther human beings each had a “twofold nature, a spiritual one and a bodily one.”\(^\text{39}\) The remainder of the work was occupied with explaining this duality.

Luther began with the “spiritual” or “inner” nature of human beings. For Luther it was the spiritual nature through which a Christian becomes free and righteous. Unequivocally, this “liberty” had nothing to do with external factors. “It is evident,” Luther wrote, “that no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom, or in producing unrighteousness or servitude.”\(^\text{40}\) A healthy body did not mean a healthy soul: vicious men have enjoyed good health. Likewise, poor health or imprisonment harms not the soul: even the godly have suffered from these things. Rather for Luther only one thing was necessary for Christian freedom, and that was the “Word of God.”

---

\(^\text{37}\) It is also known in English as The Freedom of the Christian. Luther composed it in Latin.

\(^\text{38}\) LW 31, 344; WA 7, 49.

\(^\text{39}\) LW 31, 344; WA 7, 50. “Homo enim duplici constat natura, spirituali et corporali.”

\(^\text{40}\) LW 31, 344-345; WA 7, 50.
By the “Word of God” Luther was not simply referring to the Bible and its amalgam of sacred Hebrew and early Christian writings. For Luther in *Christian Liberty* the “Word of God” meant the gospel, the good news message that the God and Creator of all, to paraphrase one New Testament writer, so loved the world that he sent his only Son to live, die and rise again so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life.\(^{41}\) In *Christian Liberty* Luther classified the scripture into either commandments or promises. The Old Testament was the commandment part of scripture; it was intended, Luther thought, “to teach man to know himself, that through [it] he may recognize his ability to do good and may despair of his own ability.”\(^{42}\) The New Testament was the promise part of scripture; it assured humanity that though by the law it is condemned, through faith in Christ the law is fulfilled. Through the condemnation of the law and faith in the promise of God, the Christian became free.

According to *Christian Liberty*, the freedom of the Christian was threefold. First, with faith in the Gospel, works for the Christian are rendered unnecessary for his righteousness or justification. Thus the Christian is free from the law: not in the sense that he may live in wickedness, but that the works of the law do not gain him salvation. Second, the faith in the promise of God frees the Christian from the condemnation of the law and into a full relationship with God. Third, by faith the Christian is freed from the bondage of sin. Luther used marital imagery to explain this release. By faith the soul and Christ become one flesh as a bride is united with her bridegroom. As in marriage all

\(^{41}\) John 3:16.

\(^{42}\) *LW* 31, 348; *WA* 7, 52.
is shared in common, the sins of the soul are shared with the righteousness of Christ, and thus the soul becomes righteous.  

Yet alongside the freedom of the Christian, Luther affirmed the divinely sanctioned place of temporal government; Luther had also claimed that the Christian was a servant and subject to all. Servitude was a necessity of the outer nature or *natura corporali* of human beings. Since Christians would not be “wholly inner and perfectly spiritual” until the resurrection of the dead, being subject to all would be a continuing condition of mortal life on earth. There was for Luther mundane yet undeniable evidence that human beings cannot in this lifetime be perfectly spiritual persons. “In this life,” wrote Luther, “he must control his own body and have dealings with men.” The problem of his own body and of others was for Luther essentially the same: each human being had in his flesh a contrary will which would serve the world and seek its own advantage. 

Just as by faith the inner nature was cleansed and made to love God, so by subjection to discipline and authority the outer nature was made to join the inner nature in the praise and love of God. Thus Luther – despite the accusations against his theology and its implications – reasserted the necessity of “good works” for the outer nature of humankind. True to his theology, these good works did not render a person justified before God; yet in order that “he may not be idle and may provide for and keep his body,

---

43 *LW* 31, 349-352; *WA* 7, 53-55.

44 *LW* 31, 358; *WA* 7, 60.

45 *LW* 31, 358; *WA* 7, 60.
he must do such works freely only to please God." Since this subjection and service to all did not make one saved or righteous, it would be done for God rather than for oneself; since this subjection was of the outer nature it applied to one’s body and extended to all one’s neighbours.

*Christian Liberty* explicitly mentions subjection to governing authorities as one type of service or bondage to which the outer nature ought to bow. The subjection of the person to government was once again not an act earning justification, but an act of the saved Christian who in the freedom of the Spirit serves the authorities out of love. For Luther, this position on governing authorities was essentially the message of Paul in a section of his letter to the Romans (13:1-7). In *Christian Liberty* service to temporal authority was analogous to many other “good works” examples from scripture: Paul’s submission to the rite of circumcision for Timothy, the Virgin Mary’s submission to the purification in the temple, or Christ’s submission to the tax tribute for the disciples. But for Luther, temporal government was more than one of many examples of submission and service. It was the most crucial of all authorities, since more than any other it dealt directly with the recalcitrant outer nature of human beings. *Christian Liberty* defined existence on earth as a dualistic *simul justus et peccator*, and these two natures were inseparable. Temporal government was God’s gift to help in the stewardship of our outer natures.

---

46 *LW* 31, 360; *WA* 7, 61.

47 This is not to say that all government for Luther was on account of sin. Later in another writing, Luther would also argue that government was established in the time of innocence, i.e. before the fall of Adam and Eve, *WA* 49, 137, 143.
A common attack against Luther was that his theology of justification had led and would increasingly lead to license, immorality and the disregard for temporal authority. It was the prime charge in the early days of the reform movement and would be echoed during the Peasant Revolt and the numerous conflicts between the imperial powers and the evangelical principalities. It was particularly prevalent in the early years of his career, and even found a voice in the concerns and reservations of Luther’s own allies. The charge went to the heart of Luther’s answer to the theological-political crisis of the age, and his restoration of temporal government to honor. Many evangelical princes voiced concern over revolt. Luther’s own prince and imperial elector was one of them; indeed the Treatise on Good Works was written in response to the urgent request of George Spalatin, secretary to Elector Frederick, Duke of Saxony and Luther’s protector.

Responding to the charge against Luther but more importantly defending the divine purpose of temporal government, the Treatise on Good Works made obedience to temporal authorities an ethical act and a good work. For Luther, the commandment “thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother” demanded it. It was not a commandment simply about parents; its full meaning was to serve and obey all those who are set in authority. Furthermore, its place in the Decalogue was a sign of its importance. Following only the commandments about humankind’s relationship to God, it preceded all other commandments that prohibited murder, adultery, stealing and lying. For Luther, this meant that after the good works of the first commandments, there was no better good work than obedience; likewise after sins directly against God, there was no greater sin than disobedience. 48 Thus for Luther the primary ethical sin of his age was disobedience:

48 LW 44, 80-81; WA 6, 250-251
the confusion of the spiritual and temporal regiments he regarded as too prevalent in his
time, was for him a violation of the fifth commandment.

Luther’s account of temporal authority in the *Treatise on Good Works* was not
only a simple command for subjects to obey their rulers. Obedience was explained in
relation to the prerogatives and limits of temporal authority: how it has jurisdiction over
property, but not over the soul.49 Sins against temporal government included
disobedience and speaking ill of it; sins within temporal government included the
influence of flattery, or the destructive pride of the ruler himself. The duties of the ruler
were for Luther not unlike those of a parent to child: the ruler must think of the good of
his subjects, take care to educate them and keep them from sin. Luther even
recommended several policies for the benefit of his age: curbing gluttony, drunkenness,
pride in clothes, usury, and church corruption.50

Yet in the *Treatise on Good Works* there was still more to Luther’s ethical
position on temporal authority. Luther affirmed temporal government as a blessing from
God, and in this way took a stand against many in his age who failed to honor this divine
gift. Luther was unequivocal that the commandments, like the law of the Old Testament
in general, were given by God. True good works were those done in obedience and
praise of God, who had already justified the sinner. Each of these commandments, as
with any other commands of God, could not possibly in themselves countenance sin. To
honor one’s parents was to recognize the gifts of love, procreation and discipline
bestowed by God unto humanity via one’s parents. For Luther these gifts were analogous

49 LW 44, 92; WA 6, 259.

50 LW 44, 95-96; WA 6, 261.
to those of temporal government. God had justified fallen humanity through Christ; but in this world, with the relentless attacks of the devil upon humanity in its temporary condition of *simul justus et peccator*, God gave the gift of temporal government. Against what he considered to be the great neglect of his age, Luther sought to restore government to high honor.

**Luther and the Restoration of Temporal Authority**

Though Luther’s “two regiments” helped him restore temporal authority to its proper place of honor and importance in his age, at first glance, they do not appear particularly unique in the history of Christian political thought. Some variation on a dualism of ecclesial and secular authorities pervaded Christian political ideas since the early Church. Moreover, there were even many prominent defenders of secular government against the power of the Church and the papacy in the ages preceding Luther. Dante and Marsilius, amongst the most prominent examples, basically shared with Luther a restorative project in their political theories.

Luther differed from these great medieval minds in that his political ethics – and thus his political thought in general – was derived from his theology of justification, and it directly answered the perceived corruptions of the Church and civil authorities. The two regiments and the two kingdoms made sense of power and authority in this world for human beings who were *simul justus et peccator*; however sixteenth century political thought, in Luther’s view, had neglected this condition. By contrast, the political ideas of Dante and Marsilius were unmistakably parts of a late medieval Christian discovery of
Aristotle. But Luther’s early political writings, including the definitive *Temporal Authority*, are decidedly bereft of any engagement with the political ideas of Aristotle, with antiquity in general, or with the medieval age. Another distinction of Luther’s political writings was that his version of the typical “dualism” was hardly typical. Even a cursory reading of *Temporal Authority* reveals a scheme with a bit more complexity than Augustine’s “two cities,” and more theological simplicity than the “two swords” of many scholastics. Luther retained both distinctions, though as noted above, he did not always employ his terms consistently.

First, there was the distinction between the *Reich Gottes* or the Kingdom of God and the *Teufels Reich* or the Kingdom of the Devil. The parallels to Augustine’s two cities are clear enough; the subjects of each are known by whom they love and serve. As noted earlier, Luther used the word *Reich* in two major ways: it could refer to the kingdom God (or the Devil) ruled over, or God’s rule itself. In either case, their power and influence was inescapable: for Luther all human beings were subjects of one and thus contested by the other. The importance of these warring kingdoms for Luther cannot be overstated. He felt their immediate presence throughout his life, and considered the creedal and political conflicts of his age signs of their contestation.

Second, there was the distinction between the *geistliche Regiment* (the spiritual government) and the *weltliche Regiment* (the temporal government). Luther manifestly considered the spiritual and temporal regiments as instruments of the *Reich Gottes* on

---

51 There are over forty explicit references to Aristotle’s works (to say nothing of the paraphrases and echoes) in Dante’s *Monarchia*, Prue Shaw, ed. & trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 103-104. However, Dante seldom referred to Aristotle’s *Politics*.

52 Luther’s commentaries on Psalms 82 and 101 are notable exceptions.
earth. It was also a sign that God was continually active in the world both through the eternal redemption promised through the spiritual government and the provision of order and earthly needs through the temporal government. The two governments were continuing gifts from God; in restoring them to their rightful place, Luther believed he would resolve the theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century.

Luther did not base his restoration of temporal authority on his own speculation. Rather, he began where he most often did: he looked to Scripture. In *Temporal Authority*, a Biblical demonstration that civil powers were a divine gift occupies the prominent place in the first of three sections of the essay. “First,” Luther wrote, “we must provide a sound basis for the civil law and sword so no one will doubt that it is in the world by God’s will and ordinance.” At the outset of *Temporal Authority*, Luther cited two pieces of New Testament scripture. Paul in his letter to the Romans wrote, “let every soul be subject to the governing authority, for there is no authority except from God.” Likewise, the first letter of Peter advised that “every soul be subject to the governing authority.”

However, a major problem remained: temporal authority punished wrongdoing, yet many prominent teachings of Christ in the gospels call the faithful to non-resistance against evil, to love their enemies, and to “turn the other cheek.” This apparent conflict between the demands of the gospel and the necessity of temporal authority was not merely an erudite theological issue; it was at the heart of the sixteenth century crisis, and

---

53 See Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, pp. 43-45.

54 *LW* 45, 85; *WA* 11, 247.

55 Especially in the “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew 5:25 ff.
it quickly became a defining political problem of the early Reformation. According to Luther, defenders of the papacy’s authority over temporal power appeared to stress the demand for submission to all authority, rendering the demands of the gospel as “counsel to those who would be perfect.” At the same time, a radical call to either forgo all politics or transform political authority in the form of a new church was beginning to arise from some reformers such as Thomas Muntzer, or Luther’s onetime colleague at Wittenberg, Andreas Karlstadt and the Anabaptists. Between these poles were the princes and their subjects of the evangelical territories. Without good counsel, subjects saw themselves stuck between choosing obedience and revolt, and the princes between maintaining order and Christian duty.

Luther’s conception of the two regiments came directly from the fact that neither the advice of Paul to submit to authority nor the commands of Christ to turn the other cheek could be disregarded. The two regiments were the manifestation of two divine gifts, though seemingly contradicting one another, but in fact complementing each other as two distinct ways in which God directed human beings on earth. In the spiritual regiment, the gospel of Christ ruled; in the temporal regiment, God ruled through law and worldly authority and demanded obedience.

Luther’s great heresiographer Johannes Cochlaeus, like so many others in the sixteenth century crisis, considered Temporal Authority a ferocious attack on the

56 LW 45, 82; WA 11, 245.

57 Luther alludes to Anabaptist withdrawal from politics in Temporal Authority: LW 45, 91; WA 11, 251.

58 This appears to be the dilemma of John the Steadfast (1468-1532), brother of Frederick the Wise and his successor to the Electorate of Saxony, to whom Temporal Authority was dedicated. See LW 45, 81; WA 11, 245.
authority of princes. It was a work in which, Cochlaeus said, Luther “burned with such anger and raved with so abusive a pen against the secular authorities” because several princes had banned his German translation of the New Testament.\(^{59}\) Duke George and Elector Joachim of Brandenburg protested that the essay had attacked them and princely authority.\(^{60}\) Though these detractors would have opposed Luther anyway, their objections were not entirely without merit. \textit{Temporal Authority} in part appeared to edge towards a Christian renunciation of all political authority. Luther wrote that “Christians, so far as they themselves are concerned, are subject neither to law nor sword, and have no need of either.”\(^{61}\)

Yet, to summarize \textit{Temporal Authority} with such a line would seriously misrepresent it: at least a third of the essay was dedicated to affirming government as a gift of God, and arguing that all are subject to it. Moreover, to see it in such a light ignores its central role in Luther’s response to the theological-political crisis. Recalling the paradoxical “inner” and “outer” natures in human beings from \textit{Christian Liberty}, Luther’s distinction of the two kingdoms/regiments follows directly from his idea of human nature. No person was by nature a Christian or righteous, and thus throughout life on earth, even life in faith, each person remained a sinful creature that must necessarily be restrained, controlled and brought to order through temporal government. Christians insofar as they were Christians, had no need for temporal authority; but as sinful human beings, all people are subject to it to maintain an outward peace.

\(^{59}\) Johannes Cochlaeus, \textit{The deeds and writings of Martin Luther from the year of our Lord 1517 to the year 1546 related chronologically to all posterity}, Elizabeth Vandiver, trans., as in \textit{Luther’s Lives}, p. 113.

\(^{60}\) Martin Brecht, \textit{Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521-1532}, p.119.

\(^{61}\) \textit{LW} 45, 91; \textit{WA} 11, 251.
Luther emphatically argued that neither the spiritual nor temporal government was sufficient in the world without the other: “both must be permitted to remain; the one to produce righteousness, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds.”\textsuperscript{62} The two governments, properly respected, brought the two natures of human beings into harmony, for “at one and the same time,” wrote Luther, “you satisfy God’s kingdom inwardly and the kingdom of the world outwardly.”\textsuperscript{63} Thus Temporal Authority warned that failing to keep the governments separate, or to respect the importance of each, would lead to a spiritual and political crisis.

According to Temporal Authority, this was precisely what had happened in the early sixteenth century. Spiritual government had subverted temporal power. Scattered throughout Temporal Authority were references to the papacy, the Church hierarchy and the priesthood which in Luther’s view had assumed command of temporal powers in Germany. Essentially this charge echoed the ones made in earlier writings such as the Babylonian Captivity of the Church.

Temporal Authority also criticized the secular powers for their encroachment into spiritual affairs. Of course the banning of Luther’s German New Testament by certain princes was an immediate issue, which had also in part motivated Luther to pen Temporal Authority in the first place.\textsuperscript{64} But Cochlaeus’s accusation aside, Luther’s objection to this ban was more than a defence of his own translation, and more than a counter attack to

\textsuperscript{62} LW 45, 92; WA 11, 252.

\textsuperscript{63} LW 45, 96; WA 11, 255.

\textsuperscript{64} Luther alludes to the ban at the outset of the essay, and explicitly in the second part. LW 45, 83, 112, WA 11, 246, 267.
anti-reform princes. Luther’s objection was that the ban was a manifestation of secular authority wrongly exercising its powers in spiritual government.

Yet Luther’s objection was not based on an idea that the secular government, by its delving into spiritual government, had become too aggrandized. In fact, it was to the contrary: Luther believed that secular authority, by exercising any spiritual authority which it did not (by God) rightly have, was compromising its governance over its own proper matters, while threatening the work of the Gospel. Meanwhile the spiritual government was delving into secular powers and bidding the princes to execute spiritual affairs. Each government was swapping its ordained role.

For the princes, their erroneous gain of spiritual authority was an affront to the divine gift of temporal government. It was in Luther’s view a trespass against the divinely ordered two governments. The consequences of the trespass, Luther warned, would be catastrophic: it would incur the wrath of God. For temporal authorities who did not respect the bounds and duties of their offices, Luther wrote (paraphrasing Psalm 107) that God would pour contempt upon Germany’s princes.  

Luther supposed that God’s punishment to wayward secular rulers would come through a serf revolt or through an invasion by the Turks. In Luther’s view, there would be no way to avert it, “unless the princes conduct themselves in a princely manner and begin again to rule decently and reasonably.”

65 Psalm 107:40.

66 *LW* 45, 116; *WA* 11, 270. *Temporal Authority* preceded the Peasant Revolt by a few years. The Turks as a judgement of God was a familiar theme in Luther’s apocalyptic warnings; the idea had stirred some controversy in his *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* in 1519.

67 *LW* 45, 116; *WA* 11, 270.
Temporal Authority defined the limits and contours of secular government, and Luther believed these limits would help restore it to its proper place of honor and respect as something divinely ordered and sustained. He defined the jurisdiction of secular government as the “laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth.” Its foremost duty was to enforce the rule of law and to punish transgressors. Thus, for Luther temporal government had the divinely ordained power to use the sword and to execute earthly justice. Moreover, Luther argued, Christians could in faith and good conscience serve the temporal government; for whatever was essential to the fulfillment of government’s duties must also be divine service. Thus, “constables, hangmen, jurists, lawyers, and others of similar function,” insofar as their tasks and duties upheld temporal authority, were servants of God.

In limiting temporal government, Luther was liberating it. Having jurisdiction over “body” and “property” alone implied that secular authority could have considerable duties and responsibilities under its control. Against Canon Law, Luther argued that marriage, all taxation and education ought to be relegated to temporal government’s jurisdiction. Second and more importantly, Luther’s idea of temporal authority freed it both conceptually and practically from any submission to the authorities of the Church. Its authority and sanction did not depend on the graces of clerics, the approval of bishops or the donations of popes. Its power did not arrive through the mediation of the spiritual

---

68 LW 45, 105; WA 11, 262.
69 LW 45, 103; WA 11, 260-261.
70 On marriage, see The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, LW 36, 92-106, WA 6, 550-560; on taxation, see Luther’s letter to the Council of the City of Stettin (Wittenberg, January 11, 1523), LW 49, 25-28, WA Br 3, 13-14; on education, see To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools, LW 45, 339-378, WA 15, 360-378.
regiment. Divine sanction for temporal government, Luther believed, came directly from God. Thus Luther believed he was restoring government to a place of honor and divine purpose in an age of theological-political crisis, and Temporal Authority’s “two regiments” was at the crux of the project.

Ordained by God: the High Purpose of Politics

For Luther a restoration of temporal government to honour and divine purpose demanded a renewed emphasis on the authority of the Bible that had long been neglected and ignored. Throughout his career, Luther continued to defend the position that although temporal government did not impart redemptive grace, its purpose and origins were divinely ordained. For Luther, the consistency was not due to his own unwavering position on political matters, but to the consistency of Scripture, as he saw it, in affirming the high and honorable purpose of temporal government.

In his seminal lectures on Paul’s letter to the Romans at Wittenberg (1515-1516), Luther discovered the divine origin and purpose of government. Both the glosses and scholia provided significant commentary on Paul’s insistence (13:1) that the faithful were subject to governing authorities as these powers were instituted by God. In the glosses, Luther affirmed that obedience to temporal powers was the duty of every Christian: “Christians should not under the pretext of religion refuse to obey men,

---

71 Luther’s lectures were based on both his glosses and scholia. The glosses were interlinear and marginal textual notes; they were dictated verbatim to his students. The scholia were extended commentaries on various passages, and were prepared and written separately for his lectures. From what can be gathered from surviving student notebooks, Luther often departed from the scholia. For a brief and helpful introduction on his lectures on Romans, the glosses and scholia, see Hinton Oswald’s introduction to Volume 25 of Luther’s Works, ix-xiv. In a fascinating tale of Reformation scholarship, the original manuscripts of Luther’s lectures on Romans were not discovered until the early twentieth century, after centuries of being lost.
especially evil ones….”72 Through Paul, Luther believed that there was no government not ordained by God. Moreover, he agreed with the Pauline teaching that bad governments were simply those usurped and managed in ways not ordained, but were nevertheless under divine charge.73

The first letter of Peter also affirmed the divine source of temporal government. In 1523, the year that he had penned *Temporal Authority*, Luther authored a commentary on the small New Testament epistle. It contained in much more succinct and less expository form essentially what had been in the former essay. In the second chapter of the first letter of Peter, Luther believed that God ordained two kinds of government. Temporal authority was ordained for external rule, to curb sin, maintain order and promote peace. Service and obedience to temporal government was an expression of loving one’s neighbor.74

Later, when Luther realised the full scope of the theological-political crisis, his mature commentaries reiterated the solid conviction that temporal powers were ordained by God and thus worthy of honor. The *Commentary on Zechariah* was a prominent example. In the first chapter the minor prophet recalled a vision in which he sees angels whom God has sent to patrol the earth.75 Luther’s commentary gave an account of how God ruled the world by means of angels, but that this was only one part of a fourfold rule. Temporal authority, though “the lowest and the least of the rules of God” (behind God, the angels, and apostles and preachers), was nevertheless a gift of God to humanity for

72 *LW* 25, 109; *WA* 56, 123.
73 *LW* 25, 109; *WA* 56, 123-124.
74 *LW* 30, 73-81; *WA* 12, 327-335.
75 Zechariah 1:7-17.
the best purposes of life on earth. In this commentary, what comprehends temporal authority was expanded to include marriage and child-rearing, as well as the enforcement of law and the promotion of peace and order. Undoubtedly Luther interpreted the Book of Zechariah as a sharp criticism of sixteenth century political thought.

Luther’s restoration of temporal government sought to reform the relationship between rulers and subjects. Two views on this subject have prevailed. On the one hand, primarily based in his early writings, Luther has been seen as an advocate of complete obedience and submission to temporal authorities, and thus has been labelled as a harbinger of the absolutist state in early modern monarchies. On the other hand, Luther’s at first reluctant advocacy of armed resistance to imperial forces (post-1530), has led many to believe that Luther’s views on obedience to temporal authority were either incoherent, or had undergone a major alteration. Both views are mistaken. Luther never advocated absolute submission to temporal authority. But he had always maintained that civil authorities had no business ruling over souls and spiritual matters. Thus he could advocate civil disobedience against the ban of his German New Testament, and also himself disobey the Edict of Worms from 1521 to the end of his life. Over his

---

76 LW 20, 172; WA 23, 514.

77 This is the view of J. N. Figgis in Political Thought From Gerson to Grotius, 1415-1625.

78 As an example of the second position, Cynthia Grant Shoenberger argues that at the Torgau meeting in October 1530 Luther’s views on resistance to the emperor were “converted” and that thereafter came to embrace resistance based on constitutional and positive law, and even in the end natural law; “Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance to Legitimate Authority,” Journal of the History of Ideas, 40 (1979): 3-20. The most useful account of Luther and resistance remains in German: Eike Wolgast, Die Wittenberger Theologie und die Politik der evangelischen Stände (Gütersloh, 1977), but Mark U. Edwards’s chapter “The Question of Resistance” in Luther’s Last Battles, pp. 20-37 is quite insightful. See also Martin Brecht’s account of the crucial years 1530-1532 in the second volume of his Luther biography, Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521-1532, pp. 369-428, and W. D. J. Cargill-Thompson’s article “Luther and the Right of Resistance to the Emperor,” Church History 12 (1975): 159-202.
life and career, strong consistencies on subjects and their duties were maintained by Luther.

Writing to both rulers and subjects, and soundly based on the view that temporal government was a divine gift, *A Sincere Admonition By Martin Luther To All Christians To Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion* (1522) made it clear that rebellion against duly instituted temporal authorities was not permissible. Luther’s immediate concern in the *Sincere Admonition* was the growing resentment against the Church amongst the populace, and the increasing sense that several reformers in his absence had become violent or had begun to encourage open revolt against both church and princely authorities.  

As in his *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*, Luther at the time of writing the *Sincere Admonition* believed that princes and nobles would play a central and invaluable role in the reform of the Church. Furthermore, Luther also argued that the sins of the spiritual authorities had become so bad that the wrath of God was imminent. While the *Sincere Admonition* made clear that subjects were to obey the temporal authorities, in Luther’s thinking they were not without some recourse: they could “stir up the authorities to do something and to give commands.” Otherwise, their duty remained to obey. Even if the secular authorities were unwilling to act, Luther did not concede it as grounds for insurrection: subjects ought only to acknowledge their own sins, pray against the “papal regime,” and let their mouths become the mouths of God’s Word.

---

79 Luther was still living in an imposed exile at Wartburg. Before writing the *Sincere Admonition*, Luther made a secret visit to Wittenberg, disguised as “Junker George” to see firsthand the growing unrest.

80 *LW* 45, 61; *WA* 8, 679.

81 *LW* 45, 61; *WA* 8, 679.

82 *LW* 45, 65-66; *WA* 8, 681-682.
While *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can be Saved* (1526) did not counsel rebellion, armed resistance or insurrection, it did provide for an occasion for subjects to disobey temporal authorities. Luther affirmed that the office of a soldier was an institution of secular authority, and thus was divinely ordained to enforce law and promote peace. But the remainder of the treatise was centred on the justness of war. Luther differentiated between wars against legitimate government (which was always rebellion), and wars against other powers or principalities. To Luther, it was just to defend against rebellion but not for it; it was just to wage war in self-defence but not in aggression. The justness of a war hinged on whether it upheld or attacked the divinely ordained secular authority. The soldier was not to automatically trust the justness of the war he fought, for God was the source of justice, and a war could be an affront to this justice. Thus *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* allowed for the relinquishing of a soldier’s duties if a war was deemed unjust; but insofar as a war preserved the divinely ordained temporal authority, a soldier could perform his duties confident that he was fulfilling his earthly duties to God.

A subject could disobey, but he could never mount armed resistance to the duly instituted (and thus divinely ordained) temporal authority. This appeared to be Luther’s unshakeable position, until the Torgau meeting in 1530 when he reluctantly approved of armed resistance against imperial forces. The endorsement was hardly emphatic, and it was not without several complexities. As a pertinent example, Luther had previously considered the relationship between princes and the emperor as one of subjects to ruler; but he changed his view to make princes into political individuals with multiple and sometimes conflicting duties to their superiors (i.e. the emperor), and to divine, natural and positive law. Luther was well aware that his guarded concession to the armed
resistance of the “Lutheran” and “protestant” princes (as they had started to be known) against their Catholic opponents required some sort of public defence, and moreover the princes, notably Landgrave Philipp of Hesse, had encouraged him to write one as soon as possible.\footnote{See \textit{WA Br} 5, 651, 653-655.}

Luther’s answer to the demand was \textit{Dr. Martin Luther’s Warning to His Dear German People} (1531). It was hardly an enormous departure from his previous insistence that armed rebellion was illicit. Throughout the work, Luther argued that rebellion was in no way permissible to Christians lest they imperil their souls.\footnote{See for example, \textit{LW} 47, 13-14; \textit{WA} 30 III, 278-279.} To defend the principalities that allied against the emperor, Luther argued that resisting the imperial forces was not in fact rebellion. His argument was not a semantic ruse. First, acting contrary to law was not always rebellion.\footnote{\textit{LW} 47, 20; \textit{WA} 30 III, 283.} But more importantly, Luther argued that the aggression of imperial forces and allies was illegal. War against the protestant lands contravened divine, natural, and imperial law. For Luther the most blatant transgression of the imperial side was that the protestant principalities were being persecuted and warred against without any proper hearing of their positions, without any clear charge of their wrongdoings, and without any authoritative condemnations that their doctrines and actions had violated imperial laws.\footnote{\textit{LW} 47, 21ff; \textit{WA} 30 III, 284ff. Luther continues on for some length speaking about the shortcomings of the Diet of Augsburg and how well the protestant authorities had represented their positions and pushed for peace.} For Luther, armed resistance to the imperial forces was much more akin to self-defence than it was to rebellion or insurrection.
Thus Luther maintained that he had been true to his efforts to restore temporal
government to its divine purpose and place of honor, despite the appearances of
inconsistency over imperial resistance. *Dr. Martin Luther’s Warning* was essentially a
reiteration of the duties subjects had under temporal authority. A subject was to treat it
with the respect that it deserved as an ordained government of God. For Luther, the
emphasis on this duty and respect for temporal authority was one of the fruits of the
Evangelical gospel. To have complied with the pope and emperor would leave the
restored understanding of temporal government at great risk. Luther’s warning to the
German people against imperial aggression concerned more than the cause of spiritual
government; it sought to protect the gains the temporal regiment had made under the
reform movement.87

Luther’s restoration of temporal government from its dependence on ecclesial
authority and to its place of honor and divine purpose brought new responsibilities and
duties to rulers. His first extensive treatment of rulers was found in the third section of
*Temporal Authority*. It took the form of pastoral advice to princes who wished to be both
effective executors of their office and faithful Christians. As such, it was addressed to an
admittedly small audience: “who is not aware that a prince is a rare prize in heaven?”88
The remainder of the work outlined the ways of the good prince. Luther advised that a
Christian prince must give consideration and attention to his subjects and provide what is
good and useful to them. He must also guard himself against his counsellors, not trusting
in them fully, and he must remain wary of sycophants. He must be just in punishment

87 LW 47, 52-53; WA 30 III, 317-318.
88 LW 45, 120; WA 11, 273. Luther was apparently employing a proverbial expression.
and in war, defending against force by force, but otherwise secure peace. Finally, he
must act in a Christian way towards God.

Undoubtedly for Luther the Christian ruler was the best ruler: he would be most
apt to understand, honor and respect his temporal office as a regiment ordained by God
and would be least likely to corrupt it to his own advantage. Nevertheless, secular
authority, no matter under a tyrant or Christian saint, remained a gift of God. Thus
honoring pagan secular authority was also very much part of Luther’s restoration of the
temporal regiment.

Luther’s *Commentary on Psalm 82* (1530) made his position on tyranny and the
office of government very clear.

Would God that only faithful men had this office and administered it faithfully
and purely, and that it were not abused shamefully and hatefully! Nevertheless,
abuse does not destroy the office; the office is true, exactly as temporal rule is a
true and good office, even though a knave has it and abuses it.\(^\textit{89}\)

Honor was due to temporal authority regardless of who held office. This idea was the
essence of Luther’s restoration of temporal authority in the early sixteenth century, and
for Luther it was rooted in the Gospel. Previously, secular authority was subject to popes
and clerics; according to Luther, the spiritual authority had usurped the divine ordination
of temporal power.

Now, however, the Gospel has come to light. It makes plain distinction between
the temporal and the spiritual estate and teaches, besides, that the temporal estate
is an ordinance of God which everyone ought to obey and honor.\(^\textit{90}\)

This was not to deny that Luther saw wickedness in rulers and subjects alike, and
lamented their influence and hoped for the better. But on eradicating sin, worldly

\(^{89}\) *LW* 13, 49; *WA* 31 I, 196.

\(^{90}\) *LW* 13, 42; *WA* 31 I, 190.
government would make no progress, for “the people are too wicked, and the lords dishonor God’s name and Word continually by the shameful abuse of their godhead.”

Yet this reality did not erase the gift of temporal authority; for Luther, after the ministry of the Word, there remained in this world “no better jewel, no greater treasure, nor richer alms, no fairer endowment, no finer possession than a ruler who makes and preserves just laws.”

In his *Commentary on Psalm 101* (1534), a psalm which he claimed praised God for the secular authorities, Luther wrote that the divine origin of temporal authority knew no bounds of culture or civilization, and could be seen abundantly in the examples of pagan antiquity. At length, Luther discussed God’s work through the great, those whom the ability to govern and to discern natural law and reason allowed them to become great statesmen or else great political thinkers. These great people of temporal authority, such as Homer, Cicero, Cyrus, Alexander, Livy, and Aristotle were to be emulated and/or read for their excellent examples or wise reflections.

For Luther, pagan princes were not a major obstacle in the restoration of temporal government. There were, he thought, more immediate forces which imperilled the reformation of politics. The *Commentary on Psalm 101* revealed them. One threat had been an obvious foe from the beginning. The Church of Rome in Luther’s mind had treated secular authorities with contempt, usurped their duties and affairs, all the while

---

91 *LW* 13, 72; *WA* 31 I, 218.
92 *LW* 13, 54; *WA* 31 I, 201.
93 *LW* 13, 154-165, 199-201; *WA* 51, 209-215, 248-250. The *Commentary on Psalm 101* is more closely examined in comparison with Machiavelli in Chapter 6.
neglecting the spiritual regiment. But the other threat had arisen since the movement to reform began. Radical Anabaptist reformers would also have had the spiritual government rule the temporal; some of these “schismatic spirits” had shunned the gift of temporal authority altogether.

Against the radical reformers who had denied the need for temporal government (either withdrawing from society or ignoring civil authority), or else sweepingly altered political offices to conform to their doctrines, Luther defended temporal government, often coming to the aid of specific German territories or writing against certain cities that adopted their faith and politics. Luther combated the tendency of the radicals to spiritualise politics, and thus alongside the “papists,” their confusion of the spiritual and temporal regiments. The radical reformers drew few distinctions between the spiritual and temporal regiments: all things would be governed by what they considered to be the Gospel message and the commands of God either through Scripture or direct revelation. For Luther, this spelled the destruction of both church and government; such a mingling of spiritual and temporal authority would imperil souls and unleash disorder in the temporal world.

Luther’s writings on the Peasants’ War of 1525 revealed his objections to the politics of the radical reformers. There were many different causes of the uprising, and it was not without many scattered and piecemeal forerunners in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Yet primary cause of the 1525 uprising had to do with the abrogation

---

94 LW 13, 146; WA 51, 201.
95 LW 13, 146-147, 204-205; WA 51, 201-202, 246-247.
of ancient peasant rights by lords, nobles, and landlords (many of whom were bishops and abbots) who were under increased pressures (financial and otherwise) to centralize their control over their territories.\textsuperscript{97} In early 1525, a group of peasants from Upper Swabia summarized their demands in the pamphlet \textit{The Fundamental and Proper Chief Articles of All the Peasantry and Those Who Are Oppressed by Spiritual and Temporal Authority}, otherwise more briefly known as the \textit{Twelve Articles}. Overall, the \textit{Twelve Articles} was a fairly moderate document: it affirmed the necessity of government and taxes, rejected outright revolution, based its claims and grievances on Scripture, and called upon theologians and some secular authorities for their judgement.\textsuperscript{98} Yet what had began as a peaceful objection, soon became violent and bloody conflict spreading throughout several regions in Germany and Central Europe.\textsuperscript{99}

The peasants’ claim to be acting on Gospel principles was for Luther the radical reformation’s corollary to the same error of the Roman Church: the radical reformers, far from spreading the Gospel, were confusing the spiritual and temporal regiments, and were thus exacerbating the theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century. Luther’s \textit{Admonition to Peace, A Reply to the Twelve Articles of Swabia} took up the offer of the \textit{Twelve Articles} to criticize the Biblical basis for their grievances. Luther never denied that the peasants were suffering injustices at the hands of temporal authorities; in fact

\begin{quote}

\textsuperscript{98} An English translation of the \textit{Twelve Articles} is contained in \textit{LW} 46, 8-16.

\textsuperscript{99} Euan Cameron provides a succinct breakdown of the revolts by region in \textit{The European Reformation}, pp. 202-209.
\end{quote}
Luther considered the unrest part of God’s righteous punishment for the abuse of their authority. What Luther did deny, however, was that the peasants had any Biblical justification for revolt and rebellion against temporal authority. At the heart of his concern were the continued proclamation of the Gospel and the survival of the common good of society. Luther feared that revolt would destroy the temporal regiment and thus imperil the preaching of the Word, since in his thinking the temporal regiment was essential and complementary. The peasants’ appropriation of the Gospel for their own ends was erroneous and blasphemous, because in the name of God it called for the revolt against the institutions and authorities instituted by God. For Luther, such a contradictory position would only incur God’s wrath and judgment for the breach of divinely ordained spiritual and temporal authority, as well as prolonging the theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century.

As much as the Admonition to Peace had been sternly pastoral, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants was violent and reactionary. Yet in both writings Luther remained consistent in a vehement defence of temporal authority and intense opposition to those who challenged it. As Luther had learned from firsthand experience, the revolt had become openly violent and destructive. The peasants had violated their duties to obey secular authorities; they openly instigated rebellion, and most perversely, they were doing so in the name of God. Luther advised the secular authorities to take swift action. Even rulers with reforming sympathies, after prayer and

---

100 LW 46, 19; WA 18, 293.
101 LW 46, 49-51; WA 18, 357-358.
conciliatory efforts, ought in good conscience to unhesitatingly take to the sword, and
their subjects to willingly obey them in wielding it. ¹⁰²

Luther shocked many of his supporters with his harsh language in *Against the
Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*. The work was considered by many to have
encouraged the most heinous cruelty against the peasants by the secular authorities in
suppressing and crushing the revolt.

Let whoever can stab, smite, slay. If you die in doing it, good for you! A more
blessed death can never be yours, for you die while obeying the divine word and
commandment in Romans 13 [:1, 2] and in loving service of your neighbour,
whom you are rescuing from the bonds of hell and of the devil. ¹⁰³

Hence soon after it had been published, Luther was compelled to write *An Open Letter on
the Harsh Book Against the Peasants*, accounting for his infamous rant against the
peasant rebellion. Apologetic only as a defence rather than as a regret, *An Open Letter*
reiterated what Luther had argued in the earlier works: the peasants had no Christian
grounds to rebel and were attacking divinely instituted temporal government. Luther also
condemned the bloodlust amongst the secular powers, but again, this was not simply
based on general Christian principles. Luther’s criticism of the wanton cruelty of the
temporal powers in fighting the revolt was firmly based on his view of temporal
government as an institution of God worthy of honor and respect. Unequivocally, abuse
of the temporal office was sin, and that sin challenged the divine source of temporal
authority. But the greater challenge still came from the peasants. Their desire for mercy
after defeat was self-serving and unchristian: they mercilessly attacked and killed
temporal authorities, and now demanded mercy and clemency from the very princes they

¹⁰² *LW* 46, 52; *WA* 18, 359.

¹⁰³ *LW* 46, 54-55; *WA* 18, 361.

198
sought to destroy.\textsuperscript{104} For Luther, these radical reformers sought to rule the world by the Gospel via the sword, a plot that could only corrode the Word and subvert the gift of temporal government, all the while deepening the theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century.

Luther’s impetus for his political project was the same as it had been for his purification of the Church: the crisis of his age was both theological and political because Church and temporal government had become unmoored from their divine missions and purposes. In the realm of politics, Luther saw that the usurpation of political powers by ecclesial authority, particularly the papacy, had rendered temporal government ineffective and far from its essential mission of maintaining order in this life. Throughout his career as a Church reformer, despite apparent inconsistencies in his political views, Luther aimed at restoring honor to temporal government and delimiting its legitimate sphere of authority. From his early studies on Paul, to his late commentaries on the Psalms and Old Testament prophets, from his early attacks on the abuses of the Church and the paradoxical freedoms of a Christian to his late polemics against the “papists” and the radical reformers, Luther argued a political theory that he believed restored temporal government to its high, divine purpose against the abuses of his age.

Luther’s response to the theological-political crisis of the sixteenth century was to restore this divine purpose to government by bringing to light the political implications of his theology against the corruptions he perceived in his day. As one example among

\textsuperscript{104} LW 46, 70; WA 18, 391.
many, Luther gave a new theological anthropology: because a Christian was both perfectly free and perfectly dutiful, Luther affirmed both the justification of humanity by faith alone and the divine gift and necessity of temporal government on earth. Thus Luther aimed straight at resolving the crisis of the age by reforming Christian theology of justification from which he believed the Church and her authorities had strayed, all the while buttressing the divine yet autonomous purpose of temporal government.

Yet even though he had solidly grounded his political theory in his theology, his political response to the crisis of the sixteenth century converged with the political response of the Florentine atheist, Machiavelli. Like Machiavelli, Luther argued against medieval universalism in temporal government, utopian politics, or any withdrawal from or denunciation of political life. Like Machiavelli, Luther saw political reality as imperfect, limited, and morally ambiguous. In this convergence, Luther aimed to reform political thought.
CHAPTER SIX:

MACHIAVELLI, LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION OF POLITICS

Beneath Machiavelli’s claim that The Prince and the Discourses contained all he had learned and understood about politics and Luther’s claim that through his arduous rediscovery of grace no one since the time of the apostles had spoken so highly of government, was their common perception of a theological-political crisis enveloping their age, a crisis which beckoned a reconsideration of political thought and temporal government. For Machiavelli, according to the lessons contained in the practice of the ancients and his fellow Florentines, political reality was a world in which morality was often neither useful nor expedient for the founding or maintenance of government. Machiavelli’s art of politics sought to remove from temporal government theories of the best regime and replace them with a teaching based on this political reality. For Luther, his experience of the grace of God informed him that grace could never be realized in or through temporal government. Luther’s insistence, however, did not demand a dismissal of politics as sinful or ungodly; rather, it was an order ordained by God for preparing humanity for the reception of divine grace. Temporal authority for Luther pointed to the Kingdom of Heaven but it was ordained and governed independently of it. Thus Machiavelli and Luther each saw himself giving to government an independence and elevated status, salvaging it from the neglect of the age.
The sixteenth century had arrived at a theological-political crisis in part through its inheritance from the middle ages. Thus the characteristics of the crisis were not particularly novel or unfamiliar. The growing political disunity of Latin Christendom, the paradoxical power of the Holy Roman Emperor, the continued growth of the political power of the papacy, and the waning of the “two swords” and the philosophic doctrines which upheld a political and ecclesial dualism, combined in a particularly acute way by the close of the middle ages and the beginning of the Renaissance and Reformation. For Machiavelli and Luther, these characteristics were part of a broader problem of political theory.

Machiavelli rejected much of late medieval and Renaissance thinking about temporal government; for him these moral, ethical and metaphysical philosophies about the best regime or best life had obscured the essential and effective teachings about politics. For Machiavelli, the sixteenth century had lost the art of politics. The knowledge and lessons necessary for the founding and maintaining of regimes were neglected. Machiavelli found fault in several movements and institutions. More than any other intellectual or philosophic movement, Machiavelli criticized Renaissance humanism, often implicitly but sometimes explicitly, not only for failing to abate the political crisis of the age, but also for exacerbating it. *The Prince*, *The Art of War*, *The Florentine Histories*, and *The Discourses* each revealed in a particular way the loss of an art of politics, and the impotence of humanism to restore it. Machiavelli also took issue with Christianity. Though varying in degree and magnitude, Machiavelli’s works presented a persistent attack on the Christian religion and Church for what he deemed its destruction of political virtue and its pervading but obstructive ethic in political affairs.
Specifically, Machiavelli attacked the papacy as the foremost example of a problematic institution; it was so rooted in Christian morality that its involvement in the politics of Italy and the wider world could only obscure the sound knowledge and teachings necessary for the founding and maintaining of regimes.

Meeting the crisis of the age, Machiavelli sought to revive the art of politics. Through the examples of ancient and modern politics, Machiavelli taught the effectual truths necessary for the founding and maintaining of regimes. *The Prince* taught that a regime continually had to re-found itself; even in times of peace, a regime was in an emergent situation. Princes must cultivate political virtue and jettison the pursuit of classical moral virtues (although retain their appearances). The *Discourses* severed the origin of politics and the founding of regimes from an ordered, beneficent cosmos. All that was necessary to understand the growth and decay of regimes was discerned through political experience rather than other-worldly philosophy or religion. The *Discourses* taught that much of the art of politics resided in the ability of regimes to use and channel the ambitions of its people. Together, *The Prince* and the *Discourses* aimed to remove considerations of what politics ought to be, and present an art of politics based on, in Machiavelli’s thinking, political reality as it actually was.

For Luther, the crisis of the sixteenth century was experienced first and foremost as a crisis of faith. Luther’s early religious life and scholarly formation was preoccupied with the search for certainty of salvation and grace. Various influences from the prevailing culture and academic currents, along with Luther’s zeal and knowledge of Scripture brought him to his Reformation “discovery.” Sometime during his teaching tenure at Wittenberg, Luther developed his theology of justification by faith alone. No
sooner was his theology on justification crystallized than he began to see that a crisis of 
grace pervaded the Church. Theologies and practices (like the sale of indulgences) which 
obscured and even opposed justification by faith, brought Luther to increasingly question 
church authorities and the papacy. Luther’s criticism of ecclesial authority led him to re-
theorize temporal authority. Far from a theological afterthought or tangential concern, 
Luther saw his reform of temporal authority as a central part of his evangelical mission; 
heretofore politics had been corrupted by ecclesial authorities who had neglected its 
divine purpose for maintaining order, and Luther sought to restore it to its proper role.

For Luther, the restoration of temporal government was grounded in his 
theological anthropology which considered the place of humankind in relation to God and 
the devil. In Luther’s thought, though Christians were radically free and radically equal 
to others, human beings in the temporal world, Christian or otherwise, were subject to the 
sundry inequalities of this life and in need of restraint. Luther did not believe that the 
necessity of restraint through temporal government contradicted justification. He 
considered his conception of the “two regimes” – ecclesial and temporal governments as 
both part of God’s dominion – as a restoration of divinity in politics. For Luther the 
crisis of the sixteenth century had obscured the high purpose of temporal government; the 
encroachment of church government into the temporal, either through the Roman clergy 
and papacy or the radical reformers, had imperiled the divine purposes of both temporal 
and spiritual government.

Machiavelli and Luther’s political theories converged in their stance against what 
they saw as the inefficacious political teachings of the sixteenth century: humanism and 
especially the Church insisted that temporal government be subservient to authorities and
ideals that were outside what Machiavelli and Luther had determined was political reality. While for Machiavelli this reality was a political world beyond Christian morality and classical virtue, and for Luther it was a world duly separated from spiritual government but ordained by God. Although the political theories of Machiavelli and Luther converged, it would not often been noted that that is so. There have been very few comparisons of their political theories, despite their importance as political thinkers, and despite the fact that they, as contemporaries, lived through the same theological-political crisis. Moreover, the comparisons that do exist are wanting in either depth or substance. Many of them contain no more than a passing mention of some tenuous relationship, such as the claim made by German theologian and church historian Ernst Troeltsch, who briefly (but famously) noted that in Luther’s opposition to revolution and his “glorification” of authority “there were certain resemblances to the doctrine of Machiavelli.”¹ In his classic survey of sixteenth century political ideas, J. W. Allen devoted a chapter to each thinker but not only did he not directly compare them, he dismissed both men as political thinkers whose influence was exaggerated – an odd conclusion considering he had devoted so much of his analysis to their thought.²

John Neville Figgis’s *Studies of Political Thought From Gerson to Grotius* first substantially linked the political thought of Machiavelli and Luther. In the six lectures that comprise the book, Figgis sought to account for the rise of the modern state and thereby “bridge the gulf between the medieval world and the modern.”³ After the

³ J. N. Figgis, *Political Thought From Gerson to Grotius 1414-1625*, p. 3.
papalism and conciliarism of the late medieval age, but before the Huguenot and
Presbyterian apologetics, the rise of the Society of Jesus, and the Dutch revolt against
Spain (all of which for Figgis contributed to the development of the modern state), Luther
and Machiavelli represented two of the crucial pivots from medieval to modern political
thought. Luther’s place in the development the modern state was so pivotal that Figgis
argued “had there been no Luther there could never have been a Louis XIV.”

In Figgis’s estimation, Luther’s accomplishments were the rise of the territorial
state and the concomitant death-blow to the Holy Roman Empire. “The medieval mind,”
he wrote, “conceived of its universal Church-State, with power ultimately fixed in the
Spiritual head bounded by no territorial frontier; the Protestant mind places all
ecclesiastical authority below the jurisdiction and subject to the control of the ‘Godly
prince,’ who is omnipotent in his own dominion.” For Figgis, Luther’s political theory
“paved the way” for Hegel; his lasting contribution to politics was the sovereign
territorial state and the denial of any extra-territorial community or authority. For Figgis,
Machiavelli’s “greatest influence” was in international politics: against any supra-
national political and religious system, against natural law, Machiavelli urged a utilitarian
ethic based on territorialism in which “the State, i.e. Italy, [was] an end in itself.” Figgis
saw that Machiavelli made the exception, the extraordinary action of a government in a
time of emergency, into a rule of action. Thus Luther and Machiavelli figured highly in
Figgis’s account of the rise of the modern state: Luther’s ideas brought about territorial

4 Ibid., p. 81.
5 Ibid., p. 55.
6 Ibid., pp. 74-75.
omnipotence and Machiavelli’s political theory placed these states in an amoral state of nature. Both thinkers bolstered the theoretical foundation of the powerful state in modern politics.

There are several problems, however, with Figgis’s comparison of Machiavelli and Luther in the *Studies of Political Thought From Gerson to Grotius*. First, Figgis’s treatment of Luther was devoid of any analysis of his theology, and barely a mention of his doctrine of “justification by faith.” Yet the connection between Luther’s theology and his political ideas is indisputable. Figgis’s neglect of Luther’s theology skewed and overestimated Luther’s concern with politics; he attributed to Luther an impetus to political reform, paving the way to the modern state, apart from his reform of soteriology in the Church. Hence Figgis mistakenly argued that Luther’s opposition to the monastic ideal was “at least partly political”⁷ even though throughout his career the reformer consistently attacked monasticism for its teaching on justification and the standing of good works.

As an account of the development of the modern state, Figgis’s arguments on Luther and Machiavelli overemphasized the proto-state elements in their political theories and (understandably) underrepresented aspects of their thought that conflicted with theories of the modern state. Furthermore, Figgis’s search for the roots of the modern state ended up being a syncretism of very disparate elements: papalism and conciliarism, Luther and Machiavelli, the Jesuits and Dutch reformers, all in Figgis’s grand account contributed (most often unwittingly) to the broad transfer of authority from the medieval

---

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56. The political opposition to monasticism was much more applicable to the English reformers, particularly the defenders of the monarchy in the tumult after the Act of Supremacy in 1535, which signalled the beginning of the end – at least until centuries later – of monasticism in England.
Church to the secular state. Furthermore, Figgis’s chapter “Luther and Machiavelli,” though implying that there was something to compare between them, barely compared them at all. Luther and Machiavelli in Figgis’s thinking were separate steps in the secularization of political government. He did not distill their political ideas to find a convergence; in fact, other than their respective roles in his overall account, he never argued there was one at all.

In *Politics and Vision*, Sheldon Wolin attempted an apology for “political philosophy in its traditional form.” As a general defense of political philosophy against “those who were eager to jettison what remains of the tradition,” the book was a sweeping account of crucial persons and periods in political thought. Within this larger project however, Wolin forcefully argued that Machiavelli and Luther were a dyad of humanism and Protestantism that dissolved the common outlook of the medieval mind and served the cause of national particularism: “on the one side the contribution of Luther and the early Protestant Reformation was to depoliticize religion; on the other, that of Machiavelli and the Italian humanists worked to detheologize politics.” Thus Wolin’s use of Luther and Machiavelli in *Politics and Vision* was more than a simple exposition of important political thinkers; both played a pivotal role in Wolin’s narrative of the history of political philosophy.

For Wolin, Luther’s project of depoliticizing religion was manifested in his campaign against the Church hierarchy. Wolin argued that the Christian tradition

---


10 Wolin has recently published an expanded edition of *Politics and Vision* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), in which he adds many new chapters in twentieth century political thought, yet leaves untouched the previously written chapters on Luther and Machiavelli.
throughout the middles ages in its sacraments, systematic theology, and institutions, was infused with subtle political language; Luther’s reform sought to purge this language from the Church. Wolin saw in Luther a bias against institutions which had certain effects on both church and temporal government. In the church it had the effect of making Luther oppose monasticism and the papacy as “strictly human contrivings”; Luther’s anti-institutionalism, Wolin argued, caused him to neglect the importance of religious institutions as political restraints.11 On the side of temporal government, Wolin wrote that Luther, by depoliticizing religion, deprived the political order of moral sustenance, and thus furthered the political irrelevancy of Christian ethics. Wolin agreed with Figgis that Luther contributed to political absolutism and the rise of the state; however for Wolin, Luther’s bias against ecclesial institutions as political restraints contributed more to the rise of absolutism than any aspect of his positive political theory.

In *Politics and Vision*, Machiavelli’s thought represented an experiment in “pure” political theory. For Wolin, Machiavelli’s project was unequivocally part of the Renaissance’s “proliferation of independent areas of inquiry, each intent on staking out its autonomy, each concerned to develop a language of explanation suited to a particular set of phenomena, and each proceeding without benefit of clergy.”12 Machiavelli’s political science was about power; it was guided by what Wolin called Machiavelli’s “economy of violence.”13 Against the conclusion that Machiavelli was the father of totalitarianism, Wolin argued that his “economy of violence” was a new political ethic


which posited that violence and cruelty properly used, was in fact (given the realities and
necessities of maintaining regimes) the most humane and least destructive course of
action for a ruling prince or republican government. Wolin also credited Machiavelli for
“the discovery of the mass.”\textsuperscript{14} In his political thought, the people – as opposed to the
nobles or aristocracy – became the guarantors for the stability of regimes if the desires
and ambitions of the people were vented and satisfied. Wolin considered this indicative
of Machiavelli’s turn to modernity: he rejected ancient notions of the rule of the best or
the improvement of the soul in government and set about to use institutional
arrangements and warfare to curb factional conflict and maintain stability in regimes.

Wolin’s interpretation of Luther, and therefore of Luther’s relationship to
Machiavelli, was questionable, because the idea that Luther “depoliticized” religious
thought is not supported by his writings. Wolin argued that Luther attempted to purge
political language from religious discourse. Yet Wolin dichotomized what Luther never
separated: there was nothing in the reformer’s writings to suggest that “religious” and
“political” were incongruous categories, or at least conceptual worlds Luther wished to
separate. On the contrary, Luther’s political theory was undeniably founded on his
teology. Wolin claimed that Luther’s depoliticizing tendencies were found in his
concept of the two Kingdoms;\textsuperscript{15} yet he at once failed to distinguish the “kingdoms” and
the “regiments,” thereby equating temporal government with the Kingdom of the World.
Wolin also failed to see that Luther’s very use of “kingdoms” and “regiments” clearly
showed that the reformer had not purged political imagery from his “religious” thought.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 228-235.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 151.
Since Wolin’s interpretation of Luther was questionable, then so was his linking Luther and Machiavelli into a dyad serving the cause of nationalism and absolutism. His argument that Machiavelli and the Italian humanists worked to de-theologize politics was less problematic; Machiavelli rendered Christian morality and ecclesial institutions impotent in the new political science of founding and maintaining of regimes. Yet if Luther’s political theory did not depoliticize religion, then his role as the mirror-image of Machiavelli’s de-theologization of politics was incorrect, and thus his comparison of two thinkers was problematic.

Quentin Skinner’s two-volume *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, insofar as it concentrated on the political theories of particular thinkers, presented Machiavelli and Luther as two central figures in the beginnings of modern political thought. However Skinner claimed that his work would not focus on the writings and thought of certain thinkers. His work was to present a history of political ideas in the late-medieval and early modern period: “I begin in the late thirteenth century, and carry the story down to the end of the sixteenth, because it was during this period, I shall seek to show, that the main elements of a recognizably modern concept of the State were gradually acquired.”

Skinner wished to distinguish his work from what he called the “textualist” mode of political theory, which he faulted for not presenting genuine histories but only textual interpretations of the great political texts outside their historical contexts. Skinner’s method aimed to more closely link political behavior to political

---


17 Apt responses to Skinner’s criticism of the so-called “textualists” were made in the years following the book’s publication; see Nathan Tarcov, “Quentin Skinner’s Method and Machiavelli’s *Prince*,” *Ethics* 92 (1982): 692-709; Michael Zuckert, “Appropriation and Understanding in the History of
thought; he argued that scholars must grasp the ideological context of their authors in order to grasp what the authors were doing in writing great texts. More precisely, Skinner sought to interpret important texts, survey ideological formation and change, and analyze the relation between ideology and to the political action it represented. Thus Skinner’s analysis of Machiavelli and Luther placed its emphasis on the “social and intellectual matrix out of which their works arose.”

Skinner’s interpretation of Machiavelli was infused with his preoccupation with the intellectual context of the Renaissance. Against arguments that Machiavelli’s thought was radically innovative and *sui generis*, Skinner wrote that “the format, the presuppositions and many of the central arguments of *The Prince* make it a recognizable contribution to a well-established tradition of later *quattrocento* political thought.” Skinner’s Machiavelli was a critic of humanism for failing to emphasize “sheer power” and for accepting the conventional view of the virtues. A regime had to be ready to dispose with the moral norms when necessity dictated it. Alongside this critique of morality, Skinner noted that Machiavelli was deeply pessimistic about human nature. Yet even considering these departures from humanism, Skinner believed Machiavelli to

---

18 Thus his study of early modern political thought was founded on his original criticism of the conventional study of political philosophy; see Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory*, 8 (1969): 3-53.


be a fairly mainstream political thinker of the sixteenth century. He argued that it was necessary to see the *Discourses* as a “relatively orthodox contribution to a well established tradition of political thought” as a corrective to the interpretations that his outlook was *sui generis*.23

For Skinner, the key to understanding Luther’s political thought and his theology in general was his insistence on the complete unworthiness of humankind.24 By this insistence, Luther allied himself with the Augustinian worldview against the Thomistic. It also influenced Luther’s principle that would define his reformation: justification by faith alone. From this overarching principle in his thought, Luther derived two revolutionary ideas; first, a devaluation of the church as a visible institution, and the displacement of the priesthood as an intermediary between God and humankind. Skinner argued that the political ideas of Luther’s thought were implied from his theory of the Church; since he deprived the Church of jurisdictional powers, political powers were given much broader authority. The implications of Luther’s theology, Skinner wrote, meant that the “tremendous theoretical battle waged throughout the Middle Ages by the protagonists of the *regnum* and the *sacerdotium* [was] suddenly brought to an end.”25 For Skinner, Luther’s political writings embodied two principles of immense significance: the New Testament became the final authority on political and social questions, and that Christians were by Holy Writ required to submit themselves without qualification to governing authorities. Skinner argued that there were many “forerunners of


Lutheranism” which in part rendered his theological and political ideas so influential for so long over so many countries. But in the end Luther’s contribution to the foundations of modern political thought was for Skinner the encouraging and legitimizing of unified and absolutist monarchies.

True to his word, Skinner concentrated more on the “social and intellectual matrix” and the formation and change of ideology and convention than on a detailed analysis of the texts of Machiavelli, Luther, and other early modern political thinkers. There are several shortcomings to Skinner’s method of studying the history of political thought. One of the most basic objections has been that Skinner’s categories of the “textualist” and “social context” histories of political theory, two opposing and for Skinner misleading ways of studying political theory, were oversimplified types into which few historians of ideas and political theorists belonged. Skinner also inspired debates in the philosophy of history and language on the merits of his approach to studying political theory.

While Skinner’s survey of early modern political thought serves well as a sourcebook, there remain serious doubts whether The Foundations of Modern Political Thought gave a coherent interpretation of either Machiavelli or Luther’s political ideas. On Machiavelli’s The Prince, for example, Skinner equivocated on the moral implications of the meaning of virtue, rendering the significance of Machiavelli’s project

26 Ibid., Chapter 2, “Forerunners of Lutheranism,” pp. 20-64.


28 See the several critical essays in Tulley (ed.) and Skinner, Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics.
to be confused and unsubstantiated.\textsuperscript{29} As one critic wrote, “Skinner [interpreted] Machiavelli’s statements as either contributions to or critiques of traditions which Skinner [did] not otherwise show were Machiavelli’s concerns.”\textsuperscript{30}

What also failed in Skinner’s project was a basic, convincing account of Machiavelli and Luther (or any other major political thinker of the era), on their own or in tandem, as founders of modern political thought. Skinner entitled his work \textit{The Foundations of Modern Political Thought}, yet with his unrelenting accounts of the social and intellectual contexts and the formation and change of ideology, the thought of Machiavelli and Luther became less and less foundational: innovations in their thinking appeared in Skinner’s account to be more like aberrations in an otherwise ideological and conventional mishmash of political ideas from the middle ages to the early modern period. What made Machiavelli and Luther either founders or moderns was in Skinner’s account unclear. Moreover, any relationship between Machiavelli and Luther, despite a volume dedicated each to the Renaissance and Reformation remained obscure. Skinner’s method and the preoccupations with the relationships between the texts, the contexts, and the formation and change of ideology, cast doubt on whether there could be a solid intellectual relationship, let alone a basic convergence in their political thought at all.

These studies of early modern political theory had juxtaposed Machiavelli and Luther’s political ideas, sometimes providing points of comparison, but scarcely did they argue that Machiavelli and Luther’s political theories converged. In the works of Figgis, Wolin, and Skinner, Machiavelli and Luther’s political thought brought about absolutism

\textsuperscript{29} Tarcov, “Quentin Skinner’s Method and Machiavelli’s \textit{Prince},” pp. 702-709.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 708.
and nationalism, political theorists and the hallmark practices and institutions of modern politics. But Machiavelli and Luther were not said to have political theories which in a very basic and fundamental way converged. Yet their political theories did converge: Machiavelli and Luther perceived in common a political crisis enveloping their age which begged a reconsideration of the role and purposes of temporal government. For vastly different reasons, they gave to temporal government an independence from what previous ancient and medieval political theory thought it ought to be.

**Machiavelli and Luther: Contrasting and Approaching Ideas**

In arguing that Machiavelli and Luther’s political theories converge, there may remain a sense of incredulity: many general contrasts separated Machiavelli and Luther. Their works, writings, and style were quite dissimilar. They had different sources of ancient authority to which their writings deferred. Disparate intellectual influences laid claim on their thinking. Contrasting ideals of public service dominated their lives. More apparent was the contrast between Machiavelli the atheist (or at least the irreverent agnostic) and Luther the theologian. Their overarching concerns reflected this difference: Machiavelli was occupied with political power whereas Luther always had his eye on God’s grace and salvation. Naturally then, Machiavelli and Luther had contrasting views of the order of the universe and the place of human beings in it. Yet their thought began to coincide with their criticism of the Church and the papacy in politics; though between them there were differing grounds for this criticism, both considered the Church an inappropriate holder of temporal authority, and sought to sever it from wielding political
power. With this common criticism of the Church and papacy in politics, Machiavelli’s art of politics and Luther’s soteriology reached a rapprochement in political theory.

One contrast between Machiavelli and Luther quickly becomes obvious to even the most cursory reader of their writings: Machiavelli’s written opus was dwarfed next to Luther’s gigantic literary output. Machiavelli’s complete writings can be bound in a single volume whereas Luther’s comprise over sixty-eight separate volumes. Thus Luther was one of the most prolific writers of the early modern period. However, both thinkers exhibited the characteristics of sixteenth century men of letters: they both read, wrote, and spoke in Latin, composed in several literary forms in prose and verse, and created some of the most exemplary and formative classics in their own vulgar tongue. Both were excellent letter writers: much of their historically important correspondence survives and reveals personal sides to public affairs while showing their abilities to correspond in the manner of sixteenth century letter writing. Yet even though Machiavelli exhibited a wide range of written forms, Luther’s range exceeded his: the reformer wrote books, essays, polemics, tracts, philosophical disputations, letters, Biblical commentaries, Biblical translations, various liturgical forms, offices, services, educational materials, and even an impressive number of hymns many of which are universally known and used in all sorts of Christian churches around the world.

They were also vastly different writers. In his works, Machiavelli trafficked in ambiguity; his meaning was often concealed by the contradictions, ambivalences, and

\[\text{31} \text{ Compare Machiavelli’s Opere to Luther’s WA; while the WA is made of sixty-eight volumes, many of them are further divided into separate sub-volumes, and this is still not exhaustive.}\]

\[\text{32} \text{ E.g., the ubiquitous hymn most commonly known in English as “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” for which Luther wrote both the words and the melody (LW 53, 283-285; WA 35, 455-457).}\]
equivocations in his writings. The careful reader learns not to trust his words at face value. For Machiavelli, subtle words could have enormous implications; extreme words could be a ruse for another agenda more subtly played. Some interpreters of Machiavelli accuse him of using a “bait-and-switch” technique on his readers. Like his protagonist Ligurio in the play Mandragola, they argue that Machiavelli would propose a reprehensible position in order to warm the reader to a less extreme one that he would not otherwise grant.33 Luther’s style was very much the opposite: a sincerity pervades his writing regardless of his aims and audience. Even the most polemical and scatological works, despite the embellishments and rhetorical flourishes, convey the single mindedness of Luther’s reformation project. For Luther, his style was dictated by his calling, for the theology of justification by faith demanded clarity of words and singleness of purpose. Intentional ambiguity and duplicity did not just conflict with Luther’s style, but were alien to the project of the Reformation.

The writings of Machiavelli and Luther also differed greatly in their sources and authorities. Machiavelli’s works were well read in ancient pagan sources, especially the writings of ancient Rome. Luther’s constant source of authority was the Bible. Machiavelli and Luther also treated their authoritative sources quite differently. In the Discourses, a work ostensibly on the first ten books of Titus Livy, Machiavelli was often found adding details, omitting others, and making conclusions not otherwise found in his

33 The best example of the “bait-and-switch” technique in Mandragola was Ligurio’s co-opting of Frate Timoteo to join the campaign to seduce Lucrezia on behalf of Callimaco. Ligurio first asks the Frate whether he would help in aborting Lucrezia’s child with the assurance that her husband would give generously to the church (Act III, Scene IV). Only after Frate Timoteo agrees to this nefarious but false plot, does Ligurio use him in his true but “less burdensome, less scandalous” purpose: having the Frate, as Lucrezia’s pastor, convince her to have relations with Callimaco in order to conceive a child for her impotent husband (Act III, Scene VI).
ancient source. Machiavelli’s art of politics required taking Livy as his ancient cornerstone, only to construct a building different from Livy’s design.

For Luther, however, his reliance on Holy Scripture for so many matters theological, ecclesial, and political, was to expose it and revitalize its authority in the world. While for Luther the Bible was not identical to the Word of God, it was the Word’s authoritative vehicle. Insofar as Luther bound his writings to scripture, he sought to make them one with the Word of God as the gift of grace and the promise of eternal salvation. Machiavelli’s writings superceded their sources and authorities; Luther’s writings aimed to faithfully witness to the message of holy scripture.

Yet there also appears to be some similarity between the intellectual influences on them. Humanism figured highly in the formation of their thinking. For Machiavelli, humanism directed him to the study of the classical texts and the revitalization of ancient Roman politics as an example for emulation. For Luther humanism opened the doors for the study of scripture in Greek and in Hebrew, and thus unlocked theological insights that had become neglected and forgotten. Yet humanism was not an intellectual movement with a particular set of ideas about the world; thus its influence could claim the most disparate thinkers in various places and in various pursuits as its intellectual progenies.

Machiavelli and Luther had quite incongruous pursuits, and this fact points to the heart of how they essentially differed. Machiavelli’s life was dedicated to public service in advising political office, whereas Luther’s life was dedicated to divine service in caring for Christian souls. These pursuits were not merely different vocations, different calls to service for the ends of common human welfare, but rather different careers founded on incommensurate worldviews. Machiavelli’s service to political life was
founded, at least for most intents and purposes, on a point of view that, if it was not philosophically atheist, was practically so. Luther’s service to the cause of reform was founded on his solid convictions on a universe sustained by a loving and graceful God.

Thus Machiavelli and Luther had vastly different overarching concerns that permeated their written thought. For the atheist Florentine, these concerns were entirely of the political world. He taught the art of founding and maintaining regimes, exercising power, and gaining glory by great acts of statesmanship. Luther’s overarching concern was the salvation of souls. From his early career as a New Testament theologian at Wittenberg to a fatherly counsel of the princes in the newly called “Protestant” principalities in Germany, from his search for grace to the propagation of his reformation discovery upon a wayward Church, Luther was engaged with God’s promise of grace and salvation.

Machiavelli’s few comments on heavenly motions did not explicitly exclude an idea of God, though it was clear that the God and revelation of Christianity were not commensurate with his concept of the cosmos. In the second book of the Discourses, Machiavelli argued that the life of religions was between 1666 and 3000 years;\textsuperscript{34} the argument included a relationship of religion to cosmic laws and motions, yet was indifferent if not opposed to the possibility of transcendent truth in religion, certainly opposed to the claims of Judeo-Christian revelation. Further evidence is not hard to find: in the very same passage Machiavelli implicitly criticized the idea of divine creation and subtly bolstered the claim for a cyclical universe.

\textsuperscript{34} Discourses, 2, 5.
Machiavelli’s concept of *Fortuna* in his writings also sheds light on his view of the cosmos. Chance happenings only appeared to be chance but were to Machiavelli caused by *Fortuna*. Just as the heavenly motions governed the regular and predictable motions on earth, *Fortuna* for Machiavelli was the cause of things that apparently happen by chance or accident.\textsuperscript{35} According to Machiavelli’s writings, *fortuna* could thwart human designs (as in the case of Cesare Borgia),\textsuperscript{36} but it could also be challenged and subdued, for a time, by those who could be “less cautious, more ferocious, and command [*fortuna*] with more audacity.”\textsuperscript{37}

Thus Machiavelli’s concept of the cosmos was one fundamentally at odds with a universe governed and sustained by Providence. This was the cosmological contrast to Luther: for the reformer, the whole of the universe was created by and sustained by the loving God of Christian revelation. Yet to stay at this fact leaves one seriously short of understanding Luther’s concept of the cosmos. While for Luther God was the source of all things seen and unseen, there were other powers and principalities; though devoid of the power to create as only the Creator could, these were yet sources of great influence and power over the world. To Luther these powers and principalities, which rivaled the powers of God, were collectively known as the kingdom of the world or the kingdom of Satan. Like Augustine, Luther stopped well short of a Manichean vision of the cosmos by considering evil as ultimately a privation of good; nevertheless the cosmos – including

\textsuperscript{35} *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.
\textsuperscript{36} *Prince*, Ch. 7
\textsuperscript{37} *Prince*, 25, 101; *CW* 92; *Op.* 296.
every person in it – was the battle ground for the forces of good and evil. Thus did Luther see his own personal struggles with the devil as cosmologically significant.

Luther’s cosmology did not rely on the natural sciences. Though Luther did from time to time consider the motions of the heavens as indicators of the coming apocalypse, his writings generally ignore the study and philosophy of the natural world. The reason for this was not because of something inherently wrong with the sciences or their objects of study; rather, Luther considered the natural sciences as unreliable in the discernment of God or of human souls. One scholar succinctly put it, for Luther “nature would have been an important source for the knowledge of God were it not for the fact of human sin.”\(^\text{38}\) Sin obscured the nature of the cosmos rendering revelation as the only direct knowledge of God. For Luther, using natural science to discover or bolster cosmic truth was in the end fruitless: the desire for God and the fact of sin were written on every human heart. In this condition with an otherwise ineradicable disposition towards sin, yet a love and longing for God, human beings could only turn to the Word to see the nature of the cosmos. Thus Luther’s concept of the cosmos could not have contrasted more with Machiavelli’s universe.

The contrast of the atheist and the theologian becomes particularly poignant when the place of humanity in each vision of the cosmos is considered. For Machiavelli, unlike Luther, there was nothing supra-cosmic; more precisely, Machiavelli’s cosmos was limited to the world as human beings knew it and lived in it. Luther’s universe was comprised of obviously more than the here and now; indeed, God’s grace itself was the guarantor that there was existence beyond the present life in a transformation of creation.

Both sketches of the cosmos had direct bearing on what each thinker considered the ultimate purpose of humankind. For Machiavelli, purpose and fulfillment was wholly of this world in the founding, building, and maintaining of great regimes. For Luther, the purpose of humankind was found in communion with God, and although there were foretastes of this purpose in the ministry of the Word, it could only be truly fulfilled by God in the life to come. Machiavelli’s cosmos was so oriented that human beings with prudence and strength rise to greatness through politics; in Luther’s cosmos, the fulfillment of humanity was entirely at the discretion of God. Without God’s grace human beings for Luther could not but do evil.

The contrast between their cosmologies is illuminated by the starkly different place Satan took in their writings. In Machiavelli’s world, humans struggled with Fortuna, but in Luther’s world they struggled with the devil. In all of his writings, Machiavelli barely even mentions the prince of darkness. To be sure, Machiavelli’s “Exhortation to Penitence” urged men to cry to God for mercy on account of the foul and sinful condition of humankind: “we are deceived by lust, involved in transgressions, and enmeshed by the snares of sin and we fall into the power of the Devil.” But there the serious references to the Devil in the Machiavellian corpus ended. A few letters mention the Devil in passing. In his short story, “Favola,” or “Belfagor: the Devil Who Married,” Machiavelli poked fun (though common enough in Renaissance literature) at

---

39 CW 174; Op. 934.

40 For example, Letter 3 (CW 886-889; Op. 1010-1012) reporting to Ricciardo Bechi in Rome regarding the preaching of Savonarola and Letter 179 (CW 971-973; Op. 1203-1204) written to Francesco Guicciardini regarding Machiavelli’s tasks of dealing with the head of the Franciscan order for the Medici regime and finding a suitable Lenten preacher for a Florentine confraternity. In the latter, Machiavelli famously wrote that a corrupt Franciscan would make a fine Lenten preacher: “I believe the true way of going to Paradise would be to learn the road to Hell in order to avoid it.”
the conventional idea of Satan and his demons: Satan (named “Pluto” in his story) appeared as a just prince, Hell an organized principality, and Belfagor, a dutiful archdevil who investigated the claim that through marriage the female sex brought too many men to Hell.\textsuperscript{41}

Luther often mocked and made fun of the Devil. Indeed, his faith at times called him to taunt Satan: since Jesus Christ had conquered sin and death, Satan had already lost the ultimate battle, had already been condemned to eternal damnation, and was the prince of a pathetically lost cause. But for Luther the battle for souls in this world waged on, and his belief in an imminent apocalypse made firm his resolve. Satan could be mocked for his forgone condemnation, but he must not be underestimated. For Luther the spiritual adversary had powers of cosmic significance able to puncture the defenses of any man on his own. For Luther, this fact was all the more reason to turn to God; not only did He grant salvation to all who turned to Him, but granted protection against the daily assaults of Satan. It is not surprising that one of Luther’s most famous hymns witnessed to the protection of God in the cosmic battle against the Devil: it spoke to the heart of Luther’s personal struggles and his concept of the universe.

Our God He is a castle strong
A good mailcoat and weapon;
He sets us free from every wrong
That wickedness would heap on
The old knavish foe he means earnest now;
Force and cunning sly his horrid policy,
On earth there’s nothing like him.

‘Tis all in vain, do what we can,
Our strength is soon dejected.
But he fights for us, the right man,
By God himself elected

\textsuperscript{41} CW 869-877; Op. 919-923; cf. devils and Satan in his carnival songs, CW 878, 881; Op. 988, 991.
Based in their opposing cosmologies, Machiavelli and Luther developed respective criticisms of the role of the Church and papacy in temporal government. For Machiavelli, the political roles of the pope and Church were incommensurate with a cosmic order in which the *summum bonum* of human beings was worldly glory in politics. The Christian religion claimed that the *summum bonum* of human beings was communion with God, a foretaste of which could be found in the sacraments of the Church and the graces of God in this life, yet would be experienced in full in the life of the world to come. Thus the pope and the Church made claims for a transcendent highest good for human beings. Machiavelli concluded that such claims to a transcendent good devalued politics, and therefore when the pope and the Church wielded temporal authority, they would neglect the art of founding and maintaining regimes with the ends of worldly glory. Machiavelli did not deny that certain popes or ecclesial principalities would excel in worldly glories; in his day there were certainly many examples of ecclesial successes in temporal government. But Machiavelli claimed that where this occurred, it had certainly not happened through the merits of Christian religion and virtue, but through the practice of the art of politics.

Luther’s objection to the role of the Church and the papacy in temporal government was based in a cosmic order in which a merciful God bestowed grace on humanity. In Luther’s view, the mission of the Church and of the Bishop of Rome was to safeguard souls for Christ and proclaim the Word of God, by means of sacrament,

42 *LW* 53, 284-285; *WA* 35, 455-457.
teaching, and example. In Luther’s view, a Church or pope wielding temporal power was simply failing its divine purpose: at best the worldly Church and pope were guilty of sloth by hearing the Word but neglecting it; at worst, a worldly Church and pope were leading the flock to Hell.

So their respective criticisms of the Church in temporal government seem at first far apart. Focusing on their objections to the pope as a ruler of temporal government, one might be inclined to agree with Sheldon Wolin’s summary of the Machiavelli and Luther positions.

Other criticisms of the papacy, such as Marsilius and Luther, had stigmatized it for being too political; but Machiavelli’s charge was that it was not political enough to warrant the attention of political theory.\(^{43}\)

Yet Wolin’s statement misleads us on the political ideas of both thinkers. Machiavelli clearly believed the papacy deserved the attention of political theory, or else the papacy would not have occupied so much of his attention in the *The Prince* and the *Florentine Histories*. For Machiavelli, the political successes and failures of the popes revealed both the necessity for the art of founding and maintaining regimes, and the incompatibility of Christian religion and virtue with political glory. Luther’s first and most important criticism of the papacy was not that it was too political, but that its neglect of the Word had imperiled souls. Moreover, Luther could be said to agree with Machiavelli: the ministry of the Church and papacy was incompatible with the exercise of temporal government.

Thus Machiavelli and Luther’s criticisms of the Church and papacy in politics ended in a convergence of political theory. Distinct from many of the thinkers of their

day, Machiavelli and Luther’s objections to the Church and pope were not first and foremost against the corruption of the clergy. Consider the words of one prominent contemporary, Guicciardini: “I know of no one who loathes the ambition, the avarice, and the sensuality of the clergy more than I – both because each of these vices is hateful in itself and because each and all are hardly suited to those who profess to live a life dependent upon God.”

Machiavelli and Luther agreed with the sentiment of Guicciardini’s complaint; however, the corruptibility or rascality of the clergy per se was not at the core of their objections. Machiavelli and Luther’s complaint against the Church and the papacy was that they would inevitably fail to execute the offices of temporal government. Machiavelli and Luther based this position in convergent political theories.

The rapprochement of the political theories of Luther and Machiavelli began with Luther’s consideration of the status of political action with respect to eternal salvation. For Luther, just like all actions of human agency, political action could not itself attain divine grace. Motivations and consequences to all political actions were in some way tainted with sin, and thus could not possess salvific power for humankind. Yet political action, or at least the maintenance of temporal government, was to Luther divinely ordained: human beings, though unable to merit salvation by their own accord, nevertheless needed the immanent graces of temporal government as they lived in this world. Temporal government not only kept order and defended freedoms, it also

---

44 Francesco Guicciardini, *Maxims and Reflections (Ricordi)*, Mario Domandi, trans. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985): p. 48. In this same section Guicciardini admits sympathy for Martin Luther: “In spite of all this, the positions I have held under several popes have forced me, for my own good, to further their interests. Were it not for that, I should have loved Martin Luther as much as myself – not so that I might be free of the laws based on Christian religion as it is generally interpreted and understood; but to see this bunch of rascals get their just deserts, that is, to be without vices or without authority.”
provided for the eternal salvation of souls by maintaining the conditions in which the
Word of God could flourish.

Via soteriology, Luther arrived at his understanding of political reality. Temporal
government was neither morally neutral, for it provided for the Word, nor was it morally
perfectible, thereby itself meriting divine grace. For Luther political reality was not an
order of grace; it stood against any political Messianism which promised salvation
through temporal government, and the political thought of the medieval world which
rendered government sacramental, i.e. infused with grace and the Word. Luther’s
understanding of political reality eliminated all soteriological elements within it. Thus he
rendered the role of temporal government negative with respect to eternal salvation: it
curbed hindrances to the work of the Word of God in salvation. Yet for Luther this did
not mean that political government was subservient to the Church, far from it: temporal
government adopted a positive and robust role in the maintaining of peace and order,
independent from ecclesial authorities. It retained cosmic significance in that it was
divinely ordained, but remained in service of the temporal world. So too was
Machiavelli’s view of political reality: though there was no provision for the Word of
God, Machiavelli’s temporal government was entirely of the temporal world, an order
without grace. All other considerations of politics were self-deception, as political reality
was a realm which was not perfectible.46

45 See the concise and insightful article by Peter L. Berger, “Lutheran Ethics and the Ambiguities
of Power” in Karl Lindberg, ed., Piety, Politics, and Ethics: Reformation Studies in Honor of George
Wolfgang Forell (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Northeast Missouri State
University, 1984): 75-84.

46 Ibid., pp. 80-81.
The Convergence of Machiavelli and Luther’s Political Thought

Machiavelli and Luther commonly recognized a problem in the political thought of their day: the ordering of temporal government was dominated by ideas which were detrimental to its very purpose. For both Machiavelli and Luther, these ideas were Christian, usually imposed by the Church authorities, but sometimes imposed upon politics by dissenting clergy and laity. Though for ultimately very different reasons, the political thought of both men converged in the effort to purge temporal government from the influence of what many Christians believed to be its role and purpose.

Machiavelli and Luther agreed that the role and purpose of temporal government was of this world. Government took the temporal world as a given; there was no cosmically reformative nor restorative project to the task of governance. Machiavelli and Luther agreed that temporal government dealt wholly with the world as a given and not with the world as, according to politically prominent sixteenth century versions of Christian theology and morality, it could be made to be.

For Machiavelli and Luther’s political theory to accept the world as given, without intentions to reform it or restore it to some better state, meant that both of them considered the shortcomings of human beings – their sin and vices – as constant factors in the founding and maintaining of regimes. For their political theory, sin and vice were calculated into the role and purpose of government, without the hope and aspiration of eradicating them with good laws or escaping them with a political order populated by saints segregated from a sinful world. For both thinkers, temporal government could not deny that human beings could and would be bad, for the key purpose of government was to control and curb the destructive acts of its subjects.
Political thought up to Machiavelli and Luther’s time did not contest this role of government. But behind the political claims of the papacy and of the Holy Roman Emperor alike was the idea that temporal government was part of a catholic whole of Christian civilization in which political authorities, though subservient in spiritual authority to the Church, were nevertheless parts of a universal government, both spiritual and material; though often fractured in jurisdictional disputes, temporal government was in a concerted campaign to save souls. Even though stark distinctions between ecclesial and temporal authority were often made, such as in the imperial apologies of Dante’s *Monarchy* or Marsilius’s *Defender of the Peace*, they did not shed this catholic purpose of temporal government; the very fact of their support for the imperial claim to temporal power located these political thinkers well within a medieval universalism in which temporal government was a part of a catholic civilization.

The political claims of the papacy in the early sixteenth century underscored the idea that temporal power was a subservient part of the catholic mission of the Church. Pope Julius II exemplified this perspective in his efforts to restore stability to the papacy. For Julius, the political strength of the papacy and the strength of the Church and its mission were one and the same; hence Julius’s campaign to consolidate the papal states, halt ecclesial nepotism, and play the role of a foreign power broker in Italy were to the Church commensurate with efforts to restore the spiritual authority of his office. The same relationship held true for the restoration of Rome as a pre-eminent city and seat of power in the Renaissance: though the system used to finance Rome’s restoration in a large way precipitated the spiritual crisis of the Reformation, the ends of the Roman restoration were not only to beautify Rome but to build the papacy to a spiritual and
political pre-eminence so that the Church’s mission in the world would be strengthened and restored.

Machiavelli and Luther vehemently disagreed. For Luther, the Church’s mission was in jeopardy: in his thinking it had granted salvific powers to human efforts while neglecting the Word of God. In terms of political theory, however, Machiavelli and Luther agreed that the political claims of the Church and papacy to temporal power, or even the claims of the Holy Roman Emperor, were anathema to the purpose of temporal government. Adjoining the role of temporal government to the catholic mission of the Church damaged its effect in the world, distancing it from what Machiavelli and Luther deemed its true role and purpose.

As opponents of any political theories which did not accept the world as a given, Machiavelli and Luther also stood against the sixteenth century’s two political extremes: any utopian politics which saw temporal government as the vehicle for salvation or the perfection of this world, or any withdrawal from the world so as to purify the political community or else denounce temporal government altogether. Machiavelli’s stance against asceticism has been discussed above. He argued throughout his major works of prose that Christian asceticism or denial of the world had huge consequences for politics; it was one of the major contributing factors in the weakening of Italy and its plundering by foreign – and Christian – powers.

Yet Machiavelli also opposed utopianism that sought to render politics as a salvific vehicle or to reform political order such that sin would cease to be a factor in the government of the regime. Witness Machiavelli’s treatment of Savonarola in his writings. Though Savonarola’s political ideas and influence significantly aided in the
establishment of republican rule after the fall of the Medici regime in the 1490s, he nevertheless became the father figure in the efforts to establish a Christian regime in Florence. Since his arrival in Florence in 1489, and his preaching career from its early days at the monastery of San Marco to the largest churches in Florence, Savonarola denounced the corruption of the Church and her clergy, the sins of Italy, and also the rule of tyrants (implicitly including, until their exile, the rule of the Medicis). Savonarola warned of an impending judgement against sinners in the Apocalypse, and called Florence to rebuild its regime on its republican roots and Christian virtue.

Machiavelli’s letter of March 9, 1498 remains the earliest of his surviving written words on Savonarola. It was written as a report to a Florentine diplomat to the Holy See, and it was also a first-hand account of the preacher before his execution. What is striking about Machiavelli’s letter was how he believed Savonarola to be ambitiously and essentially partisan. The apocalyptic warnings, the condemnations of corruption, and the calls to reform were to Machiavelli a thin guise for Savonarola’s partisanship. It was evidenced most clearly when the preacher, after learning that he no longer faced opposition from the Florentine Signoria, “changed his cloak,” dropped the condemnations of his local opponents, and tried to set Florence against the pope.

In The Prince, Machiavelli used Savonarola as the example of the unarmed prophet, a man who was ruined because “he had no mode for holding firm those who had believed nor making unbelievers believe.” In the Discourses, Machiavelli’s picture of

47 CW 886-889; Op. 1010-1012.

48 CW 889; Op. 1011.

49 The Prince, 6, 24; CW 27; Op. 265.
the preacher was similar to his letter. Savonarola’s “ambitious and partisan spirit” was shown in his refusal to support condemned men who wished to appeal their convictions to the Signoria on the basis of a law which Savonarola himself had instituted. Whether he was a man of God, Machiavelli claimed not to judge; but undoubtedly his Savonarola was a partisan and imprudent leader.

Machiavelli’s treatment of Savonarola contained his criticism of utopian politics. Savonarola could preach salvation and attempt to perfect and purify the city of Florence, but he could not succeed on the vision of a better polity or the moral calling alone: like any other prince Savonarola needed to have virtù, the art of founding and maintaining regimes. Machiavelli observed that the preacher, despite his claims to divine favour, could not avoid being partisan; yet Savonarola’s downfall according to Machiavelli was his belief that he could lead Florence as a spiritual and political father without being a clever and prudent prince. He could not, for “men are born, live and die in the same order.” For Machiavelli, Savonarola’s utopian vision had obscured his view of political reality and ultimately led to his downfall.

Luther’s stance against the political extremes of the early sixteenth century equalled Machiavelli’s. As in the case of Savonarola for Machiavelli, the political extremes that Luther met were at once theological extremes. The utopian politics of Thomas Munzter the peasant rebellions rejected legitimate political authorities and adopted radically immanent theologies that promised to usher in the Kingdom of God on

50 Discourses 1.45, 93; CW 289; Op. 127.
51 Discourses 1.11, 36; CW 226; Op. 94.
52 Discourses 1.11, 36; CW 226; Op. 95.
earth. On the other end of political extremes, the strongest defenders of the monastic life and any denial or escape from the political world adopted theologies which denied divine sanction to temporal government and laws. To Luther such extremes destroyed temporal government and imperilled souls with unsound theologies: they mixed the roles and ends of temporal government and the Word of God.

Yet Luther was a fierce defender of both the Word as he saw it, and temporal government. So strong was his vigilance, that it was extended to ideas and movements which were to have far less political or ecclesial effect than the Peasant Revolt of 1525. Consider the antinomian controversy late in Luther’s life.⁵³ The source of the controversy was a scholar under his wing at Wittenberg, John Agricola, who held that the demands of the law were null and void since the Christian was justified and taught by the gospel of Jesus Christ. For Luther, the political implications to his doctrine were obvious: temporal government would be instituted to maintain order but it would cease to have divine purpose and sanction. As he saw it, law would cease to do anything but countenance sin, both on the part of the law-breaker, and its enforcer. Hence Agricola’s position was called “antinomian.”

Luther countered the “antinomian” position in various tracts and disputations. The most widely known work was his Against the Antinomians published in January, 1539.⁵⁴ In it Luther argued that through law – enforced by temporal government but also written on the hearts of men – came knowledge of sin. Only with knowledge of sin could

---

⁵³ See Brecht, Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532-1546, pp. 156-171.

⁵⁴ LW 47, 99-119; WA 50, 468-477.
the Word take hold. Thus, law and temporal government could not be possibly eliminated: both good government and eternal salvation depended upon it.

Though the antinomian controversy was relatively small and short-lived compared to Luther’s many other battles, it illuminates his constant vigil for attacks on his theology of justification and his political theory. Like Machiavelli’s objections to Christian asceticism and Savonarola’s political vision, Luther objected to the political extremes of the growing and increasingly unwieldy European Reformation, extremes which threatened to not only batter Luther’s fortress of justification by faith, but also his robust apologies for temporal government.

It was on the nature of political reality that the thought of Machiavelli and Luther came to striking agreement. Just as both had stood against the domination of temporal government by the Church and the extreme politics of the early sixteenth century, both Machiavelli and Luther came to see political reality as a world characterized by imperfection and limitedness; a world which, without being intrinsically evil, nevertheless necessitated force and coercion and was often morally ambiguous.

Imperfection was a governing principle of temporal government in the political thought of Machiavelli and Luther. Politics was not the locus of salvation, nor was it the means of perfecting the human condition on earth. Thus Machiavelli and Luther’s political thought stood between many medieval attempts to render temporal government an extension of the Church militant or the early modern attempts at achieving a perfectly crafted state that would give freedom and security to its subjects. For Machiavelli and Luther, vain was any hope invested into politics that sought eternal ends such as the nurturing of the soul.
Yet this imperfectability in politics did not mean for either Machiavelli or Luther that temporal government was hopelessly mired in the sins and foibles of humankind. On the contrary, temporal government was identified by them to be a realm wherein a regime well-founded and maintained could aim for and obtain a worldly greatness. As they understood it, political reality dictated that the perfection of such a regime was impossible, and thus utopian visions of its success vain, but at the same time a great regime was both achievable and desirable. Temporal government could not alter human nature, but it could impose order upon a world that humanity rendered otherwise chaotic, and in building this order achieve a worldly greatness.

Machiavelli and Luther’s political thought basically agreed on the limited role and purpose of temporal government. This common sense of the limitedness of government was ambivalent: they theorized that temporal government had no place aiming at eternal ends, such as the nurture and salvation of the soul, yet this limited purpose was at once a liberation from the limits of politics imposed by much of medieval political and ecclesial thought. Generally for medieval political thought as Machiavelli and Luther saw it, temporal government had played a subservient part in a catholic mission to save souls and sacramentalize the world in a Christian empire; Machiavelli and Luther severed politics from this catholic mission, and donated to it a limited but great purpose in the temporal world.

For Machiavelli, the ambivalence in the limitedness of temporal government was expressed in his campaign to impart an art of politics. The practise of virtù in the founding and maintaining of regimes in Machiavelli’s writings necessitated a dismissal of the humanist and Christian attitude that politics was either incorrigibly stained with the
sins of the world, or that it was a subservient part of the Church militant’s dominion on earth. In Machiavelli’s thinking, humanism and Christianity destroyed the art of politics by imposing a moral purity and spiritual end upon temporal government that could not be met. Machiavelli shattered these impositions on temporal government, and thus liberated it, by limiting its aims to worldly ends. Thus in Machiavelli’s greatest works of prose, the texts were devoid of words such as “soul” or “salvation.”

Luther’s political theory shared in this ambivalent limitation of temporal government. Luther first argued and later helped institute a politics liberated from serving the ends of the Church and papacy by limiting the role and purpose of government to the temporal world. Unlike Machiavelli, Luther’s political writings (much like his entire corpus) were covered with theological language and an unyielding concern for the eternal fate of souls. Yet Luther’s theory of temporal government was emphatically divorced from any salvific role and purpose. As he made so abundantly clear in both early writings such as Christian Liberty and Temporal Authority or later ones such as Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved, temporal government had no business in salvific ends. For altogether different reasons, he agreed with Machiavelli that the salvation of the soul had no place in temporal government.

Given the imperfectability of politics and the limited nature of temporal government, Machiavelli and Luther also shared a major practical consequence of this political reality: their political thought demanded a political realism that admitted to the necessity of frequent morally ambivalent actions in government. This political realism taught that justice could not be meted out by human hands, even if, as in the theology of Luther, those human hands were directly executing divine will and purpose. Thus the
limitedness and imperfectability of temporal government taught that its own justice was limited and imperfect, and so the exercise of temporal government would at times be morally ambivalent.

In Machiavelli’s political thought this fact of temporal government was obvious; he made no equivocation that the best founding and maintaining of regimes often attacked Christian and classical moralities. Machiavelli’s teaching on morality in politics was extreme; *The Prince* and the *Discourses* were littered with the political fruits of vices well used and exercised. Machiavelli’s consequentialist ethic argued, for example, that the vicious but timely acts of a prince in the founding of a principality prevented the otherwise inevitably more vicious acts in the future. Considering Machiavelli’s technique of the “bait and switch” in his writings, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether he wholeheartedly endorsed these vicious acts necessary in political foundings, or else was challenging his audience to adopt less offensive vices, by presenting the extremes. At the very least, Machiavelli’s political thought remained wholly against utopian or perfectionist politics: the exercise of temporal government required actions that were at times morally ambivalent.

For Luther, temporal government could not be redemptive, though it was obvious to him that this fact did not mean that politics was inherently sinful. Sin was high on the agenda of temporal government: it was the government’s task to make order of a chaotic and sinful human world through the rule and enforcement of laws. Temporal government played a negative role with respect to salvation by making possible the conditions in which the Word of God would be sowed, grown, and harvested. For Luther, worldly justice was the end of temporal government. Though meting this worldly justice was a
divinely sanctioned duty, temporal government could for Luther never with complete confidence know that the justice meted by temporal government was one with God’s eternal justice and judgement. To claim so was to incur blasphemy, for it meant that the divine command of instituting worldly justice had been appropriated by human beings as a call to institute eternal justice. For Luther this eternal justice was God’s alone, ultimately unknowable and indiscernible in this world save for the illuminations given by Scripture and the sacraments. Hence for Luther even in the most righteous of projects, the actions of temporal government could be morally ambivalent without breaching God’s sanction for it. On some matters pertinent to politics and law, Scripture for Luther was clear; yet in other matters where Scripture was not, temporal government maintained order with an unbridgeable distance – at least to human devices – from divine justice.

The necessity of force and coercion in temporal government serves as an illustrative example of moral ambivalence in the convergent political theories of Machiavelli and Luther. These were unavoidable and necessary tools of temporal government. Furthermore, their use did not for Machiavelli or Luther bring temporal government into moral disrepute. For Machiavelli, the use of force and coercion both internal and external to a regime was an integral part of founding and maintaining it. Force for Machiavelli had to be used wisely, for this virtù was essential to the consequences of his art of politics; for “with very few examples he will be more merciful than those who for the sake of too much mercy allows disorders to continue.”55 For Machiavelli the detractors against the necessity of force and coercion, such as Christian

55 The Prince, 17, 65; CW, 61; Op. 282.
ascetics or humanism’s moralists, imperilled regimes and risked more violence by ignoring an essential part of political reality.

For Luther, force and coercion were both an utter necessity and a divine sanction in temporal government. Unlike other medieval Christian political theorists, Luther did not base the necessity of force foremost in natural law. Rather, Scripture for Luther demanded that the powers of the sword be given to the political authorities, and its exercise throughout the Bible was commonplace. For Luther, the necessity of force for temporal government was patterned after God’s paradoxical love as revealed in Scripture. In the Hebrew Bible, for example, God punished His chosen people for their iniquities, only for these punishments to be accompanied by God’s yearning love and forgiveness. So too was temporal government like the judgement and mercy of God: the use of force and coercion to maintain order was an expression for the love of humankind, such that at its best this use of force in the securing of worldly goods would provide for the seeds of the Word to be sown. Just as God’s harsh judgement and boundless mercy were part of the paradox of God’s love, temporal government’s use of force and coercion were to Luther essential tools in its divinely sanctioned but sometimes morally ambiguous actions in the world.

Machiavelli and Luther reacted to a “theological-political” crisis in the early sixteenth century. This was above all a crisis of political theory: to the detriment of temporal government, the ideas about what politics ought to be had obscured what the reality of politics was. In response, both Machiavelli and Luther looked to experience to determine the reality of politics. For Machiavelli, according to the lessons of the ancients
and his own Florentines, political reality was a world in which traditional morality was
often neither useful nor expedient for the founding and maintenance of government.
Machiavelli’s art of politics sought to remove temporal government from theories of the
best regime to a teaching based in this political reality. For Luther, his experience of the
grace of God informed him that political reality was not an order of grace: it could never
be realised in or through temporal government. This insistence, however, was not for
Luther a dismissal of politics as sinful or ungodly; rather it was an order ordained by God
for preparing for the reception of divine grace.

Machiavelli and Luther’s convergent responses to the theological-political crisis
of the sixteenth century aimed to restore temporal government to its place of honour and
high purpose that they had believed were lost in the early sixteenth century. Thus a
superficial similarity between Machiavelli and Luther – their respective boasts that they
were privy to special insights in political theory – unveils a broader convergence in their
projects. Machiavelli’s claim that The Prince and the Discourses contained all he knew
about politics, and Luther’s boast that not since the age of the Apostles had anyone so
highly praised temporal government, speak the convergent restorative character of their
political theory. To restore temporal government to its destined place was in the thought
of Machiavelli and Luther nothing short than a reformation of politics.
REFERENCES

Luther and Machiavelli: Collected Works


Luther: Works Cited


“Dr. Martin Luther’s Preface to the Song of Songs & Dr. Martin Luther’s Brief But Altogether Lucid Exposition of the Song of Songs,” in *Luther’s Works, Volume 15*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957.


Machiavelli: Works Cited


General References


Cochlaeus, Johannes, *The Deeds and Writings of Martin Luther from the year of the Lord 1517 to the year 1546 related chronologically to all posterity* by Johannes Cochlaeus, Elizabeth Vandiver, Ralph Keen and Thomas D. Frael, Trans., *Luther’s Lives*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2003.


“Luther’s Conception of Territorial and National Loyalty,” Church History, 17, (1948).


Kostlin, Julius, Martin Luther, Sein Leben und Seine Schriften. Elberfeld: R. L. Friderichs, 1875.


McNeill, J. T., “Natural Law in the Thought of Luther,” *Church History,* 10 (1941).


———, “The Medieval Pattern in Luther’s Views of the State,” *Church History*, 12 (1943).


