

Marco Geuna

Machiavelli and the violence of religious sects

(New York, Italian Academy, December 7th 2016)

1. Introduction: Contemporary post-secular societies and the possibility of a critique of religion

1. Contemporary democratic societies have for some time been presented as post-secular societies.¹ This newly coined adjective is customarily taken to suggest that the process of secularization, which has characterized western societies since the early modern period, appears to have come to a halt. Indeed, for more than two decades we have had to deal with what some have called the “revenge of God”², with a return of religions, in particular monotheistic religions, to the forefront of the public sphere.

As early as the 1990s, scholars like José Casanova³ and Peter Berger⁴ called attention to the re-emergence of the need for the sacred and, more generally, to the processes of de-secularization passing through contemporary societies. They analysed the increasingly widespread calls for the de-privatisation of religious faiths advanced in diverse social and political contexts, focusing not only the dynamics of radical Islam but also on more recent developments in evangelical Protestantism and in important sectors of Catholicism in various European and American countries. In the late modern period the religious phenomenon thus seems to have regained the presence and importance in the public scene that over the past two centuries it appeared to have lost.

This return of religion to the public sphere has also been investigated, from a normative point of view, by contemporary moral philosophy and political philosophy. In the first instance thinkers critical of liberalism, neo-conservative authors and certain communitarian philosophers⁵ raised the issue of a need to rework the notion of secularism which, together with the separation of the state and church, was at the centre of the liberal-democratic order. But even philosophers whose origins lay in the liberal and democratic tradition—suffice it to name John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas—

¹The expression was introduced by the German sociologist Klaus Eder. Cf. K. Eder, *Europäische Säkularisierung – ein Sonderweg in die post-säkulare Gesellschaft?*, «Berliner Journal für Soziologie», 2002, 3, pp. 331-343. Taken up by Habermas, the expression became common coin in the scientific community. Among Italian works, see for example: G.E. Rusconi (ed. by), *Lo Stato secolarizzato nell'età post-secolare*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2008; S. Zamagni e A. Guarnieri (ed. by), *Laicità e relativismo nella società post-secolare*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009.

² See J. Kepel, *La revanche de Dieu. Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde*, Paris, Seuil, 1991; English translation: *The Revenge of God: the Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.

³ Cf. J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

⁴ Cf. P. Berger, ed. by, *The Desecularization of the World*, Washington, Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999.

⁵ In particular, see the recent work by Charles Taylor. Cf. C. Taylor, *Modes of Secularism*, in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. by R. Bhargava, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1998, pp. 31-53; C. Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 2002; C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 2007.

have plumbed the depths of the problem. They have considered whether the notion of secularism and the separation of church and state theorised by classical liberalism was not too restrictive, proposing to reformulate it in order to meet new challenges. They thus arrived at redefining, albeit from different perspectives, the actual concepts of “public reason” and the “political public sphere.”

2. The discussion around these problems has been wide-ranging and has inevitably touched on a number of long-standing issues, such as the relationship between Enlightenment culture and liberal politics and even the relationship between Christianity and the Enlightenment. On the one hand, there have been authoritative but somewhat contrived attempts to annex one to the other, in other words to argue not only that the Enlightenment “is of Christian origin and it is no coincidence that it was born precisely and exclusively in the context of the Christian faith,” but even that there exists a “profound correspondence between Christianity and the Enlightenment.”⁶

On the other hand, the liberal philosopher John Rawls did not hesitate to distance himself from significant aspects of Enlightenment culture, distinguishing his own political liberalism proposition from what he has called “Enlightenment liberalism.” In his essay “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” for example, he observed drily: “There is, or need be, no war between religion and democracy. In this respect political liberalism is sharply different from and rejects Enlightenment Liberalism, which historically attacked orthodox Christianity.”⁷

Entering into a dialogue with Rawls’s ideas on these issues, Habermas himself has more than once highlighted the limits of a “secularist mindset” personally rejecting it and hoping for a “self-reflexive overcoming of a rigid and exclusive secularist self-understanding of modernity.”⁸ And it is not by chance that in the framework of these discussions, while driving us to rethink the connections and differences between science and faith, Habermas has returned to reviewing Kant’s pages on religion and conveyed his thoughts in an essay whose title is significant in itself: “The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge: On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant’s Philosophy of Religion.”⁹

It hardly needs saying that the debate that has taken place over the last twenty years has been multifaceted and has touched on different terrains. In particular, it can be mentioned that some

⁶ J. Ratzinger, *L’Europa nella crisi delle culture*, in «Il Regno. Documenti», 2005, n. 9, pp. 214-219: p. 218. See also J. Habermas - J. Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion*, Freiburg i.B., Herder, 2005, pp. 39-60.

⁷ J. Rawls, *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*, in J. Rawls, *The Law of Peoples and The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1999, p. 176; also in J. Rawls, *Collected Papers*, ed. by S. Freeman, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1999, p. 611.

⁸ J. Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005; English translation: *Between Naturalism and Religion. Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008: “Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the ‘Public Use of Reason’ by Religious and Secular Citizens”, pp. 114-147: 138.

⁹ Cf. J. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, pp. 209-247.

scholars, taking up the research and historiographical theses of Jan Assmann,¹⁰ have discussed the meaning and the costs of the shift from polytheism to monotheism and have carefully considered the possible links between monotheisms and violence.¹¹

3. It may be useful, for a moment, to consider the position of a liberal democratic philosopher such as Habermas with regard to religion, because this has had an extraordinary resonance in both the English-speaking and European debates. In the preface to one of his recent books he wrote: “Even today, religious traditions perform the function of articulating an awareness of what is lacking or absent. They keep alive a sensitivity to failure and suffering. They rescue from oblivion the dimensions of our social and personal relations in which advances in cultural and social rationalization have caused utter devastation.”¹² In order to clarify what he meant by “religious traditions”, it should be pointed out that Habermas concentrated on the cognitive value and importance of world religions that date back to the so-called Axial Age, of those religions that “in his period made the cognitive leap from mythical narratives to a logos that differentiates between essence and appearance”¹³.

Habermas thus appears to be extremely open towards the religious phenomenon. Indeed, he goes so far as to argue that it should not be ruled out that religious traditions “involve encoded semantic potentials capable of exercising an inspirational force on society *as a whole* as soon as they divulge their profane truth contents”¹⁴. He argues, therefore, that post-metaphysical thinking must have a dual or bivalent attitude towards religion: from one standpoint, “post-metaphysical thinking is prepared to learn from religion”; from the other, post-metaphysical thinking assumes an agnostic attitude towards religions: “It refrains, on the one hand, from passing judgment on

¹⁰ Cf. J. Assmann, *Herrschaft und Heil: politische Theologie in Altägypten, Israel und Europa*, München, Hanser, 2000; J. Assmann, *Die mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus*, München, Hanser, 2003, English translation: *The Price of Monotheism*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010; J. Assmann, *Of God and Gods. Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism*, Madison, The university of Wisconsin Press, 2008.

¹¹ For an introduction to the debates of the last decades, see, among others, *Political Theologies. Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. by H. de Vries and L.E. Sullivan, New York, Fordham UP, 2006; *Religion. Beyond a Concept*, ed. by H. de Vries, New York, Fordham UP, 2008; *Crediting God. Sovereignty and Religion in the Age of Global Capitalism*, ed. by M. Vatter, New York, Fordham UP, 2011; *Constitutional Secularism in an Age of Religious Revival*, ed. by S. Mancini and M. Rosenfeld, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014; *Boundaries of Toleration*, ed. by A. Stepan and C. Taylor, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014; *Religion, secularism and constitutional democracy*, ed. by J. L. Cohen and C. Laborde, New York, Columbia University Press, 2016.

¹² J. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, p. 6.

¹³ J. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, p. 142. For an introduction to Habermas’s approach to religion, see N. Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2006; H. Høibraaten, *Religion, Metaphysik und Freiheit*, in *Habermas Handbuch*, hrsg. von H. Brunkhorst, R. Kreide und C. Lafont, Stuttgart, Metzler, 2009, pp. 273-282.

¹⁴ J. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, p. 142.

religious truths, while insisting (in a non-polemical fashion) on drawing a strict line between faith and knowledge.”¹⁵

When reflecting on these ideas one cannot but point out that the dimension of the criticism of religion, which in various forms had characterized many moments of Western philosophical tradition, disappears entirely from Habermas’s view. Indeed, many kinds of critiques of religion have taken shape and succeeded one another in our philosophical tradition: from the reflection that connects religion to human passions, above all fear [the Epicurus – Lucretius - Hobbes line], to the perspective that places religion in relation to the constitutional limitation of human knowledge, with its various forms of “ignorance of the causes” [Hobbes - Hume]; from the investigation that highlights the possibility of dehumanization, or alienation, in some forms of religious experience [from Machiavelli to Rousseau, from Feuerbach to Marx] to that which brings to the fore the processes of construction of dependent subjectivities enacted by religious powers [from Nietzsche to Foucault]. Now, no trace of the many different aspects of this long critical exercise appears to remain in the reflection developed by Habermas.

In our political contingencies, marked not only by the return of religions on the public arena, but also by a remarkable reappearance of religious violence, perhaps it could be useful to reconsider some moments and some forms of this multifaceted tradition of critique of religion. In what follows, I will concentrate on one aspect of Machiavelli’s contribution to it.

2. The manifold character of Machiavelli’s discussion of religion

Machiavelli’s account of religion has a complex texture. His considerations are developed on different levels of discourse. In fact, Machiavelli returns on the problem of religion not only in *The Prince*, but also in many pages and in many chapters of his *Discourses*¹⁶. His analysis starts, in this field as in many others, from a comparison. We could say, adapting a formula, that Machiavelli repeatedly compares, through his work, the religion of the Ancients to the religion of the Moderns. As it is well known, the discussion of the religion of the Ancients is developed in the first book, from the eleventh to the fifteenth chapter¹⁷. Machiavelli focuses mainly on the religion of the

¹⁵ J. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, the last two quotes at p. 143 and at p. 140.

¹⁶ For a general introduction to the question, see E. Cutinelli-Rèndina, *Chiesa e religione in Machiavelli*, Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, Pisa-Roma, 1998; E. Cutinelli-Rèndina, *Église et religion chez Machiavel*, in *Lectures de Machiavel*, sous la direction de M. Gaille-Nikodimov et T. Ménessier, Ellipses, Paris, 2006, pp. 193-225; A. Brown, *Philosophy and religion in Machiavelli*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. by J.M. Najemy, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 157-172.

¹⁷ Cf. N. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. by H.C. Mansfield and N. Tarcov, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, henceforth abbreviated as “*Discourses*” cited with book, chapter, and page numbers. I checked the English

Romans, but it considers also some aspects of the Egyptian and the Greek religion¹⁸. He reaches the conclusion that the ancient religions were essentially human artefacts, created and structured by wise “orderers”, such as Numa and Moses. Pointing out to the extraordinary importance of practises, such as oaths, at the intersection between religion and politics, Machiavelli emphasizes that religion could be an important “instrument”, an essential device in the hands of political actors¹⁹. The analysis of the religion of the Moderns, i.e. the critical discussion of Christian religion, is mainly proposed in the second book of *Discourses*, in the famous second chapter. Machiavelli puts forward a well-structured argument in which the main values and the practises of the religion of the Ancients and of the religion of the Moderns are sharply contrasted. The comparison allows him to draw a radical conclusion: the “religion of present times”, Christianity, is an altogether impolitical religion, that opens the doors to tyranny²⁰: “This mode of life thus seems to have rendered the world weak and given it prey to criminal men [gli uomini scelerati], who can manage it securely, seeing that the collectivity of men [l’università degli uomini], so as to go to paradise, think more of enduring their beatings than of avenging them”²¹. Today, I would suggest that these well-known analyses, which had an extraordinary importance in the modern philosophical tradition, from Spinoza to Nietzsche²², represent only the first step, or the first level, of Machiavelli’s discussion of religion. There is also a second step, or a second dimension, of analysis developed by the Florentine Secretary. At this further level of interpretation, Machiavelli does not emphasize anymore the differences between religions, the diversity between their inspiring values, but tries to envisage some common traits in their institutional practices. At the core of each religion,

translation on the original Italian text: cf. *Opere*, a cura di C. Vivanti, vol. I - III, Torino, Einaudi, 1997 – 2005. *Discourses*, I. 11-14, pp. 34-42; Vivanti, vol. 1, pp. 228-238.

¹⁸ For a first introduction to the problem, cf. A. Tenenti, *La religione di Machiavelli*, “Studi storici”, 10 (1969), pp. 709-748, then in Id., *Credenze, ideologie, libertinismi tra Medioevo ed età moderna*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1978, pp. 175-219; S. Preus, *Machiavelli’s functional analysis of religion: context and object*, “Journal of the History of Ideas”, 40, (1979), pp. 171-190; B. Fontana, *Love of Country and Love of God: The Political Uses of Religion in Machiavelli*, “Journal of the History of Ideas”, 60, (1999), pp. 639-658.

¹⁹ It could be pointed out that Machiavelli uses the expression “la religione bene usata”: see, for example, *Discourses*, I. 13, p. 39, Vivanti, vol.1, p. 235: “E così la religione, usata bene, giovò e per la espugnazione / So, used well, religion helped both for the capture”; *Discourses*, I. 15, p. 44, Vivanti, vol.1, p. 239: “Il che testimonia appieno quanta confidenza si possa avere mediante la religione bene usata / This testifies if full how much confidence can be had through religion well used”.

²⁰ On Machiavelli’s evaluation of Christianity, see the classical theses put forward by Gennaro Sasso. Cf. G. Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli, I. Il pensiero politico*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1993, pp. 598-605: according to Sasso in the *Discourses* is manifest a “evidente e quasi conclamato ‘anticristianesimo’ [“a clear and almost full-blown anti-Christianism”], p. 603. I cannot share the theses advanced by scholars like Roberto Ridolfi, Sebastian de De Grazia and Maurizio Viroli, who, although through different paths, consider Machiavelli a good Christian believer. For an informed and balanced discussion of recent historiography on Machiavelli’s approach to religion, see J.M. Najemy, *Papirius and the Chickens, or Machiavelli on the Necessity of Interpreting Religion*, “Journal of the History of Ideas”, 60, 1999, pp. 659-681. See also V.B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli’s Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed*, Northern Illinois UP, DeKalb, 1996 and, among recent contributions, N. Tarkov, *Machiavelli’s Critique of Religion*, “Social research”, 81 (2014), pp. 193-216.

²¹ *Discourses*, II. 2, p. 131; Vivanti, vol. 1, pp. 333-334.

²² Cf. R. Beiner, *Civil Religion. A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

he finds a strenuous tendency, or drive, to affirm itself, to reach a hegemonic position, and therefore to extinguish previous religious experiences and practises. At the heart of each religion there is a problematic and unsettling relationship with violence. In today's paper, I would like to concentrate on these peculiar diagnosis put forward by Machiavelli mainly in the troubling and difficult fifth chapter of the second book of the *Discourses*.

3. The causes of the “oblivion of things”

Much has been written on this crucial chapter, particularly on the thesis of the eternity of the world that Machiavelli obliquely sustains in it. I don't want to return to these refined discussions²³, and on the problem of the possible sources of the anti-Christian thesis of the eternity of the world. I would rather recall the problem Machiavelli is facing, the question that triggers his research. The Florentine secretary is puzzled by the fate of the Etruscans, as he points out at the end of the fourth chapter. The Etruscans, the “ancient Tuscans” as he writes, developed a remarkable civilization. They acquired a considerable “power in Italy”: “this [power] was secure for a great time, with the highest glory of empire and of arms and special praise for custom and religion”²⁴. But a dramatic change happened, which led to the almost complete cancellation of their civilization. “Although two thousand years ago the power of the Tuscans was great, at present there is almost no memory of it. This thing has made me think whence arises this oblivion of things [questa oblivione delle cose]”²⁵, Machiavelli explicitly declares. So, his problem is to identify the causes of the “oblivion of things”, his attempt is to single out the factors that eliminate “the memories of things”, as he writes in the title of the chapter²⁶. I would like to emphasize that his research is explicitly presented as a research about memory and his opposite, oblivion: memory and oblivion of past civilisations. In order to provide a tentative answer to this disquieting question, a conceptual distinction is introduced: there are natural causes and human, or cultural, causes of the oblivion of things. But Machiavelli concentrates immediately on the cultural causes, on the causes “that come from men”²⁷. These are the most important factors, as it appears already from the title of the chapter: the first place is reserved in it to “the variation of sects and languages”. It is precisely in this conceptual context that Machiavelli develops his radical interpretation of religion. I could say: a radical

²³ For a classic discussion, see G. Sasso, *De aeternitate mundi (Discorsi, II. 5)*, in G. Sasso, *Machiavelli e gli antichi e altri saggi*, Milano – Napoli, Ricciardi, 1987, vol.1, pp. 167-399. For recent reappraisals, see G. Giorgini, *L'educazione filosofica dell'uomo politico. Discorsi, II. 5*, “Il pensiero politico”, 47 (2014), n.1, pp. 3-38; G. Sasso, *Eternità del mondo*, in *Su Machiavelli. Ultimi scritti*, Roma, Carocci, 2015, pp. 163-178.

²⁴ *Discourses*, II. 4, p. 138; Vivanti, vol. 1, pp. 341.

²⁵ *Discourses*, II. 4, p. 138; Vivanti, vol. 1, p. 341.

²⁶ The title of the chapter is the following: “That the Variation of Sects and Languages, Together with the Accident of Floods or Plague, Eliminates the Memories of Things”. *Discourses*, II. 5, p. 138.

²⁷ *Discourses*, II. 5, p. 139; Vivanti, vol.1, p. 342.

interpretation of all religious practices and experiences. In fact, he presents religions as being animated by a destructive violence that made them want to suppress the theological constructs, the rituals and the artistic expressions of earlier religions. This stood for all religions, including Christianity. “For when a new sect – that is, a new religion- emerges, its first concern is to extinguish the old to give itself reputation; and when it occurs that the orderers of the new sect are of a different language, they easily eliminate it. This thing is known from considering the modes that the Christian sect took against the Gentile. It suppressed all its orders and all its ceremonies and eliminated every memory of the ancient theology”²⁸. For carefully interpreting this crucial passage, let’s concentrate for a moment on the language used by the Florentine Secretary. As a first remark, it could be pointed out that in order to designate religions, and religious traditions, Machiavelli consistently uses the word “sects”. I must add that this happens not only in the *Discourses*, but also in many of his other works. In the *Florentine Histories*, for example, he mentions the “Arian sect, believed in by the Vandals”, and more generally present the conflicts between the “heretical” and the “catholic sects”²⁹. So, what is a “sect”? With the term “sect”, Machiavelli simply designates a peculiar form, or type, of collective organization. But also political communities or states are forms of collective organization: consistently, in the first chapter of the third book of the *Discourses*, he presents “sects” and “republics” together as “mixed bodies [corpi misti]”³⁰. Therefore, immediately the question arises: which is the element that distinguishes a sect from a political community? The peculiar character of a sect is the fact that it is created by an “orderer” and is kept together by a structured set of believes, which give form to an original “fear of God”. An important observation follows immediately from this annotation concerning the consistent use of the term “sect”: Machiavelli proceeds to a radical relativisation of the Christian religion, which is here considered to be a “sect” like all the others. I could add that this use of the term “sect” to designate the Christian religion was at that time considered so unacceptable and impious that one of the two publishers of *Discourses*, in 1531, the Roman Blado, emended the text³¹. A second remark about the key terms used in this crucial passage concerns the centrality of “orderers” [ordinatori] for all sects, a question already discussed at length in the first book. The last remark deals with Machiavelli’s choice of the verbs: what he is considering is the ability of each sect to “extinguish” [estinguere], to “suppress”

²⁸ *Discourses*, II. 5, p. 139; Vivanti, vol.1, p. 342.

²⁹ N. Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. by L.B. Banfield and H.C. Mansfield, with an Introduction by H.C. Mansfield, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988, I. 5, p. 15, Vivanti, vol. 3, p. 319: for both quotes.

³⁰ *Discourses*, III.1, p. 209; Vivanti, vol. 1, p. 416: “Because I am speaking of mixed bodies, such as republics and sects, I say that those alterations are for safety that lead them back toward their beginnings”.

³¹ Cf. C. Pincin, *Sul testo del Machiavelli. I ‘Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio’*, in “Atti dell’Accademia delle Scienze di Torino”, 96 (1961-1962), p. 109 e n. 3. Blado substituted the word “sect” with “religion”. This observation by Pincin was already picked up by Eugenio Garin in his *Aspetti del pensiero di Machiavelli*, in *Dal Rinascimento all’Illuminismo. Studi e ricerche*, Pisa, Nistri-Lischi, 1970, pp. 43 - 77: p. 62.

[cancellare], to “eliminate” [spegnere], the previous one. What is at stake, therefore, is the potential survival of the memory of earlier religions.

Moreover, it is worth emphasizing that in this chapter Christianity becomes the hermeneutic instrument used to understand other religions: “It is therefore to be believed that what the Christian sect wished to do against the Gentile, the Gentile would have done against that which was prior to it”. And how, therefore, did the Christian sect behave towards the religions and cultural heritage of the ancient world, from which it emerged? Machiavelli is blunt: “Whoever reads of the modes taken by Saint Gregory and by the other heads of the Christian religion will see with how much obstinacy they persecuted all the ancient memories, burning the works of the poets and the historians, ruining images [ruinando le imagini]³², and spoiling every other thing that might convey some sign of antiquity”³³.

So, each sect, each religion, tries to extinguish the previous hegemonic one through successive steps: a) the destruction of “orders”, “ceremonies”, and doctrinal assumptions. Each religion, as Machiavelli has considered at length in the discussion of the religion of the Romans, has its orders, its key practices and its central tenets. The new religion tries to dissolve and replace these practises and beliefs, to the point in which “every memory of [the] ancient theology” is eliminated; b) the burning of books, i.e. the destruction of the means of transmission of these inherited beliefs; c) the destruction of “images”: of all artistic forms connected to religious beliefs, and more broadly to previous forms of civilization; d) the attempt to cancel even the language of the previous religion and form of civilization, as it happened in the case of the Etruscan language. Let me introduce a side note: let me remark that, trying to conceptualize the relationship between religion and violence, in this page Machiavelli tackles two practises which resurface and return in the “longue durée” of our history: the burning of books³⁴, which some authors call biblioclasm, and iconoclasm³⁵, the destruction of artistic artefacts.

I just observed that in this chapter Christianity becomes the hermeneutic instrument necessary to understand other religions. I have now to add, however, that Christianity appears to

³² Machiavelli attributes to the term “imagine” / “immagine” two different meanings: 1) a restrict one: with a latinism, “imagine” stands for “statue”; for this meaning see, e.g., *Discourses*, I. 12, p. 37, Vivanti, vol. 1, p. 232; 2) a broader meaning, similar to the contemporary one; for this meaning see, e.g., *Discourses*, III. 39, p. 298, Vivanti, vol. 1, p. 512.

³³ *Discourses*, II. 5, p. 139; Vivanti, vol.1, p. 342.

³⁴ For an introductory text, see L.X. Polastron, *Books on Fire. The Destruction of Libraries throughout History*, Rochester, Inner Traditions, 2007. See also H. Rafetseder, *Bücherverbrennungen. Die öffentliche Hinrichtung von Schriften im historischen Wandel*, Wien, Böhlau Verlag, 1988; M. Drogin, *Biblioclasm. The Mythical Origins, Magic Powers, and Perishability of the Written Word*, Savage, Rowman & Littlefield, 1989; R. Knuth, *Libricide. The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century*, Westport, Praeger, 2003; R. Knuth, *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries: Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction*, Westport, Praeger, 2006.

³⁵ Cf. D. Freedberg, *Iconoclasts and their motives*, Maarssen, Gary Schwartz, 1985; D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1989, chapter XIV: “Idolatry and Iconoclasm”. Among Italian contributions, see M. Bettetini, *Contro le immagini. Le radici dell'iconoclastia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006; M. Bettetini, *Distuggere il passato. L'iconoclastia dall'islam all'Isis*, Milano, Cortina, 2016.

Machiavelli, in some way, a defective religion, which was unable to perform the radical role played, for example, by the Roman religion toward the Etruscan one. Indeed, Christianity was not completely successful in extinguishing the memories of the Roman world because it kept its language, Latin: “For if they had been able to write with a new language, considering the other persecutions [le altre persecuzioni] they made, we would have any record of things past. [...] So if they [“Saint Gregory and the other heads of the Christian religion”] had added a new language to this persecution, in a very brief time everything would be seen to be forgotten [si sarebbe veduto in brevissimo tempo ogni cosa dimenticare]”³⁶. But I will return on this question later.

At this point let me just add a linguistic remark. Note in the last two quotations the recurrences of the noun “persecution” [persecuzione³⁷], at the singular and at the plural, and the occurrence of the verb “persecute” [perseguitarono]. Religions are presented, in these passages, as agents of persecutions: they persecute all elements of transmission of “the ancient memories”.

4. An *excursus* on Gregory the Great and its role in the cancellation of ancient roman culture

Machiavelli knew that the destruction of Titus Livy’s decades had been attributed to Gregory the Great, but he extended and generalised the notion. In this passage Gregory becomes the knowing promoter of the burning of books written not only by historians, but also by poets. The obliteration of the past is not brought about only by the burning of books, but also by the destruction of artistic artefacts, of the “images”, in the broad sense, created by ancient culture. Why Gregory the great is assumed in this context as an exemplary figure? Machiavelli is somehow entering in a debate that lasted from the middle of the twelfth century. Let me briefly summarize some stages of this debate, which concerned the role and the attitude of Christianity toward Ancient Roman culture. But it is important, perhaps, to add first some words on Gregory the Great. It is true that Gregory the Great despised wholeheartedly the elegance of style, the tenets of classical rhetoric and more generally the values and the assumptions of Roman and Greek pagan culture³⁸. But quite a different question is to understand how the legend of Gregory the great, as the destroyer of pagan

³⁶ *Discourses*, II. 5, p. 129; Vivanti, vol.1, p. 342.

³⁷ In the text of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli uses the term “persecution” only in this crucial chapter. For another occurrence, similar to these two, see *Florentine Histories*, I. 5, p. 15: Machiavelli again connects “il variare della religione” [the variation of religion] with “tante persecuzioni” [many persecutions].

³⁸ For example, see Gregory’s *Epistola ad Leandrum Episcopum Hispalensem*: “et ipsam loquendi artem, quam magisteria disciplinae exterioris insinuant, servare despexi [...]. Non metacismi collisionem fugio, non barbarismi confusionem devoto, situs modosque et praepositionem casus servare contemno, quia indignum vehementer existimo, ut verba caelestis oraculi restinguam sub regula Donati”, quoted in E. Garin, *L’educazione in Europa (1400-1600)*, Bari, Laterza, 1957, p. 44. On Gregory’s approach to pagan culture, see now R.A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and his World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

books and idols, was formed³⁹. The starting point of the story could probably be identified in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, presumably completed around 1159. In the second book, in the course of his violent polemic against the practitioners of astrology, John refers to Gregory the great: he argues that according to a tradition "handed down from our forefathers", "doctor sanctissimus ille Gregorius" delivered up the library of the Palatine, with its patrimony of pagan reprobated texts, to the flames⁴⁰. In the eighth book, John returns to consider Gregory's deeds. He mentions the possibility that a lightning had struck the Capitol, and the Capitoline library with its manuscripts and books, but he also reports another explanation of the event handed down by the tradition to his times ("fertur tamen"). It was Gregory, "beatus Gregorius", that ordered the pagan Capitoline Library (gentilem bibliothecam) to be set on fire, in order "that there might be more ample room for the Holy Scriptures, and that their authority might be enhanced and their study more diligently pursued"⁴¹. So, Gregory was considered responsible for the burning of two important roman libraries: both the Palatine and the Capitoline library, the first built by Octavianus Augustus, the second one by Trajan. And Gregory's intention was absolutely clear: he intended to give greater space and greater attention to the Holy Book.

But let's consider the other aspect of the legend of Gregory the destroyer. Approximately one century after John of Salisbury, the Dominican monk Martinus Polonus adopted a slightly different version of the story in his *Chronicon pontificum et imperatorum*, one of the most widely read historical works of the late Middle Ages. He wrote: "in order that the seeds of the ancient errors should not multiply, [Gregory] ordered that all the heads and limbs of the statues of the demons be systematically (generaliter) cut off, so that from the extirpated root of depraved heresy, the palm of Christian truth might more fully manifest itself"⁴². Since then, the story was repeated

³⁹ On this legend, see T. Buddensieg, *Gregory the Great, the Destroyer of Pagan Idols. The History of a Medieval Legend Concerning the Decline of Ancient Art and Literature*, "The Journal of Warburg and Courland Institutes", 28 (1965), pp. 44-65. I thank David Freedberg for suggesting me to read this superb piece of scholarship.

⁴⁰ Cf. John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, ed. by C.C.J. Webb, Oxford, 1909, II. 26, vol. 1, p. 142. English translation: "Add to this the fact that St. Gregory the Great, who vivified and entranced the whole Church with the honeyed eloquence of his preaching, not only ordered astrology banished from the court but, as is related by our ancestors, threw into the fire 'all that Apollo's shrine upon the Palatine contained' of the proscribed works which claimed to reveal to mankind the intention of the heavenly bodies and the oracles of supernal beings", *Frivolities of Courtiers and Footprints of Philosophers, Being a Translation of the First, Second and Third Books and selections from the Seventh and Eight Books of the Policraticus of John of Salisbury*, by J.B. Pike, Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 1938, p. 126. Note John's remark: "ut traditur a maioribus / as is related by our ancestors". John is declaring to reproduce and rephrase a tradition already established in his times.

⁴¹ Cf. John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, ed. by C.C.J. Webb, Oxford, 1909, VIII. 19, vol. 2, p. 370: "Fertur tamen beatus Gregorius bibliothecam combuisse gentilem, quo divinae paginae gratior esset locus et maior auctoritas et diligentia studiosior". English translation: *The Statesman's Book of John of Salisbury, being the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Books, and Selections from the Seventh and Eight Books, of the Policraticus*, translated by J. Dickinson, New York, Knopf, 1927, p. 364. John unquestioningly approves the act attributed to Gregory.

⁴² *Martini Oppaviensis chronicon pontificum et imperatorum*, ed. by L. Weiland, 1872, p. 422: "Et ne erroris antiqui semen de cetero pullularet, ymaginibus demonum capita et membra fecit generaliter amputari, ut per hoc extirpata radice hereticae pravitatis palma ecclesiasticae veritatis plenius exaltaretur", quoted in Buddensieg, p. 47. According to Buddensieg, Martin Polonus, who died in 1278, might have found his source in the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, a text that

many times, mainly by authors of the chronicles of the lives of popes⁴³. Almost a century later, for example, we find Amalricus Augerius, in his *Actus pontificum Romanorum usque ad [...] annum 1321*, praise Gregory the Great's decision with almost the same words. He described it as the necessary eradication of heresy and an important step toward the triumph of Christian virtue: "he established and ordered that all the statues of demons, with their heads and limbs, which could be found both in the roman town and in the suburbs, had to be radically cut off and tear apart, in order that from the extirpated root of depraved heresy, the palm of Christian truth might more fully manifest itself"⁴⁴. What should be emphasized is the fact that in the works we have considered so far, by John of Salisbury, Martin Polonus and Amalricus Augerius, the deeds attributed to Gregory the Great are unquestioningly praised and considered necessary steps in the fight against heresy, and its ancient roots.

Let's concentrate now on the Florentine culture, so important for understanding Machiavelli's positions. A note of accusation or open denunciation of the acts of the Pope appears in Florence only in the years of Boccaccio. We find it most clearly expressed under the pen of Fazio degli Uberti, who died around 1370. In his poem *Dittamondo*, we find Rome herself lament the sad conclusion of her glorious history: "Alas, how I am still pained by the memory of my great, beautiful and noble monuments which Gregory ordered to destroy. I am still hurt by the fact that the writings of my sons and the captains of my armies, those works collected together with such labour, [...] were nearly all damaged and destroyed by this Pope"⁴⁵. The changed interpretation of Gregory's deeds expresses the humanist's profound regret for the irreparable loss of the creations of antiquity. In Florence the positions held by Fazio degli Uberti were taken and reformulated, in the following decades, by a sequel of authors: from Coluccio Salutati, the Florentine Chancellor, to Lorenzo Ghiberti, the great sculptor and art historians.

goes back to the middle of the twelfth century. In the pages of the *Mirabilia*, Martinus could find the story of the destruction, ordered by Gregory the Great, of the statue of Sol erected by Nero at the Colosseum. Buddensieg can therefore conclude: "Thus a decisive role in the downfall of the literature and art of antiquity was already ascribed to Gregory the Great by the middle of the twelfth century" p. 47.

⁴³ For example, cf. *Leonis Urbevetanis Chronicon Pontificum*: "ne erroris antiqui semen de cetero pullularet, imaginibus Daemonum capita, & membra, fecit generaliter amputari, ut per hoc exstirpata radice hereticae pravitate, palma Ecclesiasticae virtutis plenius exsaltaretur", in *Deliciae eruditorum, seu veterum anekdoton opuscolorom collectanea*, edidit Giovanni Lami, Florentiae, Viviani, 1736, p. 105. Buddensieg did not consider the *Chronicon* by Leone of Orvieto, which presumably lived in Foligno around 1289. But the text was already mentioned by F. Homes Dudden, *Gregory the Great: his Place in History and Thought*, London, 1905, p. 291.

⁴⁴ A. Augerius, *Actus pontificum Romanorum*, quoted in Buddensieg, p. 45: "statuit et ordinavit, ut omnes imagines Daemonum, capita et membra ipsorum, quae tam in urbe romana quam extra inveniri possent, amputari et dilaniari penitus deberent, ut propter hoc exstirpata haereticae pravitate radice, ecclesiasticae veritatis palma plenius exaltaretur". Amalricus Augerius was chaplain of Urban V, pope between 1362 and 1370.

⁴⁵ Fazio degli Uberti, *Il dittamondo*, in *Il dittamondo e le rime*, a cura di G. Corsi, Bari, Laterza, 1952, p. 135: "Ahi, quanto ancor mi duole a ricordare / i grandi e belli e sottili intaglio / i quai Gregorio allor mi fe' disfare! / E duolmi ancor che con lunghi travagli/ eran compilati più volumi / dei miei figlioli e di miei ammiragli / [...] che la più parte furon distrutti e lesi/ per questo Papa"

But I want to emphasize that the approach followed by the humanists, with their precise denunciation of the responsibility of the popes for the decline and fall of ancient art and literature, was not unchallenged. I could mention now just two public figures, which played an important role in the Florentine scene: at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Dominican friar, and later Cardinal, Giovanni Dominici, at the end of the century, the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola, so important for Machiavelli. In his *Lucula noctis*, around 1405, Dominici energetically defended Gregory, “pastor magnus Gregorius”, from the accusation of having ordered the burning of all the books of Livy’s decades, that could be found at that time. The act of Gregory, “fidei zelator devotus”, (a zealous and devoted man of faith), was rightly intended to strengthen the Christian faith. The same apologetic perspective returns in Girolamo Savonarola’s sermons. In particular, in the sermon preached on February the 9th, 1497, *On Ezechiel*, the Dominican friar said, in defence of the Pope: “Saint Paul made burn many objects and curious books; Saint Gregory ordered the destruction of these beautiful statues of Rome and burnt Livy’s Decades. Does that mean that Saint Gregory was crazy? I would have these crazy people on earth: you would see Peter’s ship in much better shape”⁴⁶.

The date of this sermon is extremely important. We have to remember that two days before, on February the 7th, in Florence took place what we now call the “Bonfire of the Vanities”. Followers of Savonarola collected and publicly burned thousands of objects, such as cosmetics, fine dresses, works of art, and different types of books, deemed to be immoral⁴⁷. I could add that although it is widely reported that Sandro Botticelli burned several of his paintings based on classical mythology in the great Florentine bonfire, the historical record of this is not clear⁴⁸. What is important, for us, is the fact that Machiavelli had a direct experience of the destructive force of Christian religion in his Florence. Friar Girolamo vindicated the faith and the wisdom of Gregory the great. Moreover, friar Girolamo followed strictly the path opened by Gregory, recommending the burning of immoral books and the destruction of works of art, devoted to ancient mythological

⁴⁶ G. Savonarola, *Prediche sopra Ezechiele*, a cura di R. Ridolfi, Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Girolamo Savonarola, Roma, Belardetti, 1955, vol. 1, p. 147: “San Paulo fece ardere tante cose e libri curiosi, san Gregorio fece spezzare quelle belle figure di Roma e ardere le Deche di Tito Livio. Parti che fusse un pazzo san Gregorio? Vorrei di questi pazzi in terra: vedresti che la navicella di Pietro staria meglio”. On Machiavelli’s discussion of the role played by Savonarola in Florentine history, among recent contributions see G. Barbuto, *Machiavelli e la questione savonaroliana*, in *Società, cultura e vita religiosa in età moderna. Studi in onore di Romeo De Maio*, a cura di L. Gulia, I. Herklotz, S. Zen, Sora, Centro di studi sorani Vincenzo Patriarca, 2009, pp. 47-60; T. Ménissier, *Théologie politique et histoire*, in *Machiavel ou la politique du centaure*, Paris, Hermann Éditeurs, 2010, pp. 249-295.

⁴⁷ For a critical contemporary reconstruction of the “Bonfire of the Vanities”, and the role played in it by adolescents, see L. Martines, *Fire in the City. Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Renaissance Florence*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 115-118.

⁴⁸ On the relationship between Botticelli and Savonarola, among recent works, see R. Hatfield, *Botticelli’s Mystic Nativity, Savonarola and the Millenium*, “Journal of the Warburg and Courland Institutes”, 58 (1995), pp. 88-114. See also some of the essays collected in *Money and Beauty: Bankers, Botticelli and the Bonfire of the Vanities*, ed. By L. Sebregondi and T. Parks, Firenze, Giunti, 2012.

subjects. Machiavelli had not the necessity to ask himself if what was attributed to Gregory was a legend, as many humanist had done before, from Guarino Veronese⁴⁹ to Platina⁵⁰. He had under his eyes a kind of a new Gregory. And this was enough for strengthening and generalizing his convictions about the constitutive relationship between religion and violence.

5. Religion, idolatry, violence

So, according to Machiavelli, at the core of each religion lies a tendency, or better a drive, to affirm what is considered to be truth and to destroy the tenets, theological beliefs and practices of previous ones. In this way, the Florentine secretary comes close to the thesis that each religion pretends to affirm its truth, while considering every other form of religious belief a form of idolatry.

What is extremely interesting is the fact that Machiavelli doesn't make a distinction, at this point of his reasoning, between monotheistic religions and polytheistic ones. He perfectly knew that the Ancient religions were polytheistic. For example, he could have read or, at least, come across Giovanni Boccaccio's *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, printed for the first time in Venice on 1472⁵¹. We could say, without fear of being contradicted, that he was perfectly aware of the fact that the Roman religion was polytheistic and that the Roman practice was an inclusive one. In a specific passage of the first book of the *Discourses*, he even mentions the Roman practice to "import" the gods of the defeated enemies into the City⁵². But in the crucial fifth chapter of the second book he does not resume or reformulate this thesis⁵³. We could advance the hypothesis that the peculiar attitude of Christianity becomes the paradigm for all religions. Or, to put it in other terms, the paradigmatic role of Christianity prevents him from fully understanding the specificities of polytheistic religions.

⁴⁹ Cf. Letter by Guarino Veronese, from Ferrara, to Frate Johannes Pratense, on 7 april 1450: "Nisi eam tibi non probari suspicarer, quia beatum Gregorium pontificem iussisse intellexeris, ut Livii decades cremarentur, quod ab aliquo qui vigilans somniaret manasse credo", quoted in E. Garin, *L'educazione in Europa (1400-1600)*, p. 45, n. 6.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Platinae historici Liber de vita Christi ac omnium pontificum*, work completed in 1474. English translation in F. H. Dudden, *Gregory the Great: his Place in History and Thought*, p. 290: "We ought not to suffer Gregory to be censured by a few ignorant men, as if the ancient stately buildings were demolished by his order, upon this pretence which they make for him, lest strangers coming out of devotion to Rome should less regard the consecrated places and spend all their gaze upon triumphal arches and monuments of antiquity. No reproach can justly be fastened on this great Bishop". Anyway, we have not to forget that Platina's work was commissioned by Pope Sixtus IV.

⁵¹ Cf. G. Boccaccio, *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, Venetiis Impressum, Vindalinus de Spira, 1472. In Boccaccio's lifetime and for two centuries afterwards it was considered his most important work.

⁵² Cf. *Discourses*, I, 12, p. 37. What is even more interesting for us is the fact that the defeated enemies were, in this case, the Etruscan inhabitants of the city of Veio. The Romans, obeying the orders of the dictator Camillus, transported to Rome the "image", the statue, of the goddess Juno found in Veio. For a different reading of this episode, see H.C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders. A Study of the Discourses on Livy*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 203.

⁵³ Perhaps we could conclude that the practice of "importing" Gods of the defeated enemies into the City was considered by Machiavelli as a technique for destroying the Gods' original meaning.

How did Machiavelli reach these radical conclusions? I would like to emphasize the following. It is remarkable that he arrives to detect this structural relationship between religion and violence at the very beginning of the modern era, without being a direct witness of the two experiences of religious violence that marked the origins of our world, namely the wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants on the European continent, and the so-called Conquest of the New World, by the Spanish and Portuguese armies of Catholic kings. In fact, when he was writing the *Discourses*, Machiavelli couldn't foresee all the consequences of the Lutheran Reform and, in the years just before his death, he didn't directly witness the dramatic and cruel religious wars, that had to tear apart the *Respublica Christiana* for almost a century. Moreover, if from some passages of his works we could conclude that he was aware of the recent discoveries of new lands beyond the ocean⁵⁴, the detailed accounts of the cruelties of the conquering process – what Bartolomé de Las Casas would have called *The destruction of the Indies*, i.e. the destruction of the cultural and religious heritage of the native peoples, from the Aztecs to the Incas - reached Florence and central Italy too late to be known by him.

6. The variation of sects

As we have seen, the element common to all religions is identified in the violent will to erase the past, to eliminate the previous “sects” and their symbolic and cultural apparatus. Starting from these considerations, Machiavelli is able to reformulate the idea of the horoscope of religions⁵⁵, put forward for example by Roger Bacon and later by Pietro d'Abano, and to conclude: “And because these sects vary two or three times in five or in six thousand years, the memory of the things prior to that time is lost”⁵⁶. In human history, therefore, there is essentially a cyclical succession of religious sects, which leads to the total destruction of distant memories.

What is Machiavelli doing in this passage? He takes up the idea of the horoscope of religions, mainly developed by the Arab astrological tradition, depriving it of any providential declination. It must be pointed out, in fact, that the idea had been rendered reconcilable with Christian faith by authors like Roger Bacon and Pierre d'Ailly, which envisaged six “sectae principales” before the return of Christ on earth. Machiavelli, however, completely avoids this providential reading of the idea of the horoscope of religions. According to him, each religion has a

⁵⁴ Cf. *Discourses*, Preface to the First Book, p. 5; Vivanti, vol. 1, p. 197. Cf. S. Landi, *Machiavelli e i cannibali. A proposito di una questione aperta*, “Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance”, 78 (2016), n. 1, pp. 31-43.

⁵⁵ Cf. E. Garin, *Lo zodiaco della vita. La polemica sull'astrologia dal Trecento al Cinquecento*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1982.

⁵⁶ *Discourses*, II. 5, p. 139; Vivanti, vol. 1, p. 342.

determined life-span. Religions do not last forever, but after having reached and maintained a dominant position for some hundreds years, are destined to disappear. Why does he resort to this apparently strange astrological doctrine? In the second chapter of the second book of the *Discourses*, he had extensively argued that the weakness and the lack of freedom of the Modern world were caused by the hegemonic presence of Christianity and its values. Coherently, in the fifth chapter he attempts to think the possibility of an overcoming of Christianity. If all sects had a fixed period of time in human history – he seems to suggest - why is it impossible to conceive an overcoming of Christianity? The overcoming of Christianity is necessary if we want to have the chance to successfully imitate the Romans and their political institutions.

In this occasion, I cannot further develop the analysis of Machiavelli's reformulation of the idea of the horoscope of religion. Rather, I would prefer to synthetically reconsider the anti-Christian themes that the Florentine secretary put forward in these pages:

- a) The word is eternal, i.e. we do not need the idea of a creation by God;
- b) Religions are the main human cause of the cancellation of memories. Christianity is just a sect like the others;
- c) All sects have a definite duration in human history. So, we could conceive the overcoming of Christianity.

7. The cancellation of the past: the fate of the Etruscans

I have already suggested that Christianity appears to Machiavelli, in some way, a defective religion. Christianity, in fact, was not completely successful in extinguishing the memories of the Roman world because it kept its language, Latin. Therefore the cancellation of the Roman past was not complete: from the surviving texts of Livy and Cicero, of Tacitus and Sallust, it was still possible to reconstruct the orders and the laws, the institutions and the practises of the ancient Romans. Overall, it was possible to reconstruct a political model: the model of the popular Republic, the republic that expands and builds an empire. This is the model that, according to Machiavelli, the Moderns have to follow.

On the other hand, the Etruscans had a quite different fate. The Romans were fully successful in extinguishing the Etruscan civilization. They were able not only to eliminate the Etruscan political power and religious institutions, but also the Etruscan language. Machiavelli remembers perfectly well what Livy had written about the Etruscans: “gens ante omnes alia...

dedita religionibus”⁵⁷. But Livy was not alone in emphasizing this aspect. According to a number of ancient authors, the Etruscans were the most religious and superstitious people of classical antiquity. Seneca, for example, wrote in his *Quaestiones Naturales*: “Since they [the Etruscans] attribute everything to the will of the gods, they believe not that things have a meaning insofar as they occur, but rather that they occur because they must have a meaning”⁵⁸. According to the Etruscans, therefore, the gods were continually communicating with humans through a wide variety of signs or omens, which had to be interpreted. Machiavelli coherently presents the Etruscan civilisation by highlighting this element: “Tuscany was then [...] once powerful, full of religion and of virtue, and had its customs and ancestral language [e la sua lingua patria]”⁵⁹. Next to religion, the “ancestral language” should be emphasized in this remark. The possibility of deciphering the Etruscan inscriptions was debated in Florence, after the discovery of a sepulchral burial ground in the Chianti region. From the beginning of 1508, two public figures, close to Machiavelli, Marcello Virgilio di Adriano Berti and Francesco Soderini had corresponded about this possibility, but Soderini reached the conclusion, already adumbrated by Leon Battista Alberti, that the “memory” of that ancient language had to be considered irremediably cancelled and lost⁶⁰. Machiavelli learnt the lessons and by resorting to the remembered arguments on the causes of the “oblivion of things” he could do nothing but conclude that all aspects of Etruscan civilization, religion and language included, “were eliminated by Roman power”. The conclusion is sad, but inevitable: “So, as was said, the memory of its name alone remains of it [di lei ne rimane solo la memoria del nome]”. Machiavelli almost rephrases Lucan: “stat magni nominis umbra”⁶¹. What is important, however, is to grasp the political lesson he draws from this conclusion. There is not enough left of the ancient Etruscans for them to constitute a political model to be imitated by modern Florentines. In this way, Machiavelli distances himself from Giovanni Villani, Leonardo Bruni and other authors that had contributed to elaborate the Etruscan myth. In particular, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, Leonardo Bruni, in his *Historiarum florentini populi libri XII*, had praised the Etruscan civilization and its independent self-governing cities, depicting them as the cradle of republican liberty⁶². Machiavelli could not follow his track: not the Etruscan, but the Roman republican model has to be imitated by the Moderns.

⁵⁷ Livy, *Ab Urbe condita*, V. 1: “The Etruscans as a nation were distinguished above all others by their devotion to religious observances”.

⁵⁸ Seneca, *Quaestiones naturales*, 2. 23. 3

⁵⁹ *Discourses*, II. 5, p. 140; Vivanti, vol. 1, p. 343.

⁶⁰ F. Soderini, Letter of February 23rd 1508: “nulli extant Etruscorum codices, et nemo etrusce loquens iam diu fuit auditus”, quoted in G. Sasso, *De aeternitate mundi*, pp. 398-399.

⁶¹ Lucan, *Pharsalia*, I. 135.

⁶² Cf. G. Cipriani, *Il mito etrusco nel rinascimento fiorentino*, Firenze, Olschki, 1980, pp. 1-13; S. Loriga, *In Search of Origins: Making Etruscans into Italics and Italics into Italians*, paper delivered on November 30th 2016 at the Italian Academy, New York.

8. Machiavelli and beyond: the libertine culture and David Hume

It is well-known that Machiavelli's works had a very critical and multifaceted reception in the three centuries after their publications. Radically contrasting images of the Florentine secretary were at the centre of intellectual debates: the devilish destructor of any possible ethical concern in politics stood side by side with the republican thinker, admirer of the Roman constitution and supporter of a mixed regime⁶³. In particular, as I have already suggested, a number of philosophers, from Harrington to Spinoza, from Rousseau to Nietzsche, took over and reshaped his radical criticism of Christianity, as an impolitical or anti-political religion, that weakens and imperil republican citizenship. I have now to add that also Machiavelli's discussion of the relationship between religion and violence, that we have just considered, was carefully read and reshaped at least by some thinkers. Today, I could mention just two texts: the libertine treatise *Theophrastus Redivivus*⁶⁴, anonymously circulating already at the end of the seventeenth century, and the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, written by David Hume and published only after his death in 1779⁶⁵. But a careful analysis of the texts of the so-called "Radical Enlightenment"⁶⁶ would certainly unearth and reveal other reformulations of the Machiavellian ideas developed in the *Discourses*.

9. Concluding remarks

Which is the take-home message of this long story?

1. In the last twenty-five years, the attitude of many philosophers toward the return of religions, and in particular of monotheistic religions, on the public arena has been too unproblematic. I mentioned in my preliminary remarks the names of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. But obviously many other philosophers could be evoked. They were ready to distance themselves from Enlightenment positions, as Rawls did, they were ready to emphasize the "encoded

⁶³ Cf. G. Procacci, *Machiavelli nella cultura europea dell'età moderna*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1995; S. Anglo, *Machiavelli. The First Century. Studies in Enthusiasm, Hostility, Irrelevance*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2005.

⁶⁴ Cf. *Theophrastus redivivus*, edizione prima e critica a cura di G. Canziani e G. Paganini, 2 voll., Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1981-1982. Also the author of the *Theophrastus redivivus* mentions Gregory the Great as a paradigmatic figure of religious destroyer. On this issue, see T. Gregory, "*Theophrastus redivivus*". *Erudizione e ateismo nella cultura del Seicento*, Napoli, Morano, 1979, p. 13, n. 6.

⁶⁵ Cf. L. Biasiori, "*Un argomento mai sostenuto da alcuno*"? *Machiavelli e Hume in dialogo sull'eternità del mondo*, "Rivista di storia della filosofia", (2016), n. 2, pp. 183-194.

⁶⁶ Cf. J.I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity. 1650-1750*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2002.

semantic potentials” of religions, as Habermas suggested. The long and multi-layered tradition of critique of religion, and of religion practises, did not resurface in their works. It was not politically correct, in our pluralistic and apparently tolerant societies. It seems to me that too many philosophers have closed their eyes toward the violence at the core of many, if not all, monotheistic religions. It seems to me that the dark side of religious experience has been forgotten, or, at least, went out of the critical attention.

2. The history of philosophy, or more broadly the history of ideas and cultures, could help us to distance ourselves from our present, from our values and from our not always fully conscious assumptions. In other words, I would like to suggest that, in the present-day situation, perhaps it could be healthy to pay attention to the bitter pages of Machiavelli. Two unpalatable lessons could be derived from the arguments developed in the *Discourses*:

a) at the core of each religion there is nucleus of violence; persecution and violence are not accidental to religions, but represent a constitutive dimension of their experience;

b) if you want to control the “orderers” and the “leaders” of each religion, and the violence that could stem from their decisions, you have to keep them under a precise political subordination, as happened in the ancient Rome. But in this perspective, a remarkable difference between the rulers and the ruled, between the governing elite and the normal people, remains. The rulers, the governing elite, could not intimately share those religious beliefs that are instead so important for the ruled, for the normal people, those religious beliefs that help to motivate and control them.

As obvious, I am not implying that Machiavelli’s answers have to be directly assumed, without critical discussion, in the present predicament. I am just suggesting that reading Machiavelli and other Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophers, who have attempted to develop a critique of religion, could help us to ask radical questions, that too often are avoided in the “polite” liberal discussion.

3. In the last decades, many philosophers have kept self-referentially reading only philosophers and have not paid sufficient attention to other social sciences. They didn’t read enough works not only in the history of philosophy, but in the fields of anthropology or sociology, or history of religions. To make a long story short, I would say that it could be interesting for us to read the books written by Egyptologists, like Jan Assmann, or by historians of religions, as Thomas

Römer⁶⁷. It could be worthy to confront with the researches of scholars who have focused on the problem of the passage from ancient polytheism to monotheism and have asked themselves the unpleasant questions of the costs of this passage, of this transition. The philosophical diagnosis of the connection between religion and violence could be enriched and complicated by a careful discussion of the outcomes of such researches.

4. Confronting with problems and results of different sciences could enrich philosophy and help philosophical discourse to evade from a certain self-referential attitude and style. In the last decades, philosophy has been largely, if not exclusively, practiced in a normative guise, at least in many departments of the Anglo-Saxon world. There is no doubt that the normative approach is important. What seems less acceptable and interesting are the thousands of articles commenting, for example, a particular point or assumption of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, an assumption that the same Rawls changed in *Political Liberalism* or in his subsequent work. I would like to suggest that there is space also for a different practise of philosophy: a practise more concerned with critique, with the criticism of contemporary practises and institutions. When philosophy is conceived and practised as critique, perhaps there will be also new space for a critical discussion of religions, of the different outcomes of monotheistic and polytheistic faiths, for new researches on the recurrent problem of idolatry.

Conceiving and practising philosophy as critique (to use a formula) would probably also help to establish a different relationship with some aspects of Enlightenment culture. If John Rawls felt the necessity to distance himself, and his political liberalism, from what he called "Enlightenment liberalism", now we could probably look at certain questions tackled by Eighteenth-century thinkers with new attention and respect.

⁶⁷ T. Römer, *L'invention de Dieu*, Paris, Seuil, 2014; English Translation: *The Invention of God*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2015. See also T. Römer, *Dieu obscure. Cruauté, seve et violence dans l'Ancien Testament*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 2009; English Translation: *Dark God: Cruelty, Sex, and Violence in the Old Testament*, New York, Paulist Press, 2013.