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# The Power of a Prince: Machiavelli, Devotion, and the Secularization of Western Politics

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The Power of a Prince: Machiavelli, Devotion, and the Secularization of Western Politics

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## Introduction

In 1513, the Italian Peninsula was in political disarray. A multitude of corrupt kingdoms and city-states tirelessly vied for power under the adamant rule of the Catholic Church, a similarly immoral institution, creating a sense of unease for anybody in power attempting to maintain any semblance of personal stability. It was amidst this uncertainty that Niccolò Machiavelli, a Florentine statesman, wrote *The Prince*, an appeal to Florence's powerful Medici family in the form of a treatise advising powerful elites on the best methods of securing and maintaining absolute power in a variety of governmental systems. Among these systems, Machiavelli emphasized ecclesiastical states--principalities under the direct rule of a religious entity--as the ideal model for the effectual preservation of power for rulers.

Published posthumously, Machiavelli's seminal work ruffled feathers in the Italian elite and beyond for several reasons, most of which threw all semblance of moral pretense out the window. For example, he exalted religion only as a method of maintaining social control over principalities, not as an acceptable personal practice for any ruler worth his salt: "There is nothing more necessary to appear to have than this quality [religiosity], inasmuch as men judge generally more by the eye than by the hand, because it belongs to everybody to see you, to few to come in touch with you."<sup>1</sup> Despite pushback, *The Prince's* sphere of influence expanded beyond its original bounds, serving as a turning point in the tale of Christianity and Western politics' entanglement. This shift is evidenced by the rapid political rejection of the Church in the years following its publication by movements like the Reformation, the formation of the Church of England, and the Peace of Augsburg. By expressly establishing religion as a social utility rather than a legitimate practice, Machiavelli created a lasting, practical anti-Church sentiment in Western political spheres, presenting a distinct historical watershed marking the adoption of religious ideals as political tools.

## Machiavelli and Faith

As with most expository writing of the time, *The Prince* contains references to the Bible, a fact that speaks not to Machiavelli's own preferences but to the deep-seated integration of Christianity into the fabric of society. This integration, however, is what makes the underlying

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<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*. 1968. ed. London, England; New York: Everyman's Library, 1968, 100.

meaning of his allusions all the more significant. In addition to outright statements expressing his opinion of the proper use of religion, Machiavelli venerates key Old Testament figures such as Moses as the original founders of the ideal ecclesiastical state, which are “sustained by the ancient ordinances of religion, which are so all-powerful and of such a character that the principalities may be held no matter how their princes behave and live.”<sup>2</sup> However, he also lauds secular examples of successful leadership to the same degree as biblical ones, with Moses held to the same standard as Romulus, Theseus, and Cyrus: “But to come to those, who, by their own ability and not through fortune, have risen to the princes, I say that Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus are the most excellent examples.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, he implies his disregard for the religious figures’ piety, choosing to weigh in on only their earthly successes. Under the mask of religious deference, the connotations of Machiavelli’s rhetorical choices serve to subtly push his real perspective.

As with other standout works in the Western canon, *The Prince* has been interpreted to a variety of ends based on the views of the reader. Modern-day scholars have tirelessly scoured the treatise for any evidence to support their own schemas about Machiavelli and the extent of his influence in the modern world, and even attribute parts of the United States Constitution and Stalinism to his ideas.<sup>4</sup> However, if Machiavelli’s ideas are as open to interpretation as today’s scholars would have us believe, then how would leaders in his own time have any more of a clue than those in the present? One errant interpretation of *The Prince* nearly lost Machiavelli his chance to exert the influence he did. In 1559, the treatise was famously placed on the Index of Pope Paul IV because of the author’s offenses against Christian morals. The Papal Index, or the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, was a list of texts determined by the Catholic Church to be immoral or dangerous to the faith of Roman Catholics, and condemned their printing in all of

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<sup>2</sup> Machiavelli, 61.

<sup>3</sup> Machiavelli, 28.

<sup>4</sup> Although there is little evidence that any of the Founding Fathers besides John Adams extensively studied and took into account Machiavelli’s ideas, many posit that he resurrected a lost republican tradition that was transmitted to the New World as it merged with Enlightenment ideals, thus influencing the Framers’ ideology as a whole. As for Stalin, the dictator annotated his own copy of *The Prince*, and put Machiavelli’s advice on crushing enemies totally to good use--countless individuals deemed dangerous to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union were executed during his reign. Thus, Stalinism assured that the dictator was widely feared rather than loved, and that his opponents did not stand a chance in their intolerance of his rule.

Christendom.<sup>5</sup> By placing *The Prince* on the Index, the Church publicly condemned not only the book but Machiavelli himself, and acknowledged the distinct rift between his version of political strategy and the policy they condoned.

Among the lesser-known controversies concerning *The Prince*'s publication, however, there stands a conflict equally as pivotal as the Pope's reception. In 1580, an edition from the press of Pietro Perna in Basel, Switzerland sowed much division north of the Alps because Perna prefaced Machiavelli's already-demonized work with a piece of anonymous writing on the God-given nature of political power, as well as with translations of works by Dio Cassius on the question of whether monarchies or republics are superior in providing power to the ruling class.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Perna's own preface directly advocated for Machiavellianism in political practice: "In fact, Machiavelli does not create a tyranny, but a genuine prince: he wants him (if it is possible) to keep the people in peace by all means; if it is not possible, he seeks to remove every obstacle for the principality to remain in the greatest harmony possible."<sup>7</sup> In an area that already used Machiavelli's name as a slur in the wake of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572, this publication was immediately ostracized. Indeed, despite the popular resentment of the divisive force of Catholic rule, even Machiavelli's blatant disappointment at the failure of Italian politician Cesare Borgia to kill his father, Pope Alexander VI, did not sway any Protestants in his favor.<sup>8</sup> A massive trial concerning the monarchist implications of the publication's content ensued, bringing to the public eye the acutely cynical view Protestant-majority regions had of *The Prince* despite its anti-Catholic appeal. In the minds of the Protestant populus, it was indecent material supported by the Church.<sup>9 10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lenard, Max. "On the Origin, Development and Demise of the Index Librorum Prohibitorum." *Journal of Access Services* 3, no. 4 (2006): 51-63.

<sup>6</sup> Almási, Gábor. "Experientia and the Machiavellian Turn in Religio-political and Scientific Thinking: Basel in 1580." *History of European Ideas* 42, no. 7 (2016): 857-81.

<sup>7</sup> Almási, 869.

<sup>8</sup> Scott, John T., and Vickie B. Sullivan. "Patricide and the Plot of the Prince: Cesare Borgia and Machiavelli's Italy." *The American Political Science Review* 88, no. 4 (1994): 887-900.

<sup>9</sup> Soll, Jacob, -. "The Reception of The Prince 1513–1700, or Why We Understand Machiavelli the Way We Do." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2014): 31-60.

<sup>10</sup> Although the Church, as discussed earlier, did not condone the advice espoused in *The Prince*, Protestants were quick to point fingers at the Pope in the case of all sorts of malfeasance.

As the Reformation continued to decimate the influence of the Catholic Church throughout Europe well into the 17th Century, *The Prince* remained highly influential. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Henry VIII, as a part of the first generation to read it, adamantly stood by England's separation from Papal authority in 1534. Other components of his rule were classically Machiavellian as well, but the revolutionary establishment of the Church of England is still of consequence today.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the creation of the Church of England was the result of Henry VIII's desire to divorce and remarry in an attempt to produce a male heir to the throne. In a time when it was crucial for hereditary rulers to have sons, this was not an act of mere preference; rather, Henry VIII engaged in a potentially Machiavellian play for his legacy's survival. Instead of endearing himself to the Catholic Church, he impressed his sovereignty upon his peers and his subjects by placing himself at the head of a new Church. Henry's actions were in accordance with *The Prince's* spirit of amassing power of all kinds, even without the treatise's anti-papal sentiment. To this day, the Church of England allows the monarch to appear superior to their citizenry through direct association with the divine.

The Peace of Augsburg in 1555 is also a move to empower Machiavellian rule, as it strengthened religious unity within participating countries through a system of *Cuius regio, eius religio*- "Whose realm, his religion."<sup>12</sup> A treaty of that nature was necessary because of the decades of religious war that broke out in the wake of the Reformation, but was easily taken advantage of in a domestic context because it allowed for monarchs to manipulate public opinion more efficiently through their shared universal belief system. In aligning the citizenry's religion with that of their leader in multiple Western countries, the Peace of Augsburg allowed rulers greater social control within their own nations.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the anti-Catholic sentiment that fueled the Reformation, a marked shift towards autocratic manipulation of widespread religious belief occurred in the wake of *The Prince's* creation.

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<sup>11</sup> Shore, Miles F. "Henry VIII and the Crisis of Generativity." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2, no. 4 (1972): 359-90.

<sup>12</sup> "September 25th: The Peace of Augsburg." *The Davenant Institute*, 2 Oct. 2017, [davenantinstitute.org/september-25th-peace-augsburg/](http://davenantinstitute.org/september-25th-peace-augsburg/). Accessed January 29, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> The underlying assumption in this regard was that upon the citizenry's conversion, they would personally accept the new belief system as true, regardless of their previous faith. Thus, the public consciousness would become much easier for an autocrat to manipulate as a result of his more complete comprehension of the internal moral drive guiding his subjects.

Between the Peace of Augsburg and the advent of 21st century political strategy, Machiavelli's advice broke into the mainstream. As the influence of the Church and the Holy Roman Empire waned over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, leaders took to Machiavellianism with increasing openness, tracing a tangible line of his influence throughout Western history. Nearly three hundred years after its initial publication, *The Prince* retained its relevance through the advent of Otto von Bismarck's *realpolitik*. This particular strategy focuses on the real-world effects of policy, rather than their intended results, and marks a complete shift in mainstream political strategy from that of Machiavelli's time.<sup>14</sup> As *realpolitik* is so often described as Machiavellian in origin, *The Prince* offers historians a unique viewpoint from which to observe the transition of politics from idealism to pragmatism. This evident shift in the Western political schema suggests that Machiavelli's treatise caught on in the upper echelons of European political elites despite its near-immediate heretical status in the minds of the general populus. Given that Machiavelli stood so far out of bounds of the Renaissance's respectable Christian schema that he may as well have been an atheist in the modern sense, it may have been a stroke of good fortune on his part that his treatise was published at such a turbulent time. Rulers who would not otherwise dream of following his morally questionable advice likely felt compelled to employ Machiavelli's suggested use of force and manipulation by the threat of losing their power to citizen uprisings.

Although *The Prince* has been maligned throughout history, its effectual nature is very much alive, perhaps even as a result of its infamy from the aforementioned affair in Basel. All such conflict was incited in the midst of the Reformation, which began only 4 years after *The Prince* was written. Machiavelli, it seems, was with the times. Adapting to change was a practice he expressed as paramount to a successful reign, despite the fact that "A man is not often found sufficiently circumspect to know how to accommodate himself to the change..."<sup>15</sup> This ideal attribute bears a striking similarity to the Christian theological concept of divine accommodation, in which God, while retaining his original immutability and omnipotence, adapts his extrinsic presentation to shifting human norms in order to maintain his appeal to

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<sup>14</sup> Rathbun, Brian. "The Rarity of Realpolitik: What Bismarck's Rationality Reveals about International Politics." *International Security* 43, no. 1 (2018): 7-55.

<sup>15</sup> Machiavelli, 141.

mankind.<sup>16</sup> Divine accommodation first appeared in theology as early as the writings of Augustine and Origen, and through them became a mainstay in medieval Christian exegesis.<sup>17</sup> Closer to Machiavelli's time, Reformation theologians rekindled conversations surrounding the concept in relation to the era's new biblical perspectives.<sup>18</sup> Especially prominent in the writings of Reformation leader John Calvin, divine accommodation experienced rebirth in sixteenth century scholastic dialogues.<sup>19</sup> In practice, a near-absolute translation of divine into a political context ensures that a leader may be both feared and loved, as Machiavelli advises<sup>20</sup>-- feared for his readiness to physically enforce his rule, and loved for his perpetually-maximized public appeal. Thus, Machiavelli "...secularizes divine accommodation and transposes the powers of infinite adaptability and flexibility on to the ideal ruling prince."<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, Machiavelli employs a pointedly messianic description of politics as God's instrument of divine providence on Earth.<sup>22</sup> In conjunction with his imposition of divine accommodation onto the ideal prince, this only adds to his deification of proper rule. Therefore, in the absence of sincere belief, a true Machiavellian prince acknowledges no higher power than himself. Casting aside his own advice to not dwell excessively on the ideal, Machiavelli assigns divine attributes to his vision of a perfect supreme ruler, furthering his assertion that princes should reject religion in their personal lives in order to rule without the veil that blinds their subjects.

## Conclusion

Nearly five hundred years after *The Prince's* publication, we still live in a decidedly Machiavellian world. In the United States, although the Constitution explicitly outlaws the integration of any faith into systems of governance, religion plays just as large of a role in

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<sup>16</sup> van Bemmelen, Peter M. "Divine Accommodation in Revelation and Scripture." *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, no. 9 (1998): 221-229.

<sup>17</sup> Battles, Ford Lewis. "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity." *Union Seminary Review* 31, no. 1 (1977): 19-38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096437703100103>.

<sup>18</sup> Battles, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Battles, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Machiavelli, 87.

<sup>21</sup> Kirkpatrick, Richard. "Machiavelli among the Doctors: The Prince and Divine Accommodation." *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 18, no. 2 (2016): 123-36.

<sup>22</sup> Vatter, Miguel. "Machiavelli and the Republican Conception of Providence." *The Review of Politics* 75, no. 4 (2013): 605-23.

policymaking as it does in people's personal lives. In addition to religious belief guiding legislation on a personal level for many elected officials, political candidates shamelessly appeal to voting blocs of all religious stripes, from Muslim immigrant communities in the Midwest to Evangelical Christians in the South. Politicians running for office rely on the religiously-inspired political leanings of their constituents as a surefire way to garner votes. In the centuries since *The Prince's* publication, appeals to faith have been inherent in increasingly competitive electoral systems, and for good reason- few if any free nations have a majority-atheist voting base.

In addition, realism in politics is another Machiavellian initiative that has been permanently affixed to the Western political schema.<sup>23</sup> The shift from leadership with the ideal results in mind to recognition of the actual impacts of policy occurs rapidly in the wake of *The Prince's* publication, perhaps stoked by the increasing number of peasant revolts by those disenchanted with their kings and the Catholic Church. Given a name nearly three hundred years after *The Prince's* publication, *realpolitik* saw its nascence with Machiavelli, specifically with regard to the political implications of religious diversity, both in denomination and overall intensity of devotion.

The real impact of *The Prince* lies not in its original direct appeal to the Medici family, but in the lasting use of religion as a social tool in Western politics. Published at the nascence of a watershed in Western history, the treatise served as a secularizing influence among European political elites, acting on a parallel trajectory to the increased atheism of the populus over time.<sup>24</sup> The conflict surrounding its publication and perpetuation under both Catholic and Protestant systems only served to further its influence over time by way of infamy. In addition, there are direct links between its secularizing influence and events such as the Reformation, advent of the Church of England, and the Peace of Augsburg. Its influence continues in modern-day America, where appealing to religious devotion in order to garner support has long been a successful tactic

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<sup>23</sup> Suchowlansky, Mauricio. "Machiavelli's Legacy: The Prince after 500 Years." *Contemporary Political Theory* 16, no. 2 (2017): 286-89.

<sup>24</sup> "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, December 31, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s--decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>. Accessed January 27, 2020.

for political candidates. Although *The Prince* is one of the most maligned works in the Western canon because it openly advocates for inhumane actions in the name of attaining power, its chief influence remains the shift of religion's role in politics from a legitimate practice for leaders to a tool for social control.

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