The Prince and the Prophet of Florence: Investigating the Impact of Savonarola's Anthropology on the Political Philosophy of Machiavelli

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate a connection between the political thought of Machiavelli and the philosophy prevalent in the work of Girolamo Savonarola. In this consideration, it will be necessary to examine the works of Savonarola. After considering Savonarola, the study focuses on Machiavelli and apparent similarities between the two men's writings. In addition to cross-referencing Machiavelli and Savonarola, it is necessary to cross-reference the work of Machiavelli with other humanist sources to determine whether or not Machiavelli's alternative perspectives of human nature can be synthesized into the larger context of the scholarship of his day. For this purpose, the works of Coluccio Salutati and Desiderius Erasmus are examined as representatives of two different cross sections of Renaissance culture and literature. This examination seeks to focus emphasis on the similarity between Machiavelli's writing and Savonarola's preaching.

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In a 1498 letter, Niccolò Machiavelli related his opinion of several sermons preached by a certain monk in San Marco. In passing, he seemed to approve of the speaker's use of biblical texts to stir up support among his followers, yet his final analysis was that the friar "acts in accordance with the times and colors his lies accordingly."[1] This monk appeared again in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, where Machiavelli attributed his excommunication and execution to an inability to command arms, contrasting him with successful statesmen such as Romulus and Moses.[2] This friar was Girolamo Savonarola, who from 1490 to 1498 altered the political balance of Florence by preaching against the depredations of the wealthy and the corruption of the church. While he was initially successful in creating a more "democratic" state in Florence (as compared to the "republic" which had allowed the de facto rule of the Medici family), his vocal protests against corrupt Catholic clergy earned him the ire of the pope, which led to his demise.

The references to Savonarola coloring his lies and failing due to a lack of arms could be identified by casual scholarship as the only points of connection between Savonarola and Machiavelli, especially since Savonarola was a noted anti-humanist and Machiavelli drew heavily from classical sources. However, this reading is incomplete and overlooks thematic similarities which show that Savonarola's political thought and

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[1] Niccolò Machiavelli to Ricciardo Becchi, 9 March 1498, translated and edited by James B. Atkinson and David Sices, *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 10.

[2] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince,* trans. and ed. Angelo M. Codevilla (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 22-23.

views of human nature were shared by Machiavelli. While Savonarola's ideology is not a direct equivalent to Machiavelli's thought, Machiavelli displayed ideological facets which are remarkably similar to Savonarola in both *The Prince* and his *Discourses on Livy*, indicating the distinct possibility that Savonarola's ideas directly influenced Machiavelli's conceptions of human nature, his preoccupation with Moses as an example of governance, and even some of his philosophy of republican governance in his written works. In order to discern any correlation between Machiavelli and Savonarola's ideology, it is first necessary to have a better understanding of the friar and his beliefs. Savonarola's thought was consistently concerned with the spiritual well-being of the citizens of Florence, which led to his political activism and advocacy of moralistic laws. However, his primary concern remained the spiritual renewal of the populace from the time of his arrival in Florence. This reform-mindedness manifested itself even in the monk's early years.

Savonarola

As early as his 20s, Savonarola displayed a disenchantment with the world as it was, eventually placing himself within a religious order with the intention of changing the world from within the church.[3] His poetry from his pre-monastery years showed this disenchantment, as well as a critical view of humanity. He decried those who controlled the church, designating them as pirates and debauched individuals.[4] In another passage

[3] Konrad Eisenbicher, Introduction to *A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works* (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2003), 2-3.

[4] Girolamo Savonarola, "On the Ruin of the World," in *A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*, trans. Konrad Eisenbicher (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2003), 62.

evocative of Psalm 14, he mourned that "all men turn their backs on doing good."[5] He continued this theme in "On the Ruin of the Church," which focused less on the nature of humanity as a whole and more on the corruption of the church itself. Here, Savonarola spoke of a church which was walking about in poverty, its former glory turned into patchwork tatters by the abuses of its leaders.[6] This poem directly decried the carnal nature of the church in Savonarola's time, comparing it with the virgin church, to whom the poem is addressed.[7] In yet another work, he directly criticized the sinful nature of man, asking whether or not they "understand this world is naught . . . for if your soul is foul, what is the worth / of jewels, scepters, and the world's esteem?"[8] Such statements indicate a focus on the sinfulness of man with the intent of transforming the society around him.

This perception served as a basis for the rest of Savonarola's public ministry. His sermons carried on similar themes of the evil nature of man and the necessity for change. In his fervor to cleanse the souls of men, he led the charge against the humanist movement which was prevalent throughout Italy. He attacked its focus on human life and called ignoring death "foolishness."[9] It is better, he said, to keep one's death before

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[5] Ibid., 63.

[6] Girolamo Savonarola, "On the Ruin of the Church," in *A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*, trans. Konrad Eisenbicher (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2003), 66-67.

[7] Ibid., 64-65.

[8] Girolamo Savonarola, "Song to Saint Catherine of Bologna," in *A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*, trans. Konrad Eisenbicher (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2003), 70.

[9] Girolamo Savonarola, "Ruth and Micheas, Sermon XXVIII," in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*, trans. and ed. Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 35.

one's eyes in order to foster holiness and wisdom.[10] He criticized churchmen with humanist tendencies, accusing them of trying to "guide men's souls by means of Virgil, Horace, and Cicero" rather than executing their roles as shepherds of the people.[11] In addition to attacking religious figures for using classical sources, he decried corrupt priests for leading extravagant immoral lives. In one sermon, he referred to these priests as demonic figures, more wicked than the souls in their care.[12] The only solution, for both the populace and the clergy, was to "repent, and do penance."[13] This call for practical repentance led to moral reform and political reform.

While Savonarola had influence within the political system of Florence, his attitude of penance led to the proclamation of moral reform. In addition to the repression of fireworks, dancing, poetry, and gambling, he supported laws that dramatically increased the penalties for sodomy, called a "vice" at the time for which Florence was particularly infamous in Italy. The law passed by the two city councils in relation to sodomy was incredibly harsh. The range of penalties based on number of offenses started with a public pillorying and ended with the public burning of the individual after three offenses.[14] This moral reform was deemed necessary to safeguard those who were in the city from being taken by the world. Savonarola's metaphor of choice for this

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[10] Ibid., 37.

[11] Girolamo Savonarola, "Advent Sermon," in *The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance: a Sourcebook*, ed. Kenneth R. Bartlett (North York: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 221.

[12] Girolamo Savonarola, "Sermons on the book of Haggai, Sermon no. 1," in *A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*, trans. Konrad Eisenbicher (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2003), 85.

[13] Ibid., 81.

[14] Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 154-156.

safeguard was the ark, which he equated with Florence following the overthrow of the Medici family. To remain safe within the ark was to "live in the world, but live according to God, 'our Noah.'"[15] The ark's safety needed governmental support, which required a change in the politics of Florence.

Savonarola's view of human nature also influenced his political thought. In his *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence,* the friar looked to the development of laws within a society as a means of restraining the natural evil of humans, claiming that there was "no animal more evil than a man without law."[16] Given this view, he could be expected to adopt a position similar to that of Thomas Aquinas in *On the Government of Princes,* which advocated that the monarchy was the best form of government. Indeed, Savonarola's initial statements appear to agree with Aquinas on this point.[17] He agreed with Aquinas that since man is not universally good, laws are necessary to restrain wickedness.[18]

However, Savonarola quickly diverged from his source material and made his own bold conclusion. After acknowledging Aquinas's arguments and even admitting that a singular ruler might be the best option in some scenarios, he changed direction and stated that such a government is not possible in all cases.[19] Rather, Savonarola wrote that

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[15] Ibid., 119.

[16] Girolamo Savonarola, *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence,* in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498,* trans. and ed. Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 178.

[17] Ibid., 180-181.

[18] Weinstein, *Savonarola,* 128.

[19] Girolamo Savonarola, *Treatise on Government,* 180-181.

a government of one would not survive among humans, particularly in Florence, "given that the bad are always more numerous than the good, through the shrewdness . . . of evil-minded citizens . . . either the prince would be betrayed and killed or he would be forced to become a tyrant."[20] Savonarola also rejected oligarchy, believing that the Florentines would not hold to such a government given their republican history.[21]

Based on his rejection of these two beneficial forms of government, Savonarola looked to a "civil government," hedged with strong laws and provisions, to prevent the rise of a tyrannical government.[22] The republic which Machiavelli worked in (and appeared to approve of, given his overall bent in the *Discourses*) was the outcome of Savonarola's work. While Florence had nominally been a republic even while under the de facto rule of the Medici, Savonarola sought to create a government which in the future would be safe from the dominance of any single individual.

Ultimately, Savonarola ruffled a few too many feathers in his quest to craft a "New Jerusalem" in Florence. When the French King Charles VIII first invaded in 1494, Savonarola led the civilian delegation which was able to safeguard the Florence's freedom following the disastrous diplomacy and ouster of Piero de' Medici.[23] Savonarola believed that the French king was acting as the "sword of God" and successfully negotiated a treaty between the French and the city.[24] Due to Savonarola's

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[20] Ibid., 182.

[21]Ibid., 182-183.

[22] Ibid., 199.

[23] Weinstein, *Savonarola,* 109

influence, Florence failed to join the "Holy League" opposing French invasion created by Pope Alexander VI. In retaliation, and under the influence of several anti-Savonarola partisans with ties to the Vatican, the pope excommunicated the friar in 1497. Savonarola's control of the city had not been absolute even at the best of times, and this new development exacerbated the divisions in the city.[25] Anti-Savanarolan factions became more vocal in their protest, which eventually escalated into a literal gauntlet of fire being laid down in challenge to the preacher. This resulted in a trial by fire that turned into a giant fiasco conveniently drowned out by a rain storm, and Savonarola lost the support of the majority of the city.[26] After failing to prove the veracity of his claims of prophecy, Savonarola was arrested, tortured, forced to confess to lying about his prophetic visions, and executed along with several of his followers. However, despite the return of the Medici to power in the aftermath of his time in Florence, his followers continued to push for republican reform in the city.[27] Others, while they may not have identified as followers of the friar, were influenced by his thought.

Knowing now how Savonarola's thought impacted Florence around the time that Machiavelli was entering politics enables us to determine the degree of influence he had on Machiavelli, and even some recent scholarship has stated that Machiavelli was

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[24] Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 116.

[25] Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Renaissance Florence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 169-170.

[26] Ibid., 224-230.

[27] Indeed, they managed to hold onto some power in the republic and saw some success under Soderini, even though he was neutral to the cause. See John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence: 1200-1575* (Malden: Wiley/Blackwell, 2008), 408-409.

interested in Savonarola primarily as an example of failure in statecraft. For instance, in his biography of Savonarola, Donald Weinstein limits his mention of Machiavelli's analysis of Savonarola's failure to explicit references, such as the friar's inability to use force against his enemies. As he rightly posits, Savonarola had no arms of his own, being a man of God (and one without the ability to command arms, at that). As such, Savonarola was "reduced to railing at his enemies, to reproach them . . . while hoping that his supporters, who did have the authority to raise arms, would take the cue and do what needed to be done."[28] This obviously failed, and thus Machiavelli is able to juxtapose the friar with other successful leaders in *The Prince.*

Later in *The Prince,* Machiavelli references the sins which Savonarola claimed were the cause of the French invasion. There were sins involved, but Machiavelli states "the sins were not the ones [Savonarola] believed they were."[29] According to Machiavelli, Savonarola was mistaken in assuming the sins were exclusively those vices which were purged while the friar was in power. Rather, the primary sin of which the princes were guilty was an overreliance on mercenaries.[30] Savonarola also receives explicit mention in the *Discourses on Livy,* where Machiavelli used him as a platform to advise a certain skepticism in relation to religion, despite its benefits to the state.[31] These references to Savonarola's ineffectiveness are as far as Weinstein is willing to give

[28] Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 311-312.

[29] Machiavelli, *The Prince,* 46.

[30] Ibid., 45-46.

[31] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy,* trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 35-36.

Savonarola credit as any sort of influence of Machiavelli, ideological or exemplary (or so it seems from this study). However, certain themes and arguments carry throughout Machiavelli's works that have distinctly Savonarolan overtones in relation to both Machiavelli's peculiar view of humanity and his republican ideals.

Machiavelli

Little is known about Machiavelli in his youth. However, he would have witnessed the decline of Medici power following the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent in 1492 and the rise of Piero II de'Medici. Piero was not a strong leader, and he was unable to drown out the voices of dissent that were hidden during the rule of his predecessor.[32] He thus would have also watched the rise of Savonarola to power in 1494, and he began working within the structure of the republican government which Savonarola helped create, although he did not attain office until a few days after the friar's death.[33] He then worked under the regime of Piero Soderini, a man whose goal was to dial back Savonarola's quasi-populistic ideas of freedom in favor of a more conservative ruling elite. Within this government, Machiavelli received experience working with both the military and diplomatic sides of government.[34] As a diplomat, he witnessed the rise of Cesare Borgia (son of Pope Alexander VI) as a political power and spent time in his travelling court in the early 1500s. His writings from the time show a degree of

[32] Christopher S. Celenza, *Machiavelli: A Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 25-26.

[33] Corrado Vivanti, *Machiavelli: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 8.

[34] Celenza, *Machiavelli,* 32-34.

fascination with Cesare's leadership over his Italian holdings.[35] After the failure of Cesare's state, Machiavelli's observation of the Borgia court led into his new career with the Florentine militia.[36] His time with the militia explains his interest in the controversy over the use of mercenaries. Machiavelli's statements regarding mercenaries and controlling one's own arms drew upon his time interacting with Florence's troops. His time in Florentine government indubitably influenced his later perspectives on the nature of republican governments and even the nature of autocratic rule.

Machiavelli's writing aims to rectify the lack of consistency which he perceives in the public perception. It was common to praise Moses and David, heroes of Christendom, for their virtues in leadership, but these same attributes, if found in dictators, were ignored at best.[37] He saw this as a morality based on imagination, one which he sought to replace with a philosophy based on the real world. Indeed, despite its publication years after *The Prince*, Erasmus's *Education of a Christian Prince* is a prime example of the kind of "imaginary" philosophy Machiavelli condemned. This teaching resonates with the reader, because an "ought" that is based on faulty suppositions and shown to fail is not compelling to the reader. Machiavelli's assault on a value system he sees as irrational is designed to disenchant the reader with the old view of good governance.[38] In response, the reader will naturally assume that Machiavelli's more

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[35] Ibid., 36.

[36] Ibid., 39.

[37] Codevilla, "Words and Power," xxvi.

[38] Indeed, it is not an overstatement to accuse Machiavelli of acting as the serpent to his readers' Eve, a point made by Codevilla and cited later in this work's conclusion

practical path is better than the woefully quixotic system it replaced.[39] Machiavelli's work was an appeal for a position in yet another new government following a stint in prison, yet comparing *The Prince* to its contemporaries is the study of a revolution in the language of political science.[40] In this radical departure from the accepted political theory of the humanist movement, Machiavelli's works show some ideological similarities with Savonarola's.

Machiavelli referred to Moses as one of his ideals of statesmanship. The individual who first came to this conclusion was Savonarola himself, who took stories of Moses killing the Egyptian and defending Jethro's daughters as examples of what he himself undertook in attacking the clergy.[41] Machiavelli noted his use of the idea of Moses as a great statesman, though acquainted with violence, in his letter regarding Savonarola's sermons in 1498. He refers to the section where Savonarola spoke of Moses killing the Egyptian particularly, stating that the friar equated the Egyptian with "evil-doers" and Moses with "the preacher who slew them by exposing their vices."[42] He attacked the clergy specifically, since he saw them as those most guilty of bringing ruin to the city, but also because there existed members of the priestly community who sought to undermine his authority by getting the pope to excommunicate him.[43] Savonarola

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[39] Ibid., xxxii.

[40] Angelo M. Codevilla, Editor's introduction to *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), ix-x.

[41] Vivien Gaston, "The Prophet Armed: Machiavelli, Savonarola, and Rosso Fiorentino's Moses Defending the Daughters of Jethro," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes,* 51 (1988), 221-222.

[42] Machiavelli, "Letter to Becchi," 10.

[43] Gaston, "The Prophet Armed," 222.

believed himself a modern version of Moses, a conceit which Machiavelli mocks by positing the opposite in his writings.

The fact that Machiavelli took hold of the concept of Moses as statesman, despite his use of it to critique the friar, is an indicator of the force with which Savonarola's imagery and thought made an impact on him. In the *Discourses on Livy,* he references Moses and Savonarola as being of the same nature, stating that Moses was "forced to kill infinite men who, moved by nothing other than envy, were opposed to his plans."[44] Machiavelli saw Moses as the ideal statesman because he had a capacity for ruthlessness and decisive action, which he construed as essential following the political upheaval in Florence during the Medici restoration.[45] In contrast, and in keeping with Machiavelli's prior references in *The Prince* to Savonarola's lack of arms, the friar "could not conquer [envy] because he did not have the authority to enable him to do it and because he was not understood well by those who followed him."[46] Machiavelli's use of Moses indicates an appreciation of Savonarola's point, even though he assesses the friar as incapable of applying it.

Machiavelli's view of human nature was far removed from that of the average humanist. While humanists generally believed that there was an intrinsic good to humanity, Machiavelli viewed the world with an interest in the propensity of man for wrongdoing. According to one author, Machiavelli "saw men as selfish and egotistical

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[44] Machiavelli, *Discourses,* 280.

[45] Gaston, "The Prophet Armed," 223.

[46] Ibid.

creatures, concerned primarily with their own interest, and rarely if ever capable of generous or selfless action."[47] This ideology is prevalent within the pages of his most well-known work, *The Prince.* Over the course of his treatise on statecraft, he takes note of how wicked deeds might be used to accelerate one's goals, although the public acclamation of these deeds may be seen as lacking "virtue."[48] Indeed, he made special note of how one's evil deeds should be taken considered in advance and executed all at once, in order to avoid the human tendency to escalate wrongdoing unnecessarily.[49] Elsewhere, he mentioned the inability of republics to defend themselves with mercenaries, since they are loyal to another power and therefore are likely to turn upon the hapless state despite the arrangements they should be expected to honor.[50]

Thus, Machiavelli's work is not simply a treatise on human nature. Instead, his writing exhibits a distinct method of thinking, which turned the Platonic and Aristotelian models of justice and government on their head. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli gave his readers a new perspective on the philosophy of morality in leadership, an area which had been virtually unquestioned up to this time. Machiavelli took up a comparison between attributes regarded "virtuous" and vicious in leaders, finding that ultimately what is deemed morally admirable is often actually strategically foolhardy.[51] His list he puts up

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[47] Gene A. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1969), 279.

[48] Machiavelli, *The Prince,* 33. This is a mindset that his work seeks to turn the reader away from by trying to convince the reader to accept a more pragmatic mindset of virtue.

[49] Ibid., 35.

[50] Ibid., 50-51.

[51] Angelo M. Codevilla, "Words and Power," introduction to *The Prince*, by Niccolò Machiavelli (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xxxiii.

for this comparison is heavily biased; he often chooses counterpoints of "beneficial" vices to use as straw men, despite the fact that no sane churchman would ever consider them virtuous. He is able to make this argument convincing by redirecting in the reader's mind the nature of good and evil—a feat which he primarily accomplishes before chapter XV of his work. In these preceding chapters, he focuses on the definition of virtue, while arguing that what is virtuous in tyrants will never be praised by the public due to the cruelty of those who practice it.[52] The tyrant's ability, while it may be virtuous and good, is abhorred by the public due to his lack of perceived moral restraint.

It is important to note in passing that Machiavelli did not define virtue in the sense most readers immediately think. Rather than simply being an act, which constitutes a moral good, virtue is that set of actions which is seen by the outside society as praiseworthy and admirable.[53] This idea, to some extent, rises from an idea of virtue which relates to the intrinsic nature of a thing. A prince's virtue will be different from that of a dentist.[54] Machiavelli took this idea and ran with it, examining this ideal of virtue through his own lens, an exercise which made him one of the first philosophers in history to equate virtue primarily with the concept of power.[55]

But despite the benefits of these actions, he urges caution, for a public display of too many virtues can destabilize a prince's fortunes. In particular, he refers to liberality

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[52] Ibid., xxix.

[53] William J. Connell, introduction to *The Prince*, by Niccolò Machiavelli (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), ix-x.

[54] Codevilla, "Words and Power," xxvii.

[55] Ibid.

as a dangerous virtue, urging that a prince ought to cultivate the reputation of a miser, so that his liberality might be more appreciated and less likely to cause instability for his state. Otherwise, Machiavelli warns, consistent liberality will require the prince to heavily burden and tax his subjects, which will lead to hatred.[56] This hatred, since it could lead to an uprising, does more harm than a miserly attitude. The relationship between the attitudes of liberality and the burden of taxation is one which Savonarola previously noted. Here, Machiavelli's language directly mirrors that of Savonarola.[57]

The similarities between Machiavelli and Savonarola are not limited to their anthropology. Politically speaking, Machiavelli's views are more republican than authoritarian, as can be seen in his idealization of the early republic of Rome in the *Discourses on Livy*. These works take political thought not only from the ancient historian, but also from Thomas Aquinas, whose six categories of society may be seen in the opening pages of the work.[58] Given the influence that Aquinas had on Savonarola's treatise on Florentine politics, it is not surprising that Machiavelli would share much of his initial language with Savonarola. Indeed, it has been noted that both authors similarly dismiss Aquinas's arguments, despite using his six types of government as their starting point.[59] Machiavelli, in a similar fashion to Savonarola, seeks to make a republic as attractive as possible by exploring the state of the Romans, with a particular eye to how

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[56] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 59.

[57] J. H. Whitfield, "Savonarola and the Purpose of *The Prince*," *Modern Language Review* 44, no. 1 (Jan. 1949): 52.

[58] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 11.

[59] Whitfield, "Savonarola and *The Prince,"* 48.

Rome's actions might be beneficial to the city of Florence. Machiavelli's belief in republican forms of government may very well be tied to his time spent working within Florence's republic, but since the republic's existence at this time was still in no small part due to the efforts of Savonarola it is difficult to deny the friar at least a passing influence on Machiavelli's thought in this area.

It may be further noted that Machiavelli's concern with a prince becoming a tyrant is incredibly similar to language Savonarola used both in his *Treatise on Government* and elsewhere. The friar believed that the wickedness of men would eventually be sufficient to force a good prince or council to become tyrannical, even within the constraints of a civil government such as he proposed.[60] Machiavelli made similar statements in his writings, tying this warning to topics ranging across the entirety of statecraft. He stated that tyranny was the ultimate end of a state built upon princes, for in such a hereditary system "the heirs began to degenerate from their ancestors . . . so as [they] began to be hated and, because of such hatred . . . soon passed from fears to offenses," from which arose tyranny.[61] This trend toward tyranny is inescapable, he later claims, for while individuals in a state will praise those who contribute to it and decry those who take from it in theory, they then "almost all let themselves go, either voluntarily or ignorantly, into the ranks of those who deserve more blame than praise, and though . . . they are able to make a republic or a kingdom, they turn to tyranny."[62]

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[60] Savonarola, *Treatise on Government,* 199.

[61] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 12.

[62] Ibid., 31.

Not only does this passage further clarify Machiavelli's negative view of human nature, but it also shows another fashion in which a Savonarolan perspective is made manifest in the writing of Machiavelli.

This correlation carries over into Machiavelli's discussion of responses to excellence. Savonarola wrote that a tyrant must by nature be suspicious toward and act to suppress those who are powerful for the sake of his own rule (ideology which once again borrows from Aquinas).[63] This idea is particularly explicit in the second part of the *Treatise,* where Savonarola states that "[a tyrant] is envious and always saddened by the glory of others, especially other citizens of his own city; he cannot bear to hear the praises of others," preferring that all should be "calumniated" in order to maintain his prestige.[64] Machiavelli took up this thought and related it by negation in *The Prince*, stating that a prince must be known as one who loved excellence and rewarded it as such. Thus, men would not be afraid to improve their own station, since there was no threat that such improvements would be taken away from them.[65] A truly virtuous state for Machiavelli was one which encourages its citizens to flourish, even though he shared Savonarola's fears of a tyrant suppressing public virtue.

Over the course of his works, Machiavelli also touched upon the state of religion in Italy, which provides another instance of similarity to Savonarola's work. In discussing the state of religion, he first looked to the Roman model, which used religion

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[63] Whitfield "Savonarola and *The Prince,*" 51.

[64] Savonarola, *Treatise on Government,* 187.

[65] Machiavelli, *The Prince,* 84.

to unify the state. The church for Machiavelli was especially necessary for the support of a republic, for he claimed that without a respect for religion the state would require a tyrant to supply an object of fear and respect.[66] He acclaimed this as virtue, but decried the current state of the church both in Florence and throughout Italy:

> If such religion had been maintained by princes of the Christian republic as was ordered by its giver, the Christian states and republics would be more united, much happier than they are. Nor can one make any better conjecture as to its decline than to see that those peoples who are closest to the Roman church . . . have less religion. Whoever might consider its foundations and see how much present usage is different from them might judge, without doubt, that either its ruin or scourging is near.[67]

This idea, that the church was headed for destruction or pruning, sounds very similar to some of Savonarola's pronouncements, and Machiavelli even used language similar to that of Savonarola in his sermon regarding the renovation of the church:

> The ninth is on account of the decay of divine worship. Go, see what is done in God's churches and with what devotion people attend. Today divine worship has run to ruin! You will say, "Oh, there are so many religious and so many priests, more than there have ever been before! Would that we had fewer!" Oh clergy, clergy, because of you this storm has arisen! You are the cause of all this wickedness. . . . I tell you that the time will come, and soon, when they will say, "Blessed is that house without a tonsure in it!"[68]

The degree of similarity between these two thoughts appears to indicate that Savonarola's beliefs concerning the state of the church were acquired by Machiavelli and used in the *Discourses*.[69] Machiavelli's philosophy of the church was more utilitarian than the

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[66] Machiavelli, *Discourses,* 35.

[67] Ibid., 37-38.

[68] Girolamo Savonarola, "Psalms, Sermon III (Renovation Sermon)," in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*, trans. and ed. Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 64.

conventional wisdom of the day, but his focus on the church is still indicative of thought influenced by Savonarola.

Machiavelli and Humanism

In order to reinforce the non-humanist nature of Machiavelli's anthropology and confirm that a likely source for this belief came from Savonarola, it is necessary to compare his ideology to that of other humanists. Machiavelli is often accused of being an anti-humanist, a preacher of evil in a time when humanists were generally more optimistic in their government philosophy. Despite his alternative views on human nature, Machiavelli was a humanist in the truest sense of the term, an individual who sought to apply the truths he saw in classical sources to his own time. While the "teacher of evil" trope is slightly exaggerated, Machiavelli's works do display differences from his humanist counterparts.[70] As examples of this difference, Machiavelli's works will be measured against the works of Coluccio Salutati and Desiderius Erasmus.[71] These two thinkers were selected due to their relative importance to the Renaissance and its culture. Erasmus is one of the premier examples of humanism in Renaissance, cited the world over as one of the princes of the humanist empire of letters. Salutati, on the other hand, is a choice requiring a small amount of explanation.

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[69] Whitfield, "Savonarola and *The Prince*," 58.

[70] The specific phrase "teacher of evil" in relation to Machiavelli occurs in Leo Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, which states that Machiavelli's patriotism is a form of collective selfishness and his teachings are "immoral and irreligious" (11-12).

[71] While other authors and thinkers would also provide interesting contrast to Machiavelli's thought (particularly, Pico de Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*), the constraints of the study did not permit their inclusion here.

Coluccio Salutati was the Chancellor of Florence from 1375 to 1407. During this time, he became one of the forefathers of the humanist movement, training and ensured the existence of the movement into the future by interacting with well-known figures like Poggio Bracciolini and Niccolò Niccoli.[72] Salutati displayed a concern for reviving the spirit of the classic authors in a new form. His goal, one which carried into the greater context of the Renaissance through other thinkers, was to see Humanism create new works that carried with them the spirit of the old styles, not simply mimic the old works with new copies.[73] As chancellor of Florence, he was closely related to the ins and outs of statecraft. While his works are less focused on the practical applications of politics, they nevertheless display an interest in developing an understanding of classical theories of governance. His works stand on the crossroads of Italian Humanism, displaying at some points a desire for a republic and at others a defense of the monarchy; his writings, along with Bruni's, show the evolution of civic humanism in Florence in the 15th century.[74] Because of their theoretical nature, his works do not display as explicit a view of human nature as Machiavelli's, but the inherent worldview required for Salutati's ideas to work is one in which man's good qualities are at the forefront.

In his *On Tyranny*, Salutati attempted to properly define the attributes common to tyrannical rulers. In doing so, he relied heavily on classical authors and classical scenarios, arriving at the conclusion that "the tyrant is one who usurps power, having no

[72] Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 126.

[73] Ibid., 123-124.

[74] Brucker, *Florence*, 234-235.

legal title to rule, and one whose governance is vitiated by pride or who rules unjustly or does not respect rights or laws."[75] He was also concerned with whether resistance to tyrants was a lawful exercise, a question which he examined by looking at examples from all of Roman history. He concludes that citizens under a tyrant are legally within their rights to resist their ruler, even to the point of violence and murder.[76] In this point, he affirms a commitment to republican government, which is evident in many of his writings, including his state letters. Equally rooted in Roman history, his letters call upon the example of the noble Roman republic which would not suffer for itself tyrants but was strong in standing against misrule.[77] His concern at the time was the ever-looming shadow of France over independent city-states in Italy, but his appeals remain rooted not in his current events but in the lessons of classical history. Unlike Machiavelli, Salutati's treatment of Roman government carries an optimistic cast toward the ability of humans to do good and excel.

After justifying the struggle against tyranny, Salutati turns his focus toward the example of Julius Caesar. He argues that Caesar was not actually a tyrant according to his previous definition, and therefore was killed unlawfully.[78] In defense of Caesar, his argument turned to defend Dante's depictions of Brutus and Cassius in the *Inferno*, stating that their placement in the lowest circle of Hell with Satan was well-deserved. He

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[75] Coluccio Salutati, *Political Writings*, translated by Rolf Bagemihl and edited by Stefano U. Baldassarri (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 79.

[76] Ibid., 93.

[77] Ibid., 3.

[78] Ibid., 117.

finds no moral, ethical, or poetic issues with the designation, believing that the magnitude of the betrayal was such that only this description could adequately describe the wretchedness of the two conspirators.[79] This perspective is different from the analysis of some 14th century critics of Dante, who criticized the poet's condemnation of Brutus.[80] Additionally, Salutati views Dante's poetry through distinctly Christian lenses. According to Salutati, Dante's placement of the two traitors also indicates an understanding of the impact of Rome on Christianity. Because the Roman Empire was the central vessel for the transmission of the Christian faith, rebelling against Rome as Cassius and Brutus did was to go against the will of God.[81] While Salutati was focused on the classics, he also viewed everything through the lens of his Christianity, a faith which was of great importance to him.

Salutati's idealization of Christianity appears throughout his time as chancellor. Another letter, addressed to the College of Cardinals, displays a degree of optimistic hope in the Roman Church, a belief that the church is still worthy of the respect due to divine authority.[82] There were parties in the Vatican seeking to sway papal opinion against Florentine interests, since the church was still a major player in the power politics of the region. Salutati's letter indicates that these hostile parties were attempting to use the papacy as a tool to strike against the republic with what Salutati maintains were

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[79] Ibid., 139.

[80] Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 147.

[81] Ibid., 141.

[82] Ibid., 11.

slanderous accusations.[83] He appeals to what he deems to be the decency of the Church and its mission to safeguard the souls of the people, arguing that this goal should trump the slanderous attempts of the anti-Florentine detractors.[84] In appealing to papal decency and authority, he displayed a sense of piety in stark contrast to Machiavelli's detached view of the church as little more than another political state.[85] Salutati was on the forefront of the humanist movement, but his work shares little with Machiavelli's apart from their mutual fascination with classical sources.

Having counterbalanced Machiavelli's pragmatic work with the abstract *On Tyranny*, it is now appropriate to examine another humanist thinker. Erasmus's landmark work in political thought was his *Education of a Christian Prince*, written in 1516 to the man who would eventually become Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Its purpose was similar to that espoused by Machiavelli in *The Prince* (advice to a ruler on governance) and the two works were written within three years of each other, but its approach and conclusions are quite different. While he is not pointlessly optimistic per se (he does admit that not all men are good), Erasmus does show a degree of hope for goodness in rulers. According to Erasmus, a good ruler was able by the virtue of his personal morality to bring most of his subjects up to goodness.[86] Erasmus's instructions to Charles are focused on making the prince the best man that he can be, starting with good education as a child and even

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[83] Ibid., 9.
[84] Ibid., 15.

[85] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 44.

[86] Desiderius Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, translated and edited by Lisa Jardine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 9.

dictating the kinds of company into which he ought to be introduced. Erasmus's work is to some extent an argument for his own job security, since he argues that a wise teacher is necessary who can bring up the prince from a young age in goodness and virtue.[87] Interestingly, Erasmus places a strong emphasis on Christianity as a means of ensuring the best outcome for the new ruler. While he emphasizes the use of classical sources in his work, he does not reject the value of Christian teaching. However, unlike Machiavelli's utilitarian use of the church, Erasmus believed that the teachings of Christ were the best set of attributes for any ruler to possess.[88] By imitating Christ, the ruler is able to be the best possible guardian of his people's morality.

Erasmus's entire thrust is focused on honorable rulership. His prince is a moral creature, a man whose virtue is the paradigm of the Platonic idea of a philosopher king. As a Christian, Erasmus's prince *needs* these classical virtues, because as a Christian he should be better than a pagan ideal. A tyrannical "Christian" prince ought to be an anomaly.[89] Erasmus tied his work consistently into the Christian and Western classical traditions simultaneously, blending the teachings of Christ with applications from classical scholars. He is, in this sense, the antithesis of Machiavelli. Machiavelli's work treats the church (and by extension, Christianity) as something useful for the workings of the ruler, but does not ultimately give it any value for the prince's personal life. Additionally, Machiavelli's view of humanity stands in juxtaposition to Erasmus's

[87] Ibid., 11.

[88] Ibid., 13.

[89] Ibid., 29.

teaching. Machiavelli's prince works in the miry half-world between morality and viciousness, a world that is a polar opposite of Erasmus's, in which pragmatism is a more highly valued "virtue" than morality. Erasmus's archetypical Christian prince would be a subject of derision in Machiavelli's worldview, a figure to be pitied for his quixotic attempts to hold onto goodness instead of his state. Despite his similar timing to Erasmus, Machiavelli's work displays significant deviations from that of his humanist counterpart.

Conclusion

Savonarola attempted to guide Florence through very trying times. While he was stationed in the city, the Medici were overthrown, the French invaded Italy, and famine reduced the standard of living within the city. Through it all, Savonarola remained dedicated to his ideal that moral reform was required due to mankind's wickedness. This reform, instituted through both laws and a shift in the structures of government, was designed to transform Florence into a New Jerusalem and an ark to defend against judgment, which he would lead as a Moses. However, his inability to adequately use force proved fatal, as related by political commentators like Machiavelli. Despite his failure in life, his ideas lived on in the work of Machiavelli, whether through the use of Moses as a definition of good statesmanship or through Machiavelli's cynical view of human nature. Machiavelli, for all his criticism of the man's methods, adopted the republican philosophy of Savonarola and promulgated a Savonarolan "civil government" as the ideal form for a state, a concept which flew in the face of much of the established political thought of the day. Through this unlikely mouthpiece, the ideals of Savonarola

were able to outlast him for hundreds of years and become entrenched in modern political thought.

However, it should be noted that ideas possess a life of their own. Once taken by individuals, they are easily adjusted and become something very different from the original. The anthropology of Savonarola as seen in Machiavelli is one such example. Savonarola's low view of human nature led to puritanical reforms and attempts to force some sort of righteousness upon the people believed to have forsaken it. Machiavelli, while sharing this low view, didn't see any benefit in attempting to change human nature. Rather than attempt to reform the church like Savonarola, Machiavelli placed the church off to the side as a convenient source of awe and terror for the general populace in a republican society. His perspective on the church, shaped through years of diplomatic service and interaction with the power politics of Renaissance Italy, led him to see Catholicism as a tool to be utilized rather than a code to be adopted. Unlike some of his Renaissance counterparts, he did not advocate any sense of Christian morality in his ideal leader. Instead of attempting to work within the status quo, he advocated a whole new system, altering through his use of language the very definitions of the words good and evil along utilitarian lines. In so doing, he became not so much the earlier-mentioned preacher of evil as a serpent in the Garden of Eden.[90] The serpent has tempted his readers toward a new knowledge of good and evil which has forever altered how politicians and the people they rule look at the structures of government.

[90] Angelo Codevilla, Introduction to *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xiv.

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