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On Machiavelli's double Criticism of Christianity

-- Text analysis based on The Prince and On Livy

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Abstract: In the Treatise on Livy and the Prince, Machiavelli launched a double critique of Christianity. Machiavelli proposed his own new interpretation of religious belief by discussing the characteristics of the enemy of Christianity (Roman religion). He believed that religion was only a political tool manipulated by people and not divine, and criticized Christianity from the opposite side. Machiavelli criticized Christianity from a positive perspective by presenting views contrary to the Christian doctrine on Moses, the sovereign virtue, the origin of religion, the Great Flood, and the Christian Reformation.

Keywords: Machiavelli; Dual Criticizes; Christianity.

1. Introduction

Around Machiavelli's view of Christianity, the academic mainstream has two views. The first view holds that Machiavelli is a teacher of evil and an antichrist, the second view holds that Machiavelli treats Christianity from a pragmatic perspective, and he regards Christianity as a tool of political rule. [1] Obviously, whether Machiavelli is fighting against Christianity or treating Christianity with pragmatism, it reflects that he criticizes Christianity. First of all, in his era, Christian belief was an absolute truth that could not be questioned. Machiavelli's new interpretation contrary to tradition undoubtedly reflected his criticism of Christianity. Secondly, regarding the source of religious power and secular power, the prevailing concept at that time believed that both came from the divine grant of God. However, Machiavelli did not agree with this. He denied the sanctity of Christian power and only regarded it as a tool of political rule, which also reflected his criticism of Christianity. In "The Prince" and "On Livy", Machiavelli's extensive discussion on religion became the real record of his negative and positive criticism of Christianity.

2. Machiavelli's Negative Criticism of Christianity

What is a negative critique of Christianity? Is to make a point by singing the praises of the enemies of Christianity. In an era when Christianity was so dominant, it was risky to directly criticize it positively. The opposite of Christianity is paganism, and praising the superiority of paganism is equivalent to criticizing Christianity. As Strauss puts it, "Machiavelli, having pointed out this principle, immediately turned to its application, praising the rival of Biblical Christianity, the non-Christian Roman religion."[2] Machiavelli believed that among the many pagans, the religion of the Romans was the most suitable one to criticize Christianity against. Thus, to understand Machiavelli's new interpretation of religious belief, it is important to understand his account of Roman religion.

Machiavelli's negative criticism of Christianity began with his criticism of the traditional interpretation of Christian faith. He talks about this when he contrasts the differences between ancient and modern religions. "Our religion shows us the way of truth and right, so that we do not value the honor of this world, while the pagans hold it high and regard it as the supreme good, and their actions are more violent. And our religion gives glory to the humble and the contemplative over the doer. It regards humility, baseness, contempt for human affairs as the supreme good; Ancient religions, on the other hand, promoted spiritual greatness, physical strength, and all the other things that made people strong. If our religion tells you that you have power within yourself, then it wants you to be more able to endure pain, not do great things. So this way of life seems to have debilitated the world and made it prey to the worst offenders, and it's safe to see people who just want to take more of their humiliations and don't want to retaliate in order to get to heaven." [3]

These statements reflect Machiavelli's criticism of the traditional interpretation of the Christian faith. What this criticism does mean is that the Christian doctrine of obedience and endurance leads to a lack of retaliation for evil. Machiavelli then analyzed the reasons for this situation. "This undoubtedly derives above all from the cowardice of men, who interpret our religious beliefs in terms of comfort rather than virtue." It can be seen that Machiavelli is committed to proposing a new interpretation of the Christian faith, which will obviously be different from the traditional interpretation. However, in the above discussion, Machiavelli did not give the specific content of the new interpretation, but hinted at the value orientation of the new interpretation, suggesting that his new interpretation is connected with patriotism. "If we consider how our religion allows us to elevate and defend our country, then they understand that it wants us to love and honor our country, and wants us to be prepared so that we can defend it. "According to normal reasoning, Machiavelli should go further and comprehensively discuss his new interpretation of traditional beliefs. Because religion is closely related to politics, Machiavelli, who claimed to have explained everything he knew in his book, obviously would have stated the whole content of the new interpretation. But what's amazing is that Machiavelli doesn't talk about the details, why does Machiavelli do this? He was afraid that the new interpretation would do him harm. In an era of religious censorship, most authors faced political persecution if they proposed new interpretations that ran counter to traditional interpretations. To avoid this danger, Machiavelli did not outright present his new interpretations of faith, but

interspersed them with his work. Therefore, in order to understand this part of the content, it is necessary to carefully read Machiavelli's discourse on religion in the Prince and the Discourses on Livy.

Machiavelli had a great admiration for Roman religion. "Therefore, after taking all this into account, I believe that the religion introduced by Numa was one of the main causes of the happiness of that city-state, for good religion leads to good laws, and good laws lead to good luck, and good luck leads to successful careers." Machiavelli's appreciation of Roman religion was also reflected in that he regarded Numa, the founder of Roman religion, as a more important figure than Romulus, the founder of Rome. "So if there is a debate about which emperor Rome owes more, Romulus or Numa, I believe Numa is more likely to come out on top." [4] Machiavelli praised the Roman religion because it contributed to the strength of Rome. It is not hard to understand why Machiavelli's new interpretation of religious belief emphasized patriotism. After this, Machiavelli also details the political functions of Roman religion, which are reflected in the various periods of Roman history.

The political function of Roman religion mainly includes three aspects. First, Roman religion made citizens fear breaking religious vows more than breaking laws. Machiavelli recounts Scipio's use of religious oaths to force citizens not to leave their country in order to protect it, and Titus's use of religious oaths to force Marcus to drop the charges against his father. The Roman aristocracy used religion to control the common people's excessive desire for power. In response, Machiavelli recounts two historical events. The nobles made use of the exclusive right of interpretation of signs to make an omen that was not conducive to the fate of the common people in order to force the abandonment of the practice of civilian officers of the corps; The senators Pubblis and Roubelius took advantage of the fact that the citizens dared not break the oath of "not disobeying the consuls", so that the plebeians preferred to obey the consuls elected from the aristocracy rather than trust the tribunes who represented their own interests. Omens in Roman religion can be manipulated to realize people's strategic intentions.

In this regard, Machiavelli recounts a historical incident in which Roman soldiers entered the temple of Juno to appeal to the divine will and Papilius cleverly interpreted the signs. Roman soldiers went to the temple of Juno to find out if they were going to plunder the lovers. In interpreting the omens of the divine will, they came to the subjective conclusion that the gods were in favor of plunder, and thus fulfilled their preconceived ideas. Papilius still launched the attack and won the war by cleverly arranging the interpretation of the omen when the omen showed that it was not suitable to attack. Therefore, in Roman politics, the Roman religion became a political tool used by the minority to deceive the majority. Whether it was the excessive pursuit of power by the aristocrats, the subjective presumption of the Roman soldiers that it was beneficial to achieve their own goals, or the ingenious manipulation of the interpretation of the omen by Papilius, the key to its success lies in the use of highly deceptive artificial manipulation. Second, in Roman politics, people used the intimidating power of religion to achieve certain political goals. In Roman religion, religious vows were tied to one's fate, and if one broke them, he or she would be punished by the gods. The intimidating power of religious oaths kept citizens from leaving their country and led Marcus to drop the charges against Titus's father.

So, for Machiavelli, the Roman religion was deceptive and intimidating. Is it possible to conclude that there was nothing sacred about Roman religion in Machiavelli's eyes, but that it was a tool of human manipulation? Before we can answer this question, we need to analyze Machiavelli's argument on the basis of the existence of religion. In response, Machiavelli said, "Every religion is based on some major system of its own. The existence of paganism is based on a response to oracles and a community of seers and diviners; They rely on them for their other rituals, sacrifices, and rituals, because it is easy to believe that the same God who can predict your future will be good or bad can also give you that future." Obviously, Machiavelli regarded the divination community's interpretation of the oracle as the key to determine the authority of paganism. In the process of interpreting the oracle, human manipulation plays a decisive role, so religion is likely to be the tool of manipulation. So Machiavelli really saw paganism as a tool to be manipulated. According to the previous analysis, Roman religion and these paganisms operated in the same way. So, in Machiavelli's view, the Roman religion was not sacred at all, it was just a tool operated by the Romans. Machiavelli also had an argument for this. He said, "They must support and strengthen all that is produced in favour of religion, even if they think it false; And the savvier and more knowledgeable they are about natural things, the more they should do it". As mentioned above, Machiavelli indirectly expressed his views on Christianity by discussing his own understanding of Roman religion. Since Roman religion was an unholy political tool for human manipulation, so was Christianity. This new interpretation of the Christian faith is jaw-dropping and fully embodies Machiavelli's negative critique of Christianity.

3. Machiavelli's Positive Criticism of Christianity

In the Treatise on Livy and the Prince, Machiavelli also directly discussed his views on Christianity and positively criticized it. For this, the layout needs to be more careful. If the layout is simple, it can easily be detected by the religious censors, raising the risk of persecution. So Machiavelli lumps these things together in a bunch of seemingly unimportant passages. To understand Machiavelli's positive critique of Christianity, we need to read these passages carefully. Machiavelli first leaves a clear hint at the positive critique of Christianity. "If that religion had remained in the head of the Christian Republic as it was founded by its founders, the Christian kingdoms and republics might have been more united and happier than they are now." It can be seen that Machiavelli believed that only by going back to the founder of Christianity, can it be possible to understand what the true Christianity is. Who first founded Christianity? Consider that Christianity was preceded by Judaism, and that the founder of Judaism was Moses. In this light, the key to understanding Machiavelli's positive critique of Christianity is to examine his account of Moses.

Machiavelli's account of Moses first appears in Chapter 6 of The Prince. He juxtages Moses with Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus, all of whom he sees as new sovereigns who rely on their own force and power. In this chapter, Machiavelli also details the fact that Moses established the new system by force. The second time Machiavelli makes a big deal about Moses is in chapter 9 of Book I of the Treatise on Livy. In this

chapter, he compares Moses with Lechuchus and Romulus as heroes who take illegal measures for the common good. Machiavelli's third extensive discussion of Moses comes in chapter 8 of Book II of the Discourses on Livy. Under the theme that "some peoples are forced by necessity to migrate in large numbers to other countries," Moses is depicted as a historical figure who led the Israelites "into other countries by violence, killing their inhabitants, and taking their property for themselves." by analyzing Machiavelli these discourses to Moses, first of all, you can see that Machiavelli simply put Moses as a force of historical figures, based on what god does not give Moses made the identity and should have no sanctity of the prophet. This argument is also supported by Machiavelli's statement: "But when we consider Cyrus and the other men who have acquired or founded kingdoms, we find them all admirable. If we look at their individual ways and practices, we will see that they are not so different from those of Moses, though Moses had such a great teacher." secondly, it can be seen that Machiavelli believed that Moses used a lot of force illegally when he created the new system, and that the establishment of Christianity was a state of terror using force.

Whether it is to highlight Moses as a historical figure with force, or to confirm the terror of the use of force when Christianity was founded, Machiavelli's core point of emphasis is that the emphasis on force is the doctrine that Christianity has believed since its founding. Machiavelli's claim can also be supported by an analysis of his views on the Roman Curia. Machiavelli had a lot to say about the Vatican. He blamed the Vatican for tearing Italy apart. Machiavelli had a clear account of how the Vatican had torn Italy apart. "For, although the Church of Rome is located there and holds the temporal power, it is neither so strong nor so capable as to hold all power in Italy and make itself its ruler". "It can be seen that the church is not strong enough to occupy Italy and does not allow anyone else to occupy it." These arguments reflect Machiavelli's central critique of the Vatican's lack of force. It is not difficult to assume that Machiavelli would look positively on the Vatican as long as it had the power to unite Italy. Chapter 11 of the Prince highly appraises Pope Alexander's promotion of Italian unification, and Chapter 26 suggests that Lorenzo the younger can use his family's position as head of the church to unify Italy, both of which can prove this. In a word, Machiavelli's comments on Moses and his criticism of the Holy See suggest that force is a Christian doctrine, which is contrary to the traditional Christian doctrine of forsaking force. Machiavelli's positive criticism of Christianity is obvious.

Machiavelli's positive criticism of Christianity can also be seen through the analysis of his discourse on the monarch's virtue. In the Prince, Machiavelli discusses the five virtues that a monarch should possess. The five virtues are: "Show yourself to be compassionate, faithful, honest, humane, and God-fearing. For the virtue of godliness, Machiavelli emphasized its importance. "It is especially necessary for a monarch to appear to possess the last of these qualities. “But it is worth noting that Machiavelli used the word "appear" when discussing these five virtues. This means that the monarch can in fact be impious, can go against humanity, against the doctrine of God. Machiavelli's praise of several impious monarchs illustrates this point. Machiavelli praised the Christian world leading monarchs, aragorn king Ferdinand, "the king is actually" often make use of religion as an excuse to resort to religious cruel “, without religion. Machiavelli also spoke highly of Pope Alexander VI, praising him for his great contribution in attacking the French forces in Italy and seeking the unification of Italy, but he used the evil means of "money and force" and did not show religious piety. From these arguments, Machiavelli strongly supports the use of deception in Christianity, because deception can better meet the practical needs of politics. In fact, this deception is no different from the one the Romans used in their religion. And to deceive, all you need is a clever disguise. "For the mob is attracted to the appearance and effect of things, and the world is full of the mob. “From this we can see more clearly that Machiavelli regards religion as a tool used by the shrewd few to control the majority by deception. As he puts it, "For whatever their origin, the wise man increases his trust in them, and then their authority makes all men believe in them." [5] At this point in the text, it can be found that Machiavelli's criticism of Christianity became more and more intense, and Christianity completely became a tool of human manipulation, and the sanctity of Christianity disappeared.

In his works, Machiavelli also developed a positive critique of Christianity from other perspectives. This mainly includes Machiavelli's understanding of the origin of religion, his attitude towards the Bible and his understanding of the Christian reform. On the origin of religion, he believes that the struggle between religions is the source of the beginning of new religions. Along these lines, Machiavelli describes a fierce struggle between Christianity and its rival religions. "Anyone who reads the manner in which St. Gregory and other Christian leaders adopted it will understand how obstinately they destroyed all ancient records by burning the writings of poets and historians, destroying statues of gods, and destroying anything else that might give rise to any trace of antiquity". It can be seen from this that Machiavelli regards human power as the origin of Christianity, which specifically refers to the cruel attack of Christianity on paganism. By stating that the origin of Christianity is human power rather than divine power, Machiavelli effectively denied the sanctity of Christianity, which is undoubtedly a major criticism of Christianity. It is well known that the Old Testament records the events in which God punished man with a flood. In Christian orthodoxy, this event is clearly seen as history that actually happened. But Machiavelli dismissed it categorically as an artificial fiction. "It happened either because of the plague, or because of the famine, or because of a flood. The last was the most important, both because it was so extensive, and because it was escaped only by wild mountain people, who, having no knowledge of the past, could not pass it on to posterity. Even if one of them with such knowledge was saved, he would conceal and fabricate it as he pleased for the sake of his fame." The historical events recorded in the Old Testament were regarded by Machiavelli as fictitious, and Machiavelli's positive criticism of Christianity was very obvious.

Machiavelli's positive criticism of Christianity can also be seen from his attitude towards Christian reform. Since his attitude towards Christian reform is closely related to his worldview, it is necessary to understand Machiavelli's worldview. Machiavelli believed that everything in the world has its life limit, and everything will corrupt with the passage of time, and the only way to cure the corruption is to realize self-renewal. The same is true for the hybrid organism of republic and religion. On the issue of Christian reform, he believed that reform was a way of self-renewal and self-renewal helped to cure the corruption of Christianity. Therefore, he was positive about the Christian reform at first.

In response, Machiavelli said, "If it were not for St. Francis and Santo Domin I would drag our religion back to its source, and it would have perished." But Machiavelli immediately pointed out the defects of this reform. This flaw is reflected in that the doctrine advocated by the reform does not advocate resistance to evil. "So that they made it clear to the people that it was evil to criticize the corruption of the church, and that they should obey them and let God punish them if they did anything wrong." [6]

Therefore, Machiavelli believed that the Christian reformation was not complete and that the doctrine of resisting evil by force should be replaced by the doctrine of not advocating resistance. In the onshore world, it is a traditional Christian doctrine that does not advocate resistance to evil. In contrast, Machiavelli proposed resistance to evil, which undoubtedly reflects his positive criticism of Christianity.

4. Conclusion

From this article,we have known that Machiavelli believed that religion was only a political tool manipulated by people without any divine. Machiavelli criticized Christianity from a positive perspective by presenting views contrary to the Christian doctrine on Moses, the sovereign virtue, the origin of religion, the Great Flood, and the Christian Reformation.In "The Prince" and "On Livy", Machiavelli's extensive discussion on religion became the real record of his negative and positive criticism of Christianity.

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