



AS IF GOD EXISTED

RELIGION AND LIBERTY IN THE
HISTORY OF ITALY

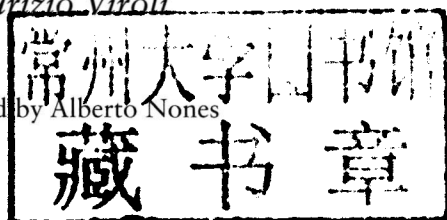
MAURIZIO VIROLI

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IN THE HISTORY OF ITALY

Maurizio Viroli

Translated by Alberto Nones



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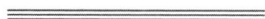
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To Gabriella, Giulia, Simona, and Tino



After all, the man who does not believe in God also feels, in the end, that his morality is like a religion, although he does not like to abuse this term. He feels it is some sort of religion, for it is something he is ready to discuss, but with the certainty that no one will convert him. He has grown old with that faith; he has spoken with many people; he has put his ideas to all tests and comparisons. He knows well that his force of persuasion is meager, that his arguments should always be renewed, and that he has something to learn from each and every interlocutor. But all this no longer affects the firmness of his faith. In this sense, he belongs to a church, which admits of no betrayal on the part of its clerics. To work for this church, to promote the increment of its believers—this is the most proper job for a man. In this job lay the worth and value of his whole existence.

—Guido Calogero, *La scuola dell'uomo*, 1939

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

THIS EXPLORATION OF Italian history offers English-speaking readers a general, valuable lesson on the relationship between liberty and religion. My study focuses on three experiences of social and political emancipation in Italy: the free republics of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, the Risorgimento, and the antifascist Resistenza (also called the Second Risorgimento). Grand and noble as they were, none of these experiences resulted in long-lasting liberty: early modern city republics were all (with the exception of Venice) consumed and destroyed by open or veiled forms of tyranny, and by the mid-sixteenth century Italy fell under foreign domination; the liberal state created by the Risorgimento collapsed sixty years later under the yoke of the fascist regime; and the Italian Republic that was born in 1946 and was to a considerable degree the expression of the antifascist struggle has degenerated into Silvio Berlusconi's court system.¹ Italy, to aptly describe its political identity, is a country marked by fragile liberty.

In each case, religious sentiments and language played a fundamental role. City-republics were sustained by a civic religion that combined in a rather innovative way classical and biblical themes. The Risorgimento was preceded and accompanied by a religious renaissance made possible by the rediscovery and reinterpretation of Christianity, as well as the elaboration of various forms of "religion of duty" or "religion of humanity." The antifascist movement found inspiration in the "religion of liberty" framed by Benedetto Croce and other political writers.

The corruption and decline of political liberty, too, has been related to religious conceptions and practices. City-republics were first enervated by the degeneration of Christianity into a religion that fiercely opposed civic virtue, and then inundated by the religion of the Counter-Reformation with its fervor for appearances and exteriority along with its moral teaching founded on docility, submission, and simulation. Fascism triumphed over the liberal state, proclaiming a new religion of the nation. To a considerable degree, the decline of the democratic republic is a consequence of the neglect and destruction of what was left of the civil religion of the Risorgimento and Resistenza. Italian history, then, seems to teach us that

good religion produces political liberty, whereas irreligiosity, or bad religion, produces tyranny and domination. The words “good” and “bad” here refer only to the moral and political content of religions.

This book challenges the well-established view that Italian political thought of the Renaissance drew its language from classical Greek and Roman texts, and only to a negligible extent from biblical and religious sources.² The truth is that as early as the thirteenth century, one of the most important sources of humanist political thought can be found in prehumanist tracts on civil government—a wealth of biblical references and religious arguments invoked to elucidate the nature of republican government.³ All these texts make abundant use of biblical quotations to stress the sacred dimension of the republican regime as well as to argue for peace and concord. They speak with the selfsame voice to emphasize that republics need God’s help, and that to obtain it, rulers must sincerely fear God and protect the Catholic faith. To urge the *podestà* (the highest magistrate of the city) to wholeheartedly respect human and divine laws, the author of one of the oldest tracts on republican government cites Matt. 5:14–16: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” The ruler who oppresses his subjects from an excessive desire for power, on the contrary, spreads darkness on the earth and extinguishes the love for God in the hearts of the citizens.

Italian political theorists and jurists relied on both classical and biblical sources. Brunetto Latini’s highly influential *Livres dou Tresor* (ca. 1260), for instance, begins its section on politics by citing Aristotle’s view that the government of the city “is the noblest and highest science, and the noblest occupation on earth,” and then turns to Cicero’s definition: “the city is an association of men who live in the same place and in accordance with a single law.”⁴ But then he rapidly refers to the Old Testament to emphasize that “all dominions and dignities are conferred on us by our sovereign Father, who, in the sacred order of earthly things, wanted the cities’ government to be founded on three pillars, that is, justice, reverence, and love.” Reverence for God, he enjoins, quoting the apostle, is “the only thing in the world that augments the faith’s merits and overcomes every sacrifice.”⁵

Prehumanist and early humanist political writers contended that rulers must devoutly practice the political virtues of justice, fortitude, prudence, and temperance, as well as the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. They contributed to creating a republican religion founded on

the beliefs that the commune is under the protection of God, Christ, and the patron saints, and that divine help is the true bulwark against sedition, discord, tyranny, and war—the mortal enemies of republican liberty. The man who undertakes the task of governing acquires a dignity that increases his likeness to God, and impels him always to follow both the political and the theological virtues. Prominent among these virtues are charity—love for God and men—and justice, understood as God’s command. The principles of republican government, therefore, were not only moral and political maxims dictated by reason and prudence but also religious principles.

Rather than expelling God and Christian religion from acceptable political discourse, Italian republican theorists and republican governments put them at the center of public spaces. The most spectacular evidence is the iconography in the public buildings of Italian city-republics like the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, and the Palazzo Ducale in Venice. Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s *Buongoverno* (1339–41) openly instructs Siena’s rulers and citizens that the “holy” virtue of justice draws inspiration from divine wisdom—indeed from the Book of Wisdom—and that the supreme magistrate must follow the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Siena’s republican elite was so far from secular that it gave money to see its city described and exalted as “the city of the Virgin.” In the Anticappella, again in the Palazzo Pubblico, Taddeo di Bartolo’s *Cycle of Famous Men* (1413–14) features Aristotle as the proper guide for learning the principles of good government. But Aristotle and the great Roman republican heroes are accompanied by the image of “Religion,” who issues an unequivocal Christian injunction: “Omne quodcumque facitis in verbo aut in opera / In nomine domini Iesu Christi facite” (Whatever you do in words or deeds / Do it in the name of Jesus Christ).

Florentine republican iconography, too, was for the most part inspired by religious and biblical sources. One of the symbols of Florentine republican ideology was in fact David, the biblical hero who, alone and armed only with a sling, decides to confront the gigantic Goliath and overcomes him. Another was Judith, the woman who killed Holofernes, chief of the Assyrians, oppressors of the Jews. David’s and Judith’s bronze statues, carved by Donatello, were prominently displayed in the Palazzo Vecchio. To leave no doubt about the religious character of their popular government, Florentine leaders decided in 1494 to inscribe in the Palazzo Vecchio Girolamo Savonarola’s motto proclaiming that the Great Council was “given by God, and anyone who tried to undo it, would come to no good.”⁶ They also agreed, again following Savonarola, to declare Christ “King of Florence.”

The Venetians went even further. In the late sixteenth century, in the Palazzo Ducale, they installed nothing less than a gigantic representation of paradise executed by Tintoretto so as to bring the “kingdom of heaven in the Great Council Hall.” As has been aptly remarked, the civic message of the painting was clear: “In a supreme statement of the grandeur, power and piety of one of the longest lasting republics in history, all the important decisions of state would be made under the auspices of Christ and the Virgin and with the inspiration of the heavenly hosts.”⁷ Can this be interpreted as a radical expulsion of God from the public sphere?

Religious themes are also visible in the works of humanist political thinkers. It is true that, as has been noticed by scholars, there are few biblical references in Petrarch’s *Qualis esse debeat qui rempublicam regit*.⁸ Yet his political poems abound in religious references. In one of them, in which he exalts Cola di Rienzo’s ephemeral republican experiment in Rome, he copiously resorted to the Bible: “When you send your Spirit, / they are created, / and you renew the face of the earth” (Ps. 104:30). “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.... And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’” (Rev. 21:1–5).⁹ In his famous canzone “Italia mia, benché il parlar sia indarno,” Petrarch appeals to faith in the ruler of the universe as the last remedy and only hope for Italy’s afflictions. When the case required it, as in his political attack against Friar Iacopo Bussolini, who seized power in Pavia, Petrarch did not hesitate to infuse his text with an impressive succession of biblical citations.¹⁰

Leonardo Bruni does not use biblical citations in his *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis*, but he invokes God’s protection (and that of the Virgin and Saint John the Baptist) over the city and its popular government in two fundamental parts of his oration: the exordium and the peroration. In another equally meaningful text, the *Oratio in funere Johannis Strozzi* (1427), Bruni expresses yet another tenet of republican political theology when he assures us that the soul does not die, and that the reward for virtuous deeds goes beyond the brief span of life on earth. On the basis of this argument, he then confidently proceeds to explain that the valiant citizens who sacrifice their lives for their homeland and liberty obtain their fellow citizens’ love on earth as well as eternal beatitude in heaven.¹¹

Coluccio Salutati, chancellor of the Florentine Republic from 1375 until his death in 1406, and the most towering representative of Italian civic humanism, often invoked God in official and semiofficial letters, and attributed the wise deliberations of the Florentine people in the

most dramatic moments of the city's turbulent life to God's benevolent intervention.¹² When he praises the excellence of civil laws, he promptly stresses that the purpose of man is not to know God but rather to obtain eternal beatitude through good deeds performed on earth.¹³ In his powerful defense of Florentine liberty, the *Invectiva contra Antonium Luschum* (1403), Salutati relies heavily on theological-political considerations, beginning with his affirmation that all Florentines are resolved to defend, "with God's help," their most sweet liberty, a "celestial good" more precious than all the world's treasures. We have inherited our liberty, Salutati remarks, from our fathers, but we regard it as "God's highest gift" and trust that God loves free peoples. Therefore, even if the human mind cannot grasp divine justice's decrees, it is absurd to think that God will strike down those people who protect liberty on earth and reward the tyrants who offend against it.

Niccolò Machiavelli, too, the alleged champion of the pagan and secular trend of republican political thought, illustrated a number of fundamental political arguments in religious terms. To reassure princes who deploy cruelty effectively, he writes that they "can remedy their standing both with God and with men." To enhance the persuasive power of the "Exhortation" that ends *The Prince*, Machiavelli rephrases the biblical Book of Exodus. When he tries in 1521 to lure Cardinal Giulio de' Medici to commit himself to the grand task of gradually restoring republican institutions in Florence, he confidently uses the conventional trope of God's love for the founders and reformers of republics.

Appeals to God and political arguments based on the scriptures flourished during the last Florentine Republic of 1527–30. God was constantly invoked as the city's protector, the vindicator of the rights of free peoples against the ambitions of kings, emperors, and popes, and the supreme guarantor that the merits of good citizens serving the common good will be properly recognized. Florentine republicans never failed to stress that God was the founder and foundation of their precious liberty—the founder because he gave Florence liberty, and the foundation because only his grace conferred on the city could grant Florentine people the moral strength and wisdom to prevail against the most powerful enemies of liberty.

Italian republican language of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries was probably less "biblical" than that of the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, but it was deeply religious—that is, inspired by a particular type of religiosity that I describe in this book as "civic Christianity." The main principles of the religious sentiment that flourished in Italian republics were that God is charity and charity is God, and that God has created

human beings in his image and likeness. From these beliefs followed the moral as well as political command that it is a Christian duty to defend republican liberty and diligently serve the common good.

Also in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries republican political writers were hoping to resurrect a religion that taught citizens to love liberty and discharge their civic duties. Some of them searched within the Christian tradition for a God who was a friend of political liberty; others, for a brief interlude, tried to implant a new civic religion in Italy modeled after Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "religion civile"; still others framed a religion of duty or liberty compatible with, though not identical to, Christian religion. They worried above all about the damaging effects of bad religion as well as the absence of religious sentiment, because they believed that without religion or with a bad religion, republics would be short-lived.¹⁴

This study also claims that the Italian Risorgimento was anticlerical yet religious. Its most representative political and intellectual leaders, along with the militants who committed themselves to the cause of Italian unity and independence, were all fiercely opposed to the temporal power of the church as well as to the enervating religious and moral education that the Italian clergy had spread over the peninsula. They were also guided and sustained, though, by a religious conception of life that took different forms—reformed Catholicism, Protestantism, New Christianity, "religion of humanity," "religion of duty," and "religion of progress"—but taught one and the same principle: namely, devotion to liberty as a sacred duty.

Just as it is plainly untrue that the Italian Risorgimento was totally secular and even irreligious, it is equally wrong to contend that it was indeed religious in the sense that it produced a nationalist or political religion. Focusing on the "locus of profound tropes" (*spazio delle figure profonde*), proponents of a cultural approach have identified in the discursive practices of the Risorgimento the conception of the nation understood as a community of combatants united in a sacred commitment to uphold the quasi-metaphysical entity of the *patria/nazione* (fatherland/nation), whose distinctive features are kinship (*parentela*), love/honor/virtue (*amore/onore/virtù*), and sacrifice (*sacrificio*), with its grim complements of pain, death, and mourning. The trope of kinship, it should be noted, reveals that the nation was imagined as a "community of progeny" (*comunità di discendenza*) that reaches back to great figures of the past who belong "by nature" to the community they have illuminated with their deeds. It also indicates that the biological nexus between generations and individuals, summarized in the word "blood," was regarded as

a fundamental feature of the nation. In addition, the religious connotation of the Risorgimento's nationalism clearly emerges from the relentless use of religious words like "regeneration," "apostolate," "faith," "resurrection," "holy war," and "crusade."¹⁵

This approach is both praiseworthy and limited. It is praiseworthy insofar as it reminds us that the Risorgimento was not just a political process; it also was sustained by stories, myths, and images that motivated strong passions. The profound tropes of lineage, honor, love, virtue, and sacrifice are particularly powerful in this regard because they connect to primary facts of human experience, such as birth/death, love/hatred, and sexuality/reproduction, and are related to centuries-old discursive practices. It is limited because it obscures a number of specific traits of the political language of the Italian Risorgimento in general and its religious dimension in particular. The profound tropes do not allow us to see, to begin with, the fundamental distinction between patriotism and nationalism.¹⁶ Giuseppe Mazzini and other prominent moral and political leaders of the Risorgimento extolled the ideal of *patria*, or nation, understood as an association of free and equal citizens that must recognize, respect, and defend its civil, political, and social rights as well as the liberty and dignity of all nations and peoples. They also forcefully rejected the commitment to a nation interpreted as an organic cultural and ethnic community that must protect and affirm itself through purification, the elimination of alien elements, both within the nation and through conflict with other nations.

It is one thing to preach love, devotion, faith, and sacrifice in relation to the universalistic ideal of the *patria*, and quite another to speak of love, devotion, faith, and sacrifice as regards the particularistic ideal of the nation. In the first case, we have a civil religion centered on the political and moral value of liberty, which sustains liberal and republican institutions; in the second instance, we find a political religion centered on the principles of cultural or ethnic homogeneity and uniqueness, designed to uphold domestic political and social discrimination or aggressive foreign policy. The political language of the Risorgimento, needless to say, presents nationalist features as well, but it is historically incorrect to assert that it was a nationalist political religion.¹⁷

For a proper understanding of the religious dimension of the Italian Risorgimento, I maintain in this study, the most reliable intellectual mentors are still the great historians of the twentieth century, particularly Adolfo Omodeo and Croce. Both stressed that the Risorgimento proclaimed a universalistic conception of the nation that had nothing in common with the nationalist ideology of fascism, and indeed was unequivocally opposed to it. Because they got the distinction between patriotism and

nationalism right, Omodeo and Croce also correctly understood the difference between the fascist political religion and the religious sentiment of the Risorgimento. In the *Manifesto of the Antifascist Intellectuals* that he composed in 1925 against Giovanni Gentile's *Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals*, Croce wrote:

We oppose abandoning our old faith for this chaotic and obscure "religion": for two centuries and a half, our faith has been the soul of the Italy that was rising again, modern Italy. That faith was composed of love of truth, aspiration for justice, generous human and civil sense, zeal for an intellectual and moral education, solicitude about liberty, the force behind and guarantee of every advancement. We look at the men of Risorgimento, those who acted, suffered, and died for Italy, and it seems to us that they are offended and concerned by the words and deeds of our adversaries, and admonish us to keep their flag flying. Our faith is not an artificial and abstract contrivance or excitement of the mind provoked by uncertain and badly understood theories, but is the possession of a tradition that has become a disposition of the emotional, mental, and moral habits.¹⁸

If we misunderstand the specific features of the patriotism that largely pervaded the Risorgimento, as the most recent scholarship does, we also miss the moral and political connection between the Risorgimento and the religion of liberty of the antifascists of the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁹ Colleagues and friends have remarked that the religion of liberty concept must be viewed as an analogy. If they mean by this that the "real" thing is revealed religion, and that the religion of liberty is similar but not quite the real thing, the argument strikes me as rather weak. For the antifascist militants who lived by it, the religion of liberty was as sincere and thus real as the religion of the believers in revealed religions. One could certainly make the opposite case—namely, that the religiosity of the majority of the Italians who followed the Catholic religion then was a mere facade, whereas the religion of liberty was deep and authentic. The truth of religions does not consist in the alleged or pretended authority of their founders, nor in the magnificence of their rituals, and even less in the number of believers or the religions' longevity. It consists only in their power to inspire deeds that are consistent with the principles they proclaim. On this score the religion of liberty stands the test quite well.

That being said, it is surely correct to assert that the religion of liberty notion is a metaphor or analogy. But political thought is full of metaphors and analogies. The "great Leviathan," the "mortal God," "laws are but chains," and the idea that the prince must be able "to imitate both the

lion and the fox” are but a few examples. Metaphors and analogies elegantly describe political reality, give persuasive power to arguments, and effectively convey the meaning of concepts. The metaphor or analogy of the religion of liberty is, in my opinion, especially felicitous. It expresses the idea of a devotion to liberty that motivates a serious commitment and even self-sacrifice, if necessary. It also uncovers the inner dimension of liberty that lives, when it does live, in the minds of human beings independently of political and legal institutions.

But if we are talking about a moral commitment to the principle of liberty, why, as a number of my colleagues have asked, do I use the word “religion” at all? My reply is that as a historian, I have a duty to be faithful to the language used by the political writers I have been studying. To redescribe as moral what they have called religious would simply amount to producing bad historical narration. I am not prepared to perpetrate such an intellectual sin. Nor do I see a powerful theoretical reason for the redescription. It is perfectly legitimate to assert that to have moral principles means to have an inward persuasion of their truth or value, and to live by them even at the cost of self-sacrifice. Yet what would be the net intellectual gain?

The religion of liberty originated as a recognized as well as recognizable moral and political language in the context of fascist Italy. It would be incorrect, however, to regard it as just a mirrorlike image of the fascist political religion. Rather, it was a response and alternative to it. Or better still, it was a completely different picture painted with the same colors. Proponents and advocates of the religion of liberty, like fascist ideologues, used the words “devotion,” “faith,” “resurrection,” and “martyrdom.” But what they meant to do was destroy the totalitarian regime and its religion, and replace them with a free political regime and a new civil religion. The documents I found indicate that the religion of liberty was particularly effective in its struggle against fascism precisely because it used the same words with different meanings.

The presence of religious interpretations of liberty in all the experiences of political liberation I examine here suggest that these kind of movements tend to assume a religious content and produce a religious language. One reason for this is that without a religious dimension, movements of social and political emancipation lack the necessary resources to persist in struggles that may easily go on for years, face dangers, and overcome tragic and devastating defeats, moments of despair and hopelessness, and the sense of futility about one’s own and everybody else’s efforts. “Des peuples religieux ont pu être esclaves; aucun peuple irréligieux n’est demeuré libre,” Benjamin Constant (1767–1830) wrote in *De la Religion*.²⁰

I find his words convincing. The achievement and defense of political liberty require a disinterested sentiment at the heart of the willingness to sacrifice oneself. Any morality that is alien to the religious sentiment cannot motivate the sacrifice of one's life. The religious dimension affects the nature of the movement itself, the very content of the liberation. What kind of emancipation can movements attain when they are guided by leaders and militants who are not religiously devoted to liberty—that is, who have not chosen liberty as the highest principle of their life?

The religion of liberty is especially necessary under extraordinary circumstances, when one must resist totalitarian regimes, oppose massive violations of human rights, defend one's country against an external invasion, and struggle against organized crime and widespread political corruption. In these cases, self-interest and moral convictions based on rational evaluations (whatever they might be) are insufficient to generate the energies needed for any chance of prevailing. On examination, though, a religion of liberty is also necessary under the ordinary conditions of a free polity to help citizens discharge their civic duties. No democratic republic, no matter how strong, can impose a respect for civic duties through the mere threat of legal sanctions or by appealing to citizens' self-interest. In addition to both, one needs some kind of inward persuasion, usually described as an obligation to one's own conscience. Experience shows that a sense of duty is more solid when connected to a religious sentiment, be it in the form of a revealed religion (if it teaches the right civic message) or a religion of liberty not based on revealed religion.²¹

If this is the case, political wisdom suggests that it is crucial to dedicate serious efforts and resources to keep alive (where it exists), resuscitate (where it is languishing), or generate (where it has never existed) a religion of liberty. It also advises us not to wait for exceptional circumstances. Citizens who love liberty with all their soul, and possess a civic spirit and moral courage, do not appear on command. They must already be there with their moral resources intact, like a well-trained army. One must cultivate in ordinary times the civic resources that are needed in the extraordinary ones. It is indeed hard to believe that citizens unable or unwilling to discharge their normal civic duties (paying their taxes, participating in elections and public life, remaining loyal to the constitution, caring for public spaces, and properly remembering the efforts and sacrifices of previous generations) will rise to the occasion when they are asked to make hard sacrifices and even put their lives at risk. This is, in my view, the political wisdom to be drawn from the Italian political and intellectual history I have reconstructed in this book.

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