

Article

Giovanni Botero on Religion and Politics

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Abstract: Giovanni Botero's political thought is significantly influenced by Machiavelli, yet it possesses its own distinctive features, particularly in its religious perspective. In contrast to Machiavelli's condemnation of Catholicism, Botero argues that Catholicism, far from weakening individuals, could instill in them the courage to defy death and foster military virtues through the promise of eternal life. While Botero agrees with Machiavelli that religion plays a central role in politics, he asserts that Catholicism is more effective than other sects as it is better suited to maintaining social order and disciplining the human conscience. However, he refutes the idea that religion should serve merely as an instrument of domination. Instead, he suggests that it should be the foundation of the state and the purpose of governance. Furthermore, he maintains that religion and the state are interdependent, functioning together to ensure the maintenance and strengthening of both.

Keywords: Giovanni Botero; Machiavelli; religion; politics; reason of state

1. Introduction

Giovanni Botero (1544–1617) is the most significant Italian political thinker of the Renaissance after Machiavelli. Although Botero's thought is strongly shaped by Machiavelli's ideas, it also exhibits distinctive characteristics, especially in his perspective on religion. He lived during the Reformation and the Wars of Religion, and as a devout Catholic, religion plays a central role in his thought. As Luigi Firpo observes, "the most evident aspect of Botero, the central nucleus of his personality is undoubtedly his sincere and profound religiosity, his devoted and convinced adherence to the ideas of the Counter-Reformation, and the cult of Christian virtues as the cornerstones of moral life" (Firpo 1948, p. 15). In contrast, Machiavelli was not a devout Christian, and some scholars have even characterized him as an atheist or pagan (Berlin 1972; Hulliung 1983; Parel 1992). The significant difference in their religious beliefs also accounts for the contrasting attitudes they hold towards religion.

What, then, is Botero's stance on Machiavelli's perspective on religion? What distinguished his viewpoint? How does he perceive the relationship between religion and politics? These questions have not been extensively explored by scholars (Bireley 1990; Suppa 1992; Vasoli 1992; Malcolm 2007; Descendre 2009; Figorilli 2021; Zancarini 2021). In particular, there has been a notable lack of scholarly attention paid to Botero's discussion of religion in *Relatione della Repubblica venetiana*. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing Botero's perspective on religion throughout a close reading of his three most relevant works: *De regia sapientia*, *Della ragion di Stato*, and *Relatione della Repubblica venetiana*. Botero's position on religion becomes evident through his critique and engagement with Machiavelli's ideas. While condemning Machiavelli's devaluation of the Roman Catholic Church, Botero defends the political role of Catholicism, yet he rejects the idea that it should be reduced to a mere instrument of domination. Rather, he advocates that Catholicism should serve as the foundation of the state and the purpose of governance. This study will clarify Botero's religious perspective, illuminate the complexities of his relationship with Machiavelli, and enhance the understanding of the concept of reason of state that underpins his political philosophy.



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2. Refuting Machiavelli's View of Religion

While Machiavelli was not regarded as an atheist or pagan in Florence, he was nevertheless considered an anti-clerical (Zancarini 2021, p. 243). In his *Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio*, Machiavelli offers a scathing critique of Catholicism, identifying it as a significant contributor to the corruption and moral decline he observed in modern society, as well as the idleness and cowardice he perceived in modern man. In *Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio*, Book II, Chapter 2, he compares ancient Roman religion and Catholicism, noting that “our religion, having shown the truth and the true way, makes us esteem less the honor of the world, whereas the Gentiles, esteeming it very much and having placed the highest good in it, were more ferocious in their actions” (Machiavelli 1996, p. 131). As explained by Machiavelli, ancient Roman religion placed a premium on earthly glory, ascribing the supreme good to qualities such as mental fortitude, physical strength, and all other things capable of making men very strong. Catholicism, however, celebrates the humble, penitent, and prayerful individual, placing the supreme good in humility, ascetic practices, and contempt for earthly things, which render the modern man weak. Francesco Guicciardini, Machiavelli's contemporary, offers a comparable evaluation of Catholicism in his *Ricordi*: “It was said truly that too much religion spoils the world, because it makes the mind effeminate, involves men in thousands of errors, and diverts them from many generous and virile enterprises” (Guicciardini 1965, p. 104). Machiavelli attributes the significant divergences between ancient Roman religion and Catholicism to different interpretations of religion: the ancient Romans interpreted religion in the sense of virtue, while the moderns tend to perceive religion according to ease and idleness (Machiavelli 1996, p. 132). The prevalence of idleness and ease in modern city-states leads to a decline in virtues, particularly courage and masculinity, which are closely aligned with military values. It also contributes to social discord and corruption within states. In contrast, the practice of war and peacetime military training in the Roman Republic served to shape and reinforce virtues, preventing their erosion by indolence (Machiavelli 1996, p. 153).

Many Christian thinkers, particularly anti-Machiavellian writers, disagreed with Machiavelli's claims about Christianity, asserting that Catholicism was not only compatible with politics but could significantly contribute to political success (Bireley 1990, p. 3). Among the most prominent of these figures was Giovanni Botero. In 1583, Botero published his first political work, *De regia sapientia*, which belongs to the tradition of the *specula principum* (mirrors for princes). It was written for Carlo Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, and dedicated to Carlo Emanuele I, Duke of Savoy. In *De regia sapientia*, Botero made his first attempt to address the relationship between the state and religion (Catholicism) and offered his first explicit quotation from Machiavelli. In Book I, Chapter 7, “In Nicolaum Machiavellum digressio”, he presents a detailed refutation of Machiavelli's assertion, “Quoniam supra demonstratum est à Deo Opti. Max. bella, victoriasq[ue] pendere, minuenda hoc loco est Nicolai Macchiavelli opinio. is enim non ineptè minus, quam falsè, asserere ausus est, Christi domini nostri lege homines ad rem bellicam, militaremq[ue] virtutem ineptos efficere”. (“Since it has been demonstrated above that wars and victories depend on the Most Good and Great God, the opinion of Niccolò Machiavelli must be diminished here. For he dared to assert, not only inappropriately but also falsely, that the law of Christ our Lord renders men unfit for military and warlike virtues”. (Botero 1583, p. 12)

From Botero's perspective, Catholic law does not instill cowardice in individuals but rather fosters courage. Catholicism prohibits unjust wars, and in any just war, the Catholics face the battle with an indomitable spirit, daring to risk death bravely and resolutely, because those who die in a just war will receive the glory of God's promise of eternal life. This promise extends beyond the limits of mortality, offering an absolute and complete happiness, which serves as a profound motivation for military virtue, surpassing the virtues of the pagan and ancient heroes celebrated by Machiavelli. For Catholics, death is not the end but the gateway to eternal life, the beginning of a new existence. This disdain for death demonstrates that Catholicism does not render men weak; rather, it is a “school of military virtue and war fortitude” (Vasoli 1992, p. 47). According to Botero, no doctrine

offers such a robust defense against the fear of death as the Catholic belief in eternal life and the immortality of the soul. The authentic Catholic warrior, unafraid of the present and contemplating the future, can courageously confront any peril, including death itself.

In *Della ragion di Stato*, published in Rome six years later, Botero reiterates this stance. In Book IX, Chapter 8, “Del far ricorso a Dio” (“Of Recourse to God”), he rejects the criticisms of Catholicism from a military perspective, arguing that Catholicism strengthens military virtue. He summarizes the positive effects of recourse to God in three ways: “Questo ricorso che si fa a Dio produce molti buoni effetti: l’uno si è che ci acquista la divina protezione, e si *Deus pro nobis quis contra nos?* L’altro, che ci dà confidenza e quasi certezza della vittoria, il che ravviva e rinfranca mirabilmente gli animi. Il terzo è che ci assicura quasi della felicità dell’altra vita, il che anco rende incredibilmente arditi gli esserciti, perché non è cosa che più conforti e più desti lo spirito dell’uomo ne’ pericoli della vita, et in ogni fazione militare, dove ha tanta parte la morte, che la speranza della vita celeste”. (“This recourse to God produces many good effects. One is that it acquires divine protection, and if God is with us, who can be against us? The second is that it gives us confidence and near certainty of victory which revives and reanimates the spirits wonderfully. Thirdly it nearly assures the happiness of the next life which also renders the armies incredibly bold because there is nothing that more comforts and more rouses man’s spirit in danger of life and in every military action where death has such a large part than the hope of a heavenly life”). (Botero 2016, pp. 229–30; 2017, p. 167). Botero supports his arguments with a series of authoritative examples drawn from ancient history (particularly Roman history), the Bible, and contemporary events.

It is evident that Botero’s critique of Machiavelli is primarily directed at his attack on the Roman Church and Catholicism, rather than at Machiavelli’s emphasis on military virtue or his affirmation of the politico-military function of religion. Botero’s objective is to challenge Machiavelli’s assertion that Catholicism is the primary cause of Italy’s military weakness and territorial losses, while justifying the alliance between Catholicism and the state. As evidenced in *Della ragion di Stato*, Botero’s selected dedicatee, Lord Wolfgang Theodore, held a dual role as both prince and archbishop of Salzburg, Austria. Wolfgang is portrayed as an exemplar of a prince–archbishop, possessing extensive knowledge of state affairs and able to govern his people and maintain his realm through justice, piety, and reputation. This image of the prince–archbishop can be interpreted as a symbol of the alliance between politics and religion.

3. Political Function of Religion

In *De regia sapientia*, Botero does not deny the importance of religion to the state; rather, he emphasizes the politico-military function of Catholicism. The Catholic wisdom of governance he presents aims to make Catholicism the greatest force in maintaining the state, as he states, “regna pietate fundantur, atque conservantur” (“the kingdom is founded and maintained by piety”) (Botero 1583, “Sententiae Insignes”). Catholicism not only provides support for rule but also serves as the real strength of the state, particularly in terms of military power, ensuring its continuity. Consequently, *De regia sapientia* can be seen as a rebuttal to Machiavelli’s views, while inheriting two of his fundamental ideas: the affirmation of the significance of military virtue (as discussed in the previous section) and the recognition of religion’s political function (Descendre 2014a, p. 199). Regarding the latter, Machiavelli provides a summary of this view in Chapter 11 of Book I of *Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio*, stating, “whoever considers well the Roman histories sees how much religion served to command armies, to animate the plebs, to keep men good, to bring shame to the wicked” (Machiavelli 1996, pp. 34–35). He views the ancient Roman religion as a valuable asset for rulers and virtuous men in governing the state and its people.

Botero elucidates the political function of religion more specifically in *Della ragion di Stato*. In Book II, Chapter 15, “Della religione” (“Of Religion”), he emphasizes, “la religione è quasi madre d’ogni virtù, rende i sudditi obbedienti al suo prencipe, coraggiosi nell’imprese, arditi ne’ pericoli, larghi ne’ bisogni, pronti in ogni necessità della repubblica,

conciosia che sanno che, servendo il prencipe, fanno servizio a Dio, di cui egli tiene il luogo". ("Religion is as it were the mother of every virtue. It renders subjects obedient to their prince, courageous in campaigns, bold in times of danger, generous in times of scarcity, alert to every necessity of the republic because they know that in serving their prince they render service to God whose place he holds".) (Botero 2016, p. 89; 2017, p. 64). Religion shapes human virtue and plays a key role in ensuring the obedience of subjects, civic affairs, and military endeavors. In the opening passages of Book II, Chapter 16, entitled "Modi di propagar la religione" ("On the Means to Propagate Religion"), he writes, "È di tanta forza la religione ne' governi" ("Religion is of such power for government") (Botero 2016, p. 89; 2017, p. 64). Botero asserts that religion is the source of the state's power and provides a solid foundation for politics by fostering an ethic of order and obedience that prioritizes legitimate authority above any other considerations (Suppa 1992, p. 80).

As previously discussed, the religion in question is not the ancient Roman religion that Machiavelli held in high regard, but Catholicism. For Botero, Catholicism is distinct in that its political function is more pronounced than that of other denominations (especially Protestantism) and secular law of the time, as evidenced by the following:

"Ma tra tutte le leggi non ve n'è alcuna più favorevole a' precipi che la cristiana, perché questa sottomette loro non solamente i corpi e le facoltà de' sudditi, dove conviene, ma gli animi ancora e le coscienze, e lega non solamente le mani ma gli affetti ancora et i pensieri, e vuole che si obedisca a' precipi discoli non che a' moderati e che si patisca ogni cosa per non perturbar la pace". ("But of all the laws none is more favorable to princes than the Christian because it submits to them not only the bodies and faculties of subjects where this is appropriate but the souls and consciences as well, and it binds not only the hands but even the affections and thoughts, and it prescribes that obedience be given to wicked princes as well as to ordinary ones and that everything be endured in order not to disturb the peace".) (Botero 2016, p. 90; 2017, p. 65)

By explicitly outlining the distinctive way in which Catholicism serves political power, it is demonstrated that Catholicism is more effective for governance than other religious sects. Catholicism has a considerable advantage over both Protestantism and secular law, particularly in its ability to control individual conscience through sacraments, such as confession (Descendre 2009, p. 111). Catholicism's role as a force for controlling the spirit and conscience of individuals is tied to its inherent tenets of peace and obedience, which the prince can effectively use. According to Botero, this is exemplified by the early Catholics of antiquity, who, despite persecution, did not rebel against the Roman Empire (although this was not entirely the case), as well as the Catholics persecuted in various European countries at the time—Scotland, England, France, Flanders, and Germany—who also did little to resist. Botero further comments: "But Luther, Calvin, and the others, distancing themselves from evangelical truth, sow everywhere weeds and revolutions in the states and the overthrow of kingdoms". (Botero 2017, p. 65). While Botero recognized the capacity of Catholicism to ensure political stability, he sharply criticized Protestantism for fomenting social unrest and revolutions.

Regarding the prince, Botero contends that the ruler should maintain devout Catholic faith, as he asserts in *Della ragion di Stato*, Book II, Chapter 15, "Della Religione":

"Deve dunque il prencipe di tutto cuore umiliarsi innanzi la Divina Maestà, e da lei riconoscere il regno e l'obediencia de' popoli e quanto egli è collocato in più sublime grado sopra gli altri, tanto deve abbassarsi maggiormente nel cospetto di Dio, non metter mano a negozio, non tentar impresa, non cosa nissuna ch'egli non sia sicuro esser conforme alla legge di Dio". ("Therefore the prince ought to humble himself with his whole heart before the Divine Majesty and acknowledge that the kingdom and the obedience of his subjects come from him; and the more that he is placed in a higher rank over others, so much the more ought he abase himself in the presence of God, nor set his hand to any negotiation, nor undertake

any campaign or anything else which he is not certain to be conformed to the law of God".) (Botero 2016, p. 86; 2017, p. 62)

The authority of the prince and the obedience of the people are both derived from God. Therefore, the prince is expected to exemplify piety and humility while adhering to God's laws. Religion can only fulfill its political function effectively if the prince remains genuinely devout—a subject that will be explored in greater depth in the following section.

While both Botero and Machiavelli acknowledge the political role of religion, they diverge in their understanding of how religion exerts its political influence: Machiavelli emphasizes the use of fear of God (divine punishment) to restrain the people, whereas Botero places greater importance on the obligations of conscience. The concept of "conscienza" (conscience) is central in *Della ragion di Stato*, as evidenced by its appearance in the dedication and throughout numerous chapters of this work. In contrast, it is a relatively rare theme in Machiavelli's political writings. For Botero, conscience is understood in a moral and Christian sense. It is the faculty that, in conjunction with reason, sets human beings apart from animals. Conscience is portrayed as a divine gift that cannot be disregarded in matters of such significance as the governance of state affairs (Figorilli 2021, pp. 374–75). Botero criticizes Machiavelli's political theory for ignoring the role of conscience, stating that "il Machiavelli fonda la ragione di Stato nella poca conscienza" ("Machiavelli based reason of state on little respect for conscience") (Botero 2016, p. 3; 2017, p. 1), thus severing politics from morality. However, Botero's critique of Machiavelli is largely strategic. While he attacks Machiavelli's perceived immorality, Machiavelli does not wholly reject morality. Concepts such as justice and the common good play prominent roles in his work (Parel 1990; Viroli 2004; Benner 2009; Hanasz 2010; Quaglionni 2011; Descendre 2014c). At that time, Machiavelli's and Jean Bodin's ideas, along with those of the *politiques*—especially Bodin's theory of sovereignty—had significantly influenced Catholicism. To counter these influences and justify Catholicism's political function, the Holy See urgently required an anti-sovereignty Catholic political theory. It was within this context that Botero's *Della ragion di Stato* was conceived. He aimed to engage with Machiavelli's thought in order to challenge Bodin's theory of sovereignty (Descendre 2009, p. 87). Superficially, Botero appeared to criticize Machiavellian immorality, but in reality, he sought to appropriate Machiavelli's political realism to establish a Catholic-based theory of reason of state, reasserting the close relationship between Catholicism and the state, as well as between religion and politics. The relationship between Botero and Machiavelli is, therefore, complex: Botero explicitly condemned Machiavelli, while at the same adopting his vocabulary and political insights to a certain degree. The core of Botero's reason of state was his attempt to reconcile the interests of the Church with those of the state. On the one hand, he sought to compel the state to submit to the Church's authority to some extent; on the other hand, he permitted the state to retain the necessary tools for effective governance (Descendre 2014b, p. 44).

As previously stated, according to Botero, Catholicism has its superiority, particularly because it submits to princes the souls and consciences of subjects, employing various instruments of conscience management, such as the sacrament of Penance, to regulate the consciences of its subjects and thereby restrain their sentiments, thoughts, and actions. In Chapter 16 of Book II of *Della ragion di Stato*, Botero also states, "il che è indizio della verità della Fede cattolica che rende i sudditi obediendi al prencipe e lega loro la conscienza e li fa desiderosi di pace e nemici di romore e di scandali". ("it shows the truth of the Catholic faith that renders these subjects obedient to their prince and binds their conscience to them, makes them desirous of peace and enemies of rumors and scandals".) (Botero 2016, p. 90; 2017, p. 65). The Catholic Church serves to connect people to God through their conscience, thereby instilling in them a hatred of turmoil and a love of peace. In Book V, Chapter 1, "De' sudditi d'acquisto, come s'abbino a trattare" ("Of Acquired Subjects, How they Ought to be Treated"), Botero presents a policy for a prince to adopt toward newly acquired subjects after conquering a territory. He asserts that the most effective approach is to naturalize the conquered subjects, emphasizing the pivotal role of religion in regulating the conscience: "i

religiosi tengono in mano le coscienze de' popoli, i letterati gl'ingegni, et i giudicii degli uni e degli altri sono di grandissima autorità presso tutti: quelli per la santità, questi per la dottrina, quelli per la riverenza, questi per la riputazione, onde quel che costoro fanno o dicono è stimato bene e prudentemente fatto e detto, e per ciò degno di esser abbracciato e seguito". ("The religious hold in their hand the consciences of the people, the literati the understanding, and the judgments of the one and the other have the greatest authority with all, the former for their sanctity, the latter for their teaching, the former for the reverence they inspire, the latter for the reputation they have acquired, so that whatever they say or do is considered to have been well and prudently said or done, and so worthy of being embraced and followed".) (Botero 2016, p. 124; 2017, p. 93). Consequently, he underscores the need for patronage of religion and the humanities, as clergy and humanists serve as influential authorities who can shape the conscience and intellect of individuals. Securing the support of these authorities can facilitate the adherence of broader populations.

Furthermore, the distinctive aspect of Botero's politico-religious perspective is the introduction of the "consiglio di coscienza": "sarebbe necessario che il prencipe non mettesse cosa nissuna in deliberazione nel consiglio di Stato che non fosse prima ventillata in un consiglio di coscienza nel quale intervenissero dottori eccellenti in teologia et in ragione canonica, perché altramente caricherà la coscienza sua e farà delle cose che bisognerà poi disfare, se non vorrà dannare l'anima sua, e dei successori". ("it would be necessary that the king never bring to the council anything for deliberation that was not first vetted in a council of conscience to which outstanding doctors of theology and canon law belonged. Otherwise he will burden his conscience and do things that he will later have to undo if he does not want to damn his soul and the souls of his successors".) (Botero 2016, p. 87; 2017, p. 63). Botero posits that a council of conscience should be constituted by the prince, comprising a committee of ecclesiastics (especially experts in theology and canon law). Any significant decision made by the state would be subject to the precautionary opinion of the council of conscience. It is noteworthy that the Jesuits (Botero is a former Jesuit) are experts in the practice of the judgement of conscience, and this practice is now introduced into the core of the state's decision-making apparatus with the objective of providing preliminary evaluations of the issues discussed by the council of state, thereby guiding political decisions (Figorilli 2021, p. 376).

4. Religion: Tool or Purpose of Governance?

In his later years, Botero authored a treatise on Venice, entitled *Relatione della Repubblica venetiana* (1605), which includes a section called "Della religione di Venetia" ("Of the religion of Venice"). Before discussing the religion in Venice, he deliberately addresses the function of religion in the state in a general sense, offering significant insight into his perspective on the relationship between religion and politics. Botero asserts, "siamo giunti alla religione fondamento importante de gli stati: e senza il cui appoggio tutti gli altri hanno poca forza, e fermezza". ("we have arrived at religion, the important foundation of states: and without whose support all the others have little strength and firmness"). (Botero 1605, p. 98v). He explicitly emphasizes the foundational role of religion in the state, which he also discusses in Chapter 16 of Book II of *Della ragion di Stato*, where he posits: "Religion is of such power for government that without it every other foundation of the state wobbles". (Botero 2017, p. 64). Religion is not merely a tool for the prince but a fundamental pillar of the state (Descendre 2009, pp. 110–11). However, in *Relatione della Repubblica venetiana*, he advances this idea further, arguing that religion is not only the foundation of the state but also its purpose.

In "Della religione di Venetia", Botero proceeds to state: "alcuni (come è il Machiavelli, e i politici) non ragionano della religione se non come di una maschera della tirannia: altri vogliono, che la religione ad un Principe indubitatamente ogni prosperità, anche terrena arrechi". ("some (like Machiavelli and *politiques*) do not think of religion except as a mask of tyranny: others want, that religion undoubtedly brings to a Prince every prosperity,

even earthly"). (Botero 1605, p. 99r). He then enumerates two additional perspectives on religion, which he subsequently refutes in the following passages.

Botero begins by refuting the second argument from a theological standpoint. He asserts that religion is not a means of achieving earthly happiness and that Christ does not promise believers any form of earthly guidance as a reward for adhering to God's law. "Il che ci insegna S. Iustino martire: e ci dimostra, senza altro, il testo dell'Evangelio, ove Christo ci protesta, che il suo regno non è di questo mondo: e che s'egli patì, dobbiamo apparecchiarsi à patire ancor noi; ove c'insegna à disprezzar le facultà à vilipendere gl'honori, e le grandezze terrene, e à metter ogni nostra speranza, e pensiero nel regno de' Cieli". ("This is what St. Justin Martyr teaches us, and is demonstrated to us, undoubtedly, by the text of the Gospel, where Christ protests to us that his kingdom is not of this world: and that if he suffered, we must prepare ourselves to suffer too; where he teaches us to despise our faculties, to vilify earthly honors and greatness, and to place all our hope and thought in the kingdom of Heaven"). (Botero 1605, p. 99r). Catholicism eschews the pursuit of earthly glory and directs its adherents towards a spiritual understanding of heaven and eternal life. God's justice and power are manifested through the dispensation of eternal rewards and punishments.

If religion is not efficacious in the present world, what benefit can it and true piety bring to the prince? In Botero's view, religion serves two functions for princes: the salvation of their souls and the maintenance of obedience among subjects. In response to this question, he proceeds to refute the first perspective, namely that religion is merely a mask for tyranny.

Regarding the first aspect, Botero posits, "in prima gli reca la salute dell'anima. Perche il primo capo della ragion di stato, che à un savio Principe conviene si è quel, che dice Christo, *Quid prodest homini si univrsum mundum lucretur, animæ verò suæ detri mentum patiatur?*" ("Firstly it brings him the salvation of the soul. Because the first principle of the reason of state, which befits a wise Prince, is that which Christ says, What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and suffers the loss of his own soul?") (Botero 1605, p. 99v). Furthermore, he asserts that it is futile to amass an empire greater than that of Alexander the Great or the Romans if the prince forfeits his own soul. With regard to the second aspect, namely the maintenance of obedience among subjects, it has already been mentioned in the previous section: "Appresso se la religione è di qualche rilievo per il reggimento de'popoli, (come ella di grandissimo rilievo è) la Christiana ha in ciò quel vantaggio, à paragone di tutte le sette, e le legge humane, che ha in vero all'incontro del falso. Imperoche se niuna ragunanza d'huomini, benche barbari, e fieri, benche malvagi, e scelerati, si può senza qualche ombra, e sembianza almeno di religione, lungo tempo conservare, di che importanza crediamo, che sia per la conservatione delle Republiche, e de' regni, l'autorità, e la forza della religione vera, e santa?" ("Furthermore, if religion is of any importance for the government of the people (as it is of the greatest importance), Christianity has in this respect that advantage, in comparison with all sects and human laws, which it has in truth in opposition to the false. For if no assembly of men, however barbarous and fierce, however wicked and depraved, can be preserved for long without some shadow or at least the semblance of religion, of what importance do we believe the authority and strength of true and holy religion to be for the preservation of republics and kingdoms?") (Botero 1605, pp. 99v–100r). Botero underscores the crucial political role of religion, particularly Catholicism, in any state and any collective entity, including the worst form. Furthermore, he adds:

"Hor di che forza sarà per contener, i sudditi in ufficio, e in ubidienza per unirli, e per tenerli soggetti in tuo servitio, quella legge, che lega non solo le mani, ma gl'affetti, che frena gl'animi, che tempera i desideri, che regola i pensieri a' popoli? che li sottomette affatto al tuo Imperio, che comanda loro, che si prestino obbedienti, e trattabili non solamente a i Principi ragionevoli, e moderati, ma ancora a gl'impertinenti e a' discoli non tanto per paura di pena, quanto per obbligo di coscienza?" ("Now of what force will that law be to keep subjects in

office and in obedience, to unite them, and to keep them subject to your service, which binds not only the hands, but constrains the affections, restrains the minds, tempers the desires, and regulates the thoughts of the people? It subjects them entirely to your domination, commands them to lend themselves obediently and tractably not only to reasonable and moderate princes, but also to the impertinent and the unruly, not so much through fear of punishment, as through obligation of conscience?”) (Botero 1605, p. 100r)

This passage is analogous to the aforementioned quotation from *Della ragion di Stato*, Book II, Chapter 16. Both passages illustrate that Catholicism serves an essential political function by instilling a sense of discipline in individuals, encompassing physical, emotional, spiritual, and conscientious aspects, which enables them to obey the prince. Additionally, Botero provides the example of an Indian prince who, despite subscribing to idolatry, recognizes the significant role of Catholicism and participates in Catholic baptismal ceremonies. When questioned about his motivation, he responds that he does so because he understands that “la legge Christiana, che è tutta rivolta al Cielo, e indirizzata alla vita, eterna, rendeva i sudditi affatto ubidienti a’ Principi nelle cose terrene”. (“the Christian law, which is entirely directed towards Heaven and towards eternal life, made subjects completely obedient to Princes in earthly things”). (Botero 1605, p. 102r). Despite the fact that this Indian prince is not himself a Catholic, he nevertheless affirms the political efficacy of the religion.

Given the significant political role that religion (in this case, Catholicism) plays, it is pertinent to inquire whether it serves as a mask for tyranny or as an *instrumentum regni*. In Machiavelli’s thought, religion is largely politicized or instrumentalized; as he himself put it, religion is the best means of politics (Machiavelli 1996, p. 43), in other words, an instrument of domination that allows prudent and virtuous leaders to achieve great and even extraordinary things in the name of God. Ernst Cassirer’s argument in *The Myth of the State* has some merit: religion is no longer an end in itself, but has become an instrument of the political rulers, a powerful weapon in all political struggles (Cassirer 1946, p. 138). In a sense, with Botero, religion also becomes an instrument of domination, as Maria Cristina Figorilli has observed: “the primary purpose of the new ‘reason of State’ set forth by Botero is to provide the sovereigns of the new and modern state apparatuses with the skills and techniques necessary to govern stably, neutralizing and preventing seditions, revolts, conspiracies, in short, any attempt to disturb the public peace by ‘making novelties’. And from this point of view, religion also becomes a formidable *instrumentum regni* that ensures the survival of the State, protecting it from mutations and upheavals” (Figorilli 2021, p. 383). Nevertheless, Botero’s affirmation of the political function of religion does not reduce it to an instrument of domination. He points out further in his *Relatione della Repubblica venetiana*:

“Non si ha però la religione da prendere (come fa la maggior parte di Politici) per mezzo col quale si assicurino, e si stabiliscino li stati, ma per fine, e per mira alla quale il governo, e li stati medesimi si indirizzino, imperio, che il fine di ogni Republica, e d’ogni civile ragunanza si è la vita felice, e beata, e di tutti quelli contenti, e beni ripiena, e colma, che si possano da noi mentre in questa fatichevole, e travagliata vita soggiorniamo conseguire?” (“But is religion not to be taken (as most *politiques* do) as a means by which states are secured and established, but as an end and a goal to which the government and the states themselves are directed, because the aim of every republic and of every civil assembly is the happy and blessed life, filled and replete with all those satisfactions and goods that we can achieve while we sojourn in this laborious and troubled life?”) (Botero 1605, pp. 100r–100v)

This statement explicitly indicates that Catholicism should not be perceived as a mere instrument, which is the view of Machiavelli and most of the *politiques* that Botero condemns. He holds that Catholicism should be regarded as an end. However, Jean-Claude Zancarini points out that Botero’s distinction between his own perspective and theirs in this instance

is primarily rhetorical rather than substantive (Zancarini 2021, p. 245). Nevertheless, there is a substantive distinction between Botero's assertion and theirs: although Botero believes that religion has a powerful political function, he cautions against regarding it as merely a tool of domination and proposes that it should also be viewed as an end of the state. The question thus arises as to how the assertion that religion should be regarded as an end is to be understood and in what ways it is manifested. According to Botero's explanation below, the pursuit of the happiness of the people is considered an end of the state and of governance; however, this happiness is not understood as worldly pleasure and fulfillment, but rather as divine happiness—the peace and contentment of the soul given by God. This is because “tutti li sodisfacimenti dell'animo, eccetto quello, che dall'unirsi con Dio, e dal dipendere affatto da lui procede, sono come cibi senza virtù” (“all satisfactions of the soul, except that which proceeds from union with God and from total dependence on him, are like foods without virtue”) (Botero 1605, p. 100v).

In the following passage, Botero provides further clarification: “la via d'avvicinarsi à Dio, è di partecipare delle sue infinite perfettioni non è la falsa, ma la vera religione, e questa presa non per mezo, ma per fine de gli stati, e del governo loro, non più tosto tu la prenderai per mezo ch'ella non sia più vera, e reale ma finta, e ingannevole religione”. (“the way to approach God, and to participate in his infinite perfections is not the false, but the true religion, and this taken not as a means, but as an end of states, and of their government, you will not sooner take it as a means than it is no longer true and real, but a false and deceptive religion”.) (Botero 1605, p. 101r). The use of religion only as a means results in the loss of its intrinsic truth and purity, leading to its transformation into a false and deceptive religion. Accordingly, from the prince's perspective, treating religion as an end in itself means truly believing in Catholicism rather than pretending to be pious.

Similarly, in *Della ragion di Stato*, Botero underscores the significance of princes' genuine adherence to Catholicism, rather than merely feigning piety, which is precisely what both Aristotle and Machiavelli counsel tyrants or new princes to do. Regarding the maintenance of piety, Botero offers a counterpoint to Aristotle's position, articulated in Book V, Chapter 11 of the *Politics*. In this passage, Aristotle asserts, “a tyrant should always be seen to be outstandingly serious where matters concerning the gods are concerned” in order to retain his authority (Aristotle 2017, p. 298). However, it seems more probable that Botero is refuting Machiavelli. In *Il Principe*, Machiavelli observes, “by appearing to have them, they are useful, as it is to appear merciful, faithful, humane, honest, and religious, and to be so; but to remain with a spirit built so that, if you need not to be those things, you are able and know how to change to the contrary. This has to be understood: that a prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things for which men are held good, since he is often under a necessity, to maintain his state, of acting against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion” (Machiavelli 1998, p. 70). The new prince must appear pious but not necessarily remain pious. However, Botero argues that it is more beneficial for the prince to be pious than to feign piety. For example, in Chapter 15 of Book II of *Della ragion di Stato*, he remarks, “egli è difficile che chi non è veramente religioso sia stimato tale, poiché non è cosa che manco duri che la simulazione”. (“it is difficult that he who is not truly religious be considered so because there is nothing that lasts less than simulation”) (Botero 2016, p. 86; 2017, p. 62). In Chapter 16, he states, “E prima conviene ch'egli schivi gli estremi che sono la simulazione e la superstizione, quella perché (come ho già detto) non può durare e, scoperta, discredita affatto il simulatore, questa perché porta seco disprezzo”. (“And it is necessary first that he avoid the extremes which are simulation and superstition, the former because, as I have said, it cannot last and, once discovered, entirely discredits the simulator, the latter because it causes contempt”). (Botero 2016, p. 91; 2017, p. 65). It is evident that a disguise is not a durable strategy, and once it is exposed, it inevitably leads to the discrediting of the pretender. This is particularly true in the case of a prince who pretends to be pious, as such an act can result in a loss of prestige and even power. In other words, a prince can lead more effectively and enduringly only by projecting sincere religious faith.

In summary, on the one hand, Botero does not concur with the assertion that Catholicism is merely an instrument of governance; however, he acknowledges the political function or instrumental value of religion, which is powerful in this regard and indispensable for the governance of the state. On the other hand, he is unequivocal in asserting that Catholicism serves as the foundation of the state and the purpose of governance. While Catholicism does not promise worldly, material happiness, it can bring peace and fulfillment to the souls, connecting people's souls to God, keeping them united, rendering them less greedy and less concerned with worldly affairs, and making them desirous of peace and enemies of rumors and scandals, thus reducing domestic unrest, which is mainly caused by human greed, and maintaining peace and stability in the country. Consequently, it is believed that princes should adhere to the Catholic faith themselves and endeavor to ensure that their subjects do so as well. Additionally, they should seek to minimize instances of heresy and facilitate conversions to Catholicism. As Botero reveals in his dedication of the first part of *Le Relazioni universali*, the goal set by the circumstances at the time is precisely “la conversione degli infedeli, e la riduzione degli heretici” (“the conversion of infidels and the reduction of heresies”) (Botero 1591, n. III). In the second book of *Della ragion di Stato*, Chapter 16, he reiterates, “essendo tanta l'importanza della religione per lo felice governo e per la quiete de gli Stati, deve il prencipe favorirla e con ogni suo studio dilatarla”. (“because of the great importance of religion for the successful government and peace of the states, the prince ought to favor it and make efforts for its expansion”). (Botero 2016, pp. 90–91; 2017, p. 65). Promoting the dissemination of Catholicism is one of the missions of the Catholic princes.

5. Conclusions

It is important to note that while Botero asserts that the prince should adhere to the tenets of Catholicism and make it the foundation of the state, this does not imply that he expects the prince to strictly adhere to Catholic moral norms in governance. Indeed, he posits that princes may employ means that violate moral and religious norms in domestic and foreign affairs, not only when the state faces significant internal or external threats, but also in the routine maintenance and strengthening of the state (though major matters are subject to review by the council of conscience). This is particularly evident in his *Della ragion di Stato*.

For example, in Chapter 7, “Of Secrecy”, of the second book of *Della ragion di Stato*, he emphasizes that those who deal with matters of peace and war (especially princes) should cultivate the arts of concealment and disguise, similar to Machiavelli's statement in Chapter 18 of *Il Principe* that “it is necessary to know well how to color this nature, and to be a great pretender and dissembler” (Machiavelli 1998, p. 70). In Book II, Chapter 11, “Of the Ways to Preserve Reputation”, Botero also makes the point that many princes, despite their lack of strength, manage to maintain their authority and reputation by concealing their weaknesses and incompetence rather than by seeking to enhance their capabilities. In Book IX, Chapter 22, “Of Stratagems”, he posits that the use of stratagems and ruses is not only justifiable but also brings great honor to generals, who should therefore make good use of them. It is noteworthy that, in order to maintain peace and stability in the country, it may be necessary to take more drastic measures to prevent or stop riots, revolutions, and rebellions, even in less urgent circumstances. As evidenced in Book IV, Chapter 1, “On the Way to Avoid Rumblings and Rebellions”, Botero states that the mere provision of diversions and amusements to the populace is insufficient for the prevention of riots and rebellions; additional measures are required to prevent the populace from revolting and disturbing the public peace and the majesty of the prince. In particular, it is essential to deny them the opportunity and means to revolt. Furthermore, in Book V, Chapter 4, “How they Have to be Discouraged”, Chapter 6, “How to Weaken the Power”, Chapter 7, “How to Weaken their Union”, and Chapter 8, “How to Take Away the Means of Uniting with Other Peoples”, he explicitly indicates that to preserve peace and maintain the obedience of the subjects, and to prevent rebellion even when they possess the courage to do so, three methods can be

employed: by humbling their spirits, weakening their strength, and preventing them from uniting. Moreover, in Book V, Chapter 9, “Of the Means to Calm Troubles Once they have Arisen”, he proposes that when disturbances have already occurred, the source of these disturbances should be compelled, and the root of the problem should be addressed as soon as possible, which necessitates the clandestine and expeditious elimination of the leaders.

It is evident that, despite his vehement criticism of Machiavelli in several works and his portrayal of himself as an anti-Machiavellian, Botero ultimately espouses a form of Machiavelli’s realism. This entails the recognition that, in the long run and from a global perspective, adherence to moral and religious norms in significant matters is essential and advantageous. However, in the short term and from a local perspective, there is no discernible benefit in rigidly aligning with these norms. In other words, there are instances where immoral actions are undertaken in conjunction with the moral and religious planning of Botero as a whole (Malcolm 2007, p. 99).

From our analyses of *De regia sapientia* to *Della ragion di Stato* and then to *Relatione della Repubblica venetiana*, Botero’s religious perspective becomes progressively evident and pronounced. He denounces the impious Machiavelli, yet he is unable to entirely disassociate himself from the influence of Machiavelli’s political discourse and ideas. Instead, he integrates and adjusts his own religious ideas with them. To phrase it otherwise, while denouncing the immorality and impiety of Machiavellianism, Botero seeks to construct a realist political theory that does not defy Catholic authority. This requires the creation of a robust state ruled by a Catholic prince, an alliance between religion and the state, the establishment of religion as the foundation of the state, and the mutual assistance of the state and religion in achieving a common goal: to convert more people to Catholicism, render the subjects more obedient, and simultaneously reinforce the state’s military and other strengths. This enables the country and Catholicism to better maintain themselves and grow further in the context of challenging international circumstances, including religious conflicts and the Reformation. This is particularly evident in his theory of the reason of state, or, more accurately, the reason of state is at the core of Botero’s politico-religious thought. In contrast to Machiavelli, who views the reason of state as a political exception—namely, the prince’s transgression of traditional morality in pressing circumstances for the sake of the state—Botero presents it as a new norm and normality, or, as Michel Foucault termed it, “le type de rationalité” (“the type of rationality”) (Foucault 2004, p. 243): the reason of state represents the totality of knowledge necessary for the governance of the state; whether in times of war or peace, almost any means of governing that does not deny the supremacy of Catholic authority could be used to maintain and strengthen the state and Catholicism. As Botero articulates explicitly in an essay entitled “Della Neutralità” (“On Neutrality”) in his *Aggiunte alla sua Ragion di Stato* (1598), “ragion di Stato è poco altro, che ragion d’interesse” (“reason of state is little else than reason of interest”) (Botero 1598, p. 68). Indeed, the essence of the reason of state is interest, which encompasses both state interest and religious interest. For Catholic states, since religion is the foundation and purpose of the state, the core interest of the state is consistent with the fundamental interest of religion.

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